

ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KAMLA MARKANDAYA'S 'NECTAR IN A SIEVE'

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Abstract: *Women are the significant element of our Society. The contemporary society has started recognizing the individual identity of women. She is supposed to have her ambition, abilities, and qualities as a man does have and it is also considered that she should have the opportunities to develop her faculties and to express them according to her own choice. Kamala Markandaya had great hopes for India. Her most famous novel, Nectar in a Sieve, told the story of a woman who faced implausible hardships yet never ceased to dream of a better life. Nectar, which takes its title from a poem by Samuel Coleridge, is typical of Markandaya's forward-thinking perspective. Nectar in a Sieve is anchored by a strong female character. The protagonist's optimism serves dual purposes. It allows Markandaya the writer to imagine a better future both for the characters and the country.*

"When women are empowered and can claim their rights and access to land, leadership, opportunities, and choices, economies grow, food security is enhanced and prospects are improved for current and future generations".(Michelle Bachelet - Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women)

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INTRODUCTION

Women who were the most inactivesection of India population have now become active participants in all walks of life. The ability of women to control their own fruitfulness is absolutely fundamental to women's empowerment and equality. When a woman can plan her family, she can plan the rest of her life. When she is healthy, she can be more productive. And when her reproductive rights – including the right to decide the number, timing, and spacing of her children, and to make decisions regarding reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence – are promoted and protected, she has the freedom to participate more fully and equally in society.

Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve portrays its optimistic woman characters as ideal sufferers and nurturers. "The cause of her suffering springs mainly from poverty and natural calamity. The women are from the rural sections of society. They are the daughters of the soil and have inherited age-old traditions which they do not question. Their bravery lies in meek or at times cheerful way of facing poverty or calamity". She faces a lot of hardships. She demonstrated her true character each time she overcame one of her problems.

Rukmani, a Strong Female Character

Rukmani the central character and speaker in the novel is an undemanding peasant woman who was fighting against poverty. She was the daughter of the village Headman, but her father at the age of twelve gets her to marry a poor man named Nathan, who was a landless tenant farmer. The deteriorating financial position of her father forces him to marry her to a poor tenant. Hence Rukmani with neither beauty nor dowry is given away to Nathan a tenant farmer. Poverty and starvation follow the doorstep of the couple from the beginning of their married life. When Rukmani comes to live with Nathan, his house images her withered future,

"Across the doorway, a garland of mango leaves, symbol of happiness and good fortune, dry now and rattling in the breeze". (NS4)

Rukmani accepts her hardships serenely and reveals her forbearance towards the predictable. In the relationship with her husband, she learns the values of mutual love, understanding, respect, acceptance, and adjustment. Both Rukmani and her husband lead a simple and contented life with the barest necessities such as food, clothes, and shelter.

Rukmani seems to conform to the established image of woman personified in the mythical figures of Sita and Savitri who silently bear all hardships and remain devoted to their husbands. Born of the village headman and married to a tenant farmer below her family status, her good soul speaks of her husband as one "who was poor in everything but in love and care for me."(NS4) she feels proud of him as he is efficient in farming, in maintaining the household single-handed and he is also a loving husband.

Rukmani and her daughter Ira display suffering throughout the novel. She is working hard and is loyal to her gentle husband. She endures blow after blow from life: poverty, famine, the divorce of her barren daughter, the deaths of her sons, her daughter's prostitution, and finally her husband's death. She accepts the blow and moves on in life. Rukmani, the Indian woman, sees suffering as good for the spirit and endurance as a

necessity because she cannot change her situation. Looking at Rukmani only from the Western point of view leads one to misunderstand her character and the values that sustain her. The Western viewpoint equally misjudges the ideal of the devoted wife.

Rukmani in her trials of penury comes out successfully. She was very particular about showing mercy to people who were less fortunate than her, unyielding for the sake of herself and family, or adapting to a new livelihood; she overcomes all of the difficulty. Rukmani exhibits her true character of compassion, perseverance, and adaptability to changing circumstances each time problems faced her. One characteristic of Rukmani that she demonstrated for the duration of Nectar in a Sieve is that she is a compassionate person. She frequently acted out of her compassion with many characters. She did this during a period of hardship and famine in her village.

When we consider Rukmani as the mother figure, she symbolizes the mother earth. The earth is the life – giver, the supporter, the sustainer, the nourisher and even more, the healer as it is the positive, sustaining force of life. The mother Earth is omnipresent with outstretched arms to welcome each and every one. While commenting on the noble quality of the stoic endurance of Rukmani, Deepti Pandey observes:

“Rukmani in Nectar in a Sieve is the Mother Earth. Her integrity is never on the brink of collapse. On the face of all calamities, she unfolds her lap to take in everything and everybody around her. She is the eternal mother figure.” (Pandey 29)

CONCLUSION

Rukmani's sufferings form a queue and they multiply with the advancement of time 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. Arundhanti Chatterjee describes the character of Rukmani accurately: *“She is the eternal mother bound by love and affection to her hearth and home. Biologically, she is the receiver giving birth to human beings. Emotionally, philosophically and spiritually too she is the absorber who imbibes everything that comes her way – joy, happiness, hardship, poverty, loss, pain, suffering – Nectar as well as poison. Her journey from home to her husband's house is her journey to motherhood”*. (Chatterjee 85) Everything that crosses her path is sieved through her kind, simple, tolerant, understanding, sympathetic and loving self.

Women can help the society in various ways. They can engage in social activities and work for the improvement of the society. Young educated girls are free to get engaged in a profession of their choice. It is the fact that the world cannot develop and grow rapidly unless women come forward and take initiative for the development works. They can contribute extremely in the field of healthcare. Women education will also improve the level of sanitation and hygiene. As a mother, her role in the development of the emotional psychological aspect of the newborn child has been also very significant. She was not only the creator and maintainer of her child but an educator and disciplinarian as well. The woman is now an important instrument of social change. The extent of woman's participation in the corporate life is thus the measure of social change in India.

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