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Empowerment Through Adversity: Self-Knowledge in the Lives of Women in Markandaya's Works

Dr. B.Yasoda Rani,
P.S Government Degree College,
Penukonda, Sri Satya sai Dist.

Abstract

Kamala Markandaya, as a novelist, is a typical representative of the feminine sensibility. She shows great power and insight in portraying women characters. In majority of Markandaya's works, we have women narrators and the story is narrated through the feminine consciousness. She presents an objective account of women's emotions, desires and their problems, assessing womanhood's confrontation with male reality. But she is not a radical feminist and her novels are not an outright condemnation of a repressive male-dominated society calling for radical reconstruction of male and female roles. She doesn't create women's world. She just presents the real world from point of view of women. As a novelist Kamala Markandaya is a typical representative of the feminine sensibility. She shows great power and insight in portrying women characters. They are embodiment of love and peace. They are not victims of modern feminist problems, like self-realization and self-alienation. Her women are clever and practical. They learn from their past, they deal with present and looks for better future.

Index terms: Self-Realization, patriarchal society, Urban Vs Rural society, Poverty.

Kamala Markandaya stands out as one of the most prolific and talented Indian English novelists. Her works deeply resonate with the rich cultural heritage and mythology of India. Many of her themes explore the tensions between tradition and modernity, the struggles of rural poverty and hunger, the effects of industrialization on traditional ways, and issues faced by immigrants, including racial strife, as well as the conflict between material and spiritual values. A notable emphasis in her narratives is the portrayal of women, who hold a significant place in her stories. In fact, women frequently serve as the narrators, allowing the tales to unfold through a feminine lens. Through her novels, she captures the emotional landscape of Indian women and their encounters with the male-dominated reality around them.

Kamala Markandaya is not a radical feminist. Her novels are neither written for outright condemnation of patriarchal society nor accounts about the victimization of women in the hands of men. She doesn't create a woman's world. She presents the real world. Her women are earthly, practical and real. They neither blame the society nor hold others responsible for their problems. Her women characters outwardly appear to be docile. Subservient but on a closer look they are pragmatic, undaunted, unflinching, unflappable and stoical. Markandaya lets her women have the traditional role and makes them face modern predicament. As K.S.N.Rao rightly pointed out "Kamala Markandaya has no heroes but only heroines."

In *Nectar in a Sieve* Markandaya explores the ordeals of a semi-literate lower class peasant housewife, Rukmani and her daughter, Irwaddy. There is a memoir of Rukmani told in the first person narration. The tale of Rukmani and her husband Nathan, and through them the story of the changing life style of the village is told by Rukmani. The old woman starts reminiscing in the evening of her life. In Handful of Rice, Markandaya has evocatively portrayed the life of a beautiful, gentle, modest, obedient, hardworking, satisfied, loving and lovable woman Nalini, who draws Ravi from a scandalous unlawful Damoda.

Markandaya's women Rukmani, Irwaddy and Nalini are the daydreaming and fanciful. They are practical and realistic. Rukmani is the daughter of a village headman. Her three sisters, Shanta, Padmini and Thangam are married long before she is. Gradually their father dwindles in his position, and becomes a man of no consequence. Moreover four dowries are too much for a man to bear. By the time Rukmani achieves her womanhood, his prestige is much diminished. Rukmani, being unaware of her father's financial position, hopes that she would have grand wedding. She is perforce married off to a poor peasant. "The absence of money makes her fall from the fringes of her own class. The match that her family found for her is below her. She feels distressed to stay in a mud house along with her husband.

Markandaya's women are endowed with certain characteristics like vigour of mind, sensitivity, proficiency and contentment. Rukmani knows more about her husband's love for her from her neighbours Kali, Janaki and Kunthi. She feels proud that her husband has built their house with his own hands. She learns work with zeal and tries to help her husband.

Nalini, in *Handful of Rice* is beautiful. Her beauty is so fascinating that Ravi, a vagabond, falls in love with her at first sight. Ravi prepared to suffer any humiliation and discomfort for the sake of Nalini. He is completely enthralled by her beauty and envisions her as his wife.

Nalini, daughter of a skilled tailor, Apu, is the most powerful stimulus that draws Ravi from Damodar who is deeply concerned with his unfair and unlawful quest for wealth. Ravi is very impressed by her virtues. He comes to her house as often as he could to see her. Nalini is very obedient and docile. She obeys her elders and marries Ravi, a vagabond, who is below her. But Nalini is not ambitious like her husband, Ravi. She is satisfied with what they have. She knows very well that Ravi is very ambitious and dreams to achieve the things which are impossible for him. Ravi likes to show off like rich people. So, often, he goes to the sea beach and prefers a coffee bar. It gives him a sensation of living in a high society. In contrast, "Nalini symbolizes the subtle fragrance of life, a clean, healthy and traditional life. She promises sweet life but demands hard and honest labour."[12]

