

WOMEN'S ROLE IN RURAL INDIA: DECISION-MAKING AND LIFE PERSPECTIVES IN NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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Abstract

This paper explores the lives of Indian women belonging to the rural sector of India. In rural Indian society, a woman's life often seems to revolve around men, as seen in Rukmani's life. Through the portrayal of women in Nectar in a Sieve, rural women are shown striving to rise from the soil to their souls. In India, millions of women live lives similar to Rukmani's, without even realizing their value and existence, and end up in the shackles of patriarchy. In the novel's story, it is seen that male hierarchy is imposed on women, and rural women consider it their destiny and even worship it. In the study, we find that rural women are treated like slaves, forced to obey men without making their own decisions due to a lack of life perspectives.

Keywords: Rural women, Patriarchy, Striving, Slaves, Decision-Making Power.

Introduction:

Home is not just a building, but the place where a woman lives and weaves all the family members together — that is what truly makes it a home. A woman is undoubtedly the center of every family, and her contribution is beyond measure or repayment. The emergence of vibrant and independent women is rare in the traditional structure of Indian society. Many of them lack the opportunity or freedom to think about their own lives. A woman's primary role is often seen as serving others and merely surviving. They are not encouraged to think for themselves, but are instead idealized only for their obedience. As Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem *The Princess* states, *"Man for the field and woman for the hearth
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey... (427–431)"*

A woman's choices in life and her hardships are central themes in Kamala Markandaya's novels. It is a significant motif that her female characters strive to walk their own paths and assert themselves as independent entities. The topic is significant as it sheds light on the tortures faced by rural women in Indian society, particularly in the context of their lives and decision-making power. It highlights society's blind eye to the struggles women face, both externally and internally. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* serves as a prelude to the plight of rural women just after independence. She gives voice to these rural women.

The phrase "rural woman" often brings to mind images of submissive and silent individuals. Their lives are completely ignored by those closest to them. Although the role of women in rural India is as important as that of men, their presence in decision-making is often invisible, like a sight to the blind. Their decision-making power and life perspectives remain largely unknown and unacknowledged. The clash between rural and urban women is rarely acknowledged, yet their challenges are vastly different. The life of the rural woman is thoroughly examined in this research paper.

The paper attempts to capture the reader's attention by showing how a woman is easily tormented and how her psyche becomes a slave to male validation. Through this, women find a window to express their voices. As the famous critic Uma Parameshwaran rightly observes: It is easy to wring tears of pity for the plight of the peasant, underfed, uneducated, exploited, and easier still to rouse anger and contempt for the superstitious and slow-moving masses. They stand there vulnerable and open to every attack, be it indifference, contempt, or emasculating charity. But to evoke admiration, even envy, for their simple faith and unswerving tenacity needs sympathy and skill. Kamala Markandaya has both." (qtd. in Parvati, 2001, p. 2)

The women characters in the novel, including Rukmani, Ira, and Kunthi, represent various perspectives of womanhood. They choose paths that are demanded by circumstances in order to survive in difficult times. They transcend all possible gender-based barriers. These characters serve as a fitting response to the oppressive forces in society that suppress women.

Review of Literature: Kamala Markandaya is one of the well-known women novelists in Indo-Anglican fiction. She belonged to the independent era of India, when women were starting to make their mark in Indian English literature. She was Indian but married an Englishman. Still, her writings reflect the heart of a hurt India.

Nectar in a Sieve, published in 1954, is a novel that depicts the hard life of Indian peasants in the wake of industrialization and serves as a cry for independence from their miseries (Markandaya, 1954). In the novel, Rukmani and Ira are mother and daughter, but their lives change over the course of the story. The voice of women resonates strongly in women's writing. This novel portrays every aspect of both rural and urban life, reflecting the reality of people's experiences.

Silence as a Virtue: Women's resignation to silence is often considered a virtue. Whatever the situation, they are expected to nod their heads in the presence of men. Even in the most inhuman conditions, women's voices are never called out, because everyone at the center wants their periphery to remain in a state of silence. Words have power, and in a patriarchal society the source of power lies with men. As Pratap Bhan Singh (2018) observes, silence is a weapon used against marginalized people, and women are left with only one path—the path of dead silence. "Silence has always been imposed

forcefully on the marginalized community of the society. Their existence is considered so negligent that even if they try to speak, their voice remains inaudible. Women too belong to this section" (Singh, 2018). The adoption of silence as a virtue for anyone appears as weakness, not as power. Only men's words are seen to carry implications, while women are expected to show only obedience. In Nectar in a Sieve, Rukmani receives only misfortune through her silence, and Ira faces rejection at the hands of her husbands (Markandaya, 1954).s

Fertility and Women's Position in Society:

Life is considered meaningless for a barren woman in the context of Indian society. Children are seen merely as a measure of a woman's position in the family, and marriages are sometimes broken if a woman is unable to have babies. The whole society looks down on such women. They are already victims of infertility, yet they are considered inferior. However, no one questions or labels men as responsible, because it is a patriarchal society. Rogobete (2014), highlighting the connection between fertility and a woman's social value, observes: "India seems to be a special case in this regard since women's representations have generally acquired paradoxically conflicting, and sometimes even violent, dimensions under the influence of a particular combination of factors related to religion, social class, caste, degree of education, sex of the child and rank in the female family hierarchy" (Rogobete, 2014).

Women Treated as Objects Under Male Supremacy:

Gender is one of the basic parameters of discrimination against women. A woman's gender identity is associated with her socio-cultural reputation and economic factors. Decisions regarding her education, marriage, and profession are determined by her gender rather than by her personal choices. Babu and Sreeramulu (2022) explain how the inhuman subjugation of women is still considered normal even in today's society. A husband's approval is perceived as a blessing, whereas his neglect is considered a misfortune for a woman: "An Indian husband, even when educated, does not treat his wife as a companion, but as a subordinate. After their marriage, Indian women have to lose their identity and wait for the mood of their husbands. Even they cannot suggest anything without the orders of their husbands" (Babu & Sreeramulu, 2022).

Men as Decision-Makers and Women as Dependents:

Women are subjected to suffering, and men are subjected to pleasure. Men are privileged at all levels, from birth to death. But a woman is condemned for having reflection, an inherent trait common to every human being. Even her life is regulated by the men in her life, such as her father, brother, husband, and son. She is completely treated as an animal who is merely transferred to another place by her owners, and her individuality is limited to her mere imagination, if she even has the spare time to think about herself. Rani and Shanker (2017) explain women's condition of obedience by describing Rukmani's life: "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" (Rani & Shanker, 2017).

Unequal Access to Education for Women: Education is a tool to gain knowledge and to achieve something. However, according to patriarchal norms, a woman is expected to be limited to serving her family. If a woman were given the same opportunities as a man, she could make her own decisions. In the words of Gayathri (2016), "The Indian social system, with just a few exceptions, is dominated by

patriarchy, which advocates male governance and female subordination. The better share has always been in the control of men, and women have to be contented with the minor role and have to be restricted to the background”.

Methodology:

This present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research approach to examine the representation of women and socio-cultural realities in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*. This analysis is closely based on a textual analysis of the novel's text and relevant secondary data from research papers. Feminist and existential theories are used. The narrative focus is also included in it.

Theoretical Background: Kamala Markandaya does not portray the lavish life of landlords; instead, she provides an account of landless farmers and their families, particularly focusing on the women who are part of these families. Rural people, in general, are illiterate. A woman has no hope for the future. In the Indian rural setting, a woman always lives her life on the periphery of a man. Sons are considered the inheritors of the family's pride, while daughters are seen as a burden and, in some cases, even a cause of shame. This is evident in the novel, as reflected in the line: "For what woman wants a girl for her first-born? They took the child from me" (p. 25).

The question is proof that women's autonomy and decision-making power are still a luxury for many women. Anyone's decision-making power is based on their knowledge, position, socio-economic status, and employment. These factors are mostly possessed by men, though some women do have them and are able to exercise their rights. Mutual decision-making between husband and wife is the key to a happy family as well as a strong nation. Rukmani and Nathan share this kind of mutual understanding. However, Rukmani's marriage was not of her own choice. Her life after marriage becomes a disaster. She is shocked at the time of her wedding when she learns that her husband, Nathan, is a tenant farmer. In her words, "I had to acknowledge that his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care for me" (p. 2).

Findings:

Silence in *Nectar in a Sieve*: Women, as human beings, are endowed by nature with all the qualities of a complete person. But in society, they are treated only as deaf, dumb, and brainless creatures governed by men. Rukmani's marriage to Nathan is beyond her imagination, as she had hoped for a groom as wealthy as her sister's husband. But what she receives after her marriage is quite the opposite: "I wanted to cry. This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch as my home. My knees gave first the cramped one, then the other and I sank down" (p. 4). It shows how brutally silence can hurt a person, as completely depicted by the author through Rukmani's words. A poor match leads her entire life into endless suffering.

Fertility and Women's Social Position in *Nectar in a Sieve*:

Society, though modern in some ways, still views women through narrow lenses when it comes to their social value. Women who do not bear children are considered childless or barren. Their status in society is almost like that of an untouchable, as they are seen as an obstacle to a prosperous family and a hindrance to continuing the family lineage. It is regarded as a man's right to choose another woman over his wife simply because she is barren. In the novel, Ira is rejected by her husband, even though she is docile, homely, and a good, obedient wife. He says, "I intend no discourtesy but this is no ordinary

visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a barren woman.” (p. 52)

Rukmani, who is the mother of Ira, faces the same fate when her first child is a girl, and then she does not give birth to a son for the next six years. This period feels like a prison for her, and she is treated as a culprit for not giving birth to a male child. In her words, “Women need men” (p. 111).

Objectification of Women in *Nectar in a Sieve*: Marriage, particularly in rural India, isn't only the beginning of a new life; for a woman, it is a gamble for her life. Here, she either gets the life of a subordinate or love from her husband. Even in many cases, husbands still beat their wives and abandon them. Despite this, the prevalent notion is that women must obey their husbands.

Nectar in a Sieve clearly shows this gender bias. Rukmani's marriage to Nathan is a complete shock to her, yet she does not have the power to oppose it, so she obeys. The tragic pattern repeats with her daughter, Ira, who is returned to her parents because she could not conceive a child. In the novel, her husband justifies the rejection to Rukmani by saying, “She has not borne in her first blooming; who can say she will conceive later? I need sons.” (p. 50)

Male Dominance and Female Subjugation in *Nectar in a Sieve*: Cultural preservation is closely linked with women. In India, culture completely favors male authority over half of the population. From birth to death, every girl and woman is taught that she is less than a man. In the name of culture and tradition, women are forced to accept their boundaries. They are taught to worship their husbands like gods and to respect them as divine beings. In the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani, who is married to Nathan, remains bound by these traditions. She accepts them silently and says, “It was my husband who woke me—my husband, whom I will call here Nathan, for that was his name, although in all the years of our marriage I never called him that, for it is not meet for a woman to address her husband except as ‘husband’.” (p. 4)

Learning as a Privilege for Rukmani: A woman's status is not defined by her education but by her service to men. Even Rukmani's mother reminds her father of this when she questions the need for Rukmani's education, saying, “What use,” my mother said, “that a girl should be learned! Much good will it do her when she has lusty sons and a husband to look after. 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?” (p. 13)

Women often have to settle for less, even when they possess qualities and abilities, because showing them might hurt a man's ego. Rukmani, though educated, is hesitant to use her knowledge as her husband is illiterate. In the novel, she says, “I am sure it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself; it was, for Nathan alas could not even write his name, yet not once did he assert his rights and forbid me my pleasure.” (p. 23).

Discussion: In the meantime, a suppressor has the power to speak. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani does not have this power; as a poor marginalized woman, she has no voice. However, with gradual social progress, women begin to find their voice at home and in the workplace. Their words start to catch the attention of those in authority, and in some cases, women themselves become the authority. From a woman's perspective, the world may not change rapidly, but the progress is still encouraging. d'Almeida (1994) examines women's silence in the African context, which parallels Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of women's silence, as reflected in the statement: “Silence represents the historical muting of women

under the formidable institution known as patriarchy, that form of social organization in which males assume power and create for females an inferior status" (d'Almeida, 1994).

Women, especially those who live in rural areas, are often treated as a burden despite contributing so much to their families. In metropolitan cities, women work, have a voice, and can make their own decisions. But Rukmani, who dedicates her entire life to her family, does not have the courage to disobey her husband, even though he is never faithful to her, and she always tries to maintain the relationship. A son is considered necessary for earning a livelihood and taking care of parents. In the novel, Ira is the one who tries to support her family, even going so far as to indulge in prostitution. Chaube and Saini (2002) discuss a similar idea: "The women in rural communities play a more active role as a bread earner of the family, perform hard manual labor, even act as a more responsible partner and not function as a passive human incubator, not confining themselves to hearth and kitchen alone, not parading themselves as a beautiful drawing room showpiece like many of their counterparts in advanced societies" (Chaube & Saini, 2002, p. 10).

Women are seen as the property of men. Their individuality is only to serve their men. Women's decision-making threatens male supremacy over them, so their individuality is always questioned by men because individuality leads to freedom of choice, which includes every aspect that women are expected to obey to comfort men. The ownership of men ends where women begin to make their own decisions. Even a small decision taken by a woman about what she wants to do becomes a true question of modernity and education. In the modern world, where women are leaders, CEOs, and corporate workers, the ancient saying of Manu in the Manu Smriti still seems true, as noted by Mokashi (2018): "During childhood, a female must depend upon her father; during youth, upon her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons; if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband; in default, upon those of her father; if she has no parental kinsmen, upon the sovereign; a woman must never govern herself as she likes" (Mokashi, 2018). Although women have a choice, societal pressures often force them to remain subservient to men. Education has failed to give individuality to women.

Kamala Markandaya very aptly describes her heroines as struggling figures. Her heroine, Rukmani, never finds complete peace and pleasure. Regarding women's struggles, Srinivasa Iyengar (1973) observes: "But the heart that is tempered in the flames of love and faith, of sufferings and sacrifice, will not easily accept defeat. Rukmani, the narrator heroine, is also a mother of sorrow" (Iyengar, 1973).

Conclusion:

The present study showcases how a woman's world is limited to men's choices. Even if we live in the 21st century, do women still have any rights? This question is quietly disheartening, but the present study reveals another underexplored side of rural women in the work of Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*. The analysis shows how and why women are conditioned in such a way that they consider suffering as their destiny. The hardships and loyalty are the veil of a woman, as seen in Rukmani's character. The agrarian community is completely marginalized after industrialization, but the situation of their women went unnoticed. The poverty and its impact on women are quietly described by Markandaya. Poverty does not betray the plate of the poor, but it breaks the family.

Thus, this novel shows that women's silence is a decision to be loved by their families and surroundings. By examining gender in the context of postcolonial society, it is still hard for a female to make decisions of her own and try to establish her own identity.

Suggestions:

The study reveals that there are many areas for future research in the context of women and their lives. How women adapt to this changing world and mold themselves according to the times is an important area to explore. Decision-making is their right, and studying how they exercise this right is significant. Comparative studies of rural and urban women and their difficulties would also be valuable research topics in the future. Understanding the meaning of these changes for women in the context of postcolonialism and industrialization is an important theme. Additionally, the problems of tribal women remain largely unexplored in the postcolonial period and offer another avenue for research.

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