Rukmani, in *Nectar in a Sieve,* is a typical Indian woman. She is an upholder of Indian tradition. She is a woman of conservative character. She is unhappy when she gives birth to a baby girl. Nathan paid scant attention to his daughter Irawaddy as he had wanted a son to continue his line and work beside him on the land. In India sterility among women is considered unacceptable. Rukmani's faith in God fails to achieve the desired result. But she is endowed with an awareness of the possibilities of life. She sees value in living. For her life is important. She becomes rational and like modern women, approaches Dr. Kenny for treatment and consequently gives birth to her first son Arjun after seven years. But Rukmani never reveals her visit to Dr.Kenny for treatment to Nathan. Ira and Arjun are followed by many children - Thambai, Murgan, Raja, Selvan and Kuti. She develops a feeling of kinship with Dr.Kenny for the rest of her life. She doesn't, however, choose to disclose the truth to her husband because she knows that a man, he may, feel hurt in some way. It is not a fear of deceitfulness but calm appraisal of human nature touched by genuine, conjugal love. She is absolutely faithful to her husband in thought, word and deed.

In India a barren woman is like a counterfeit coin which is returned to the owner or discarded as useless. Women are mainly considered a begetter of children. Rukani's only daughter Irwaddy is returned to her parents by her husband as she is barren. Nathan neither blames his son-in-law not finds fault with his daughter. Rukmani, once again, boldly approaches Dr.Kenny for treatment but this turns out to be a source of tragic consequence. However, Ira accepts her fate with stoicism. There is no trace of revolt in her attitude to life.

> "Leave me alone, Mother. I have seen this coming for a long time. The reality is much easier to bear than the imaginings. At least now there is no more fear, no more necessity for lies and concealment."[17]

But Rukmani worries about Ira's future. They have no maney to leave her or to marry her again. No one has been more upset about the outcome of Ira's marriage than old Granny. She tries to console Rukmani by saying that so will Ira do, as she manages to live alone.

Rukmani, Irawaddy, and Nalini are a source of perennial love and succor to their family. They are natural buffer for the dark and uncertain future, the unfathomable depths of existence and terrors of death. Their goals and desires are vindicated by their strong family ties. Apart from the hard work of Nathan in the farm, Rukmani also raises vegetables in the backyard of her house, to support her husband financially The joy of the first pumpkin form her own, made her "pulse beat, the blood, unbidden came hot and surging to my face."[19] Then she plants beans and other vegetables which grow very wee. This fruitfulness of the plants has been a matter of pride, wonder, excitement, pleasure and gratification for Rukmani. There is harmony in the life of Rukmani and her husband Nathan. Through all the seasons the generous and gentle Rukmani is content in her love and admiration for her husband Nathan and their playful children. Rural life is full charm. The advent of the tannery and the town people disturbs the placid rhythm of rural existence. Rukmani is aware of the attack of the urban on the rural.

Rukmani and Nathan are buffeted by the vagaries of nature and chance. Nature is shown to be callous, rather cruels, out to harass and destroy Nathan and Rukmani and their kind. Either there is incessant rain leading to disastrous flood which kill men and cattle and wash away the villager's houses, or draught which brings to naught, the swat and bloodshed by the farmers in raising the crop. But Rukmani is hardworking and optimistic. She always stockpiles some grain for her family. When they come to the end of their dried-fish stocks and when they have nothing left to sell, she draws upon her secret hoard, a small stock of rice. During this period Rukmani thinks of going to Kenny and Biswas for help. Seven days pass by and seven portions are finished off. On the eighth day Kunthi comes when Rukmani is cooking rice water, in a wretched condition. She demands some rice and also threatens Rukmani that if she doesn't get rice, she would reveal what she has seen, that is her intimacy with Kenny. Rukmani is very enraged at this but gives seven days ration to her.

That night when Rukmani unearths the other half of the rice, there is no more than a handful of rice. She suspects her children. Nathan tells her that he has taken the rice to give it to Kunthi as he has fathered the sons of Kunthi. Rukmani shows a sense of accommodation in her reaction to her discovery of infidelity on her husband's part:

> Disbelief first, disillusionment, anger, reproach, pain. To find out, after so many years, in such a cruel way… He has known her not once but twice, he had gone back to give her a second son. 'And between how many times,' I thought bleak of spirit, 'while her husband in his impotence and I in my innocence did nothing.' [25]

Rukmani also reveals Kunthi's earlier visit and the grain she took. At last the necessity for the concealment is over. The rice is gone but there is at least relief now. Hereafter they feed on whatever they get. In the midst of these inexorable malignant forces Rukmani and Nathan struggle to work the land and to raise their children. They weave their dreams round their children. Arjun and Thambi, instead of helping their father, take up work with the tannery, Much against their mother's wishes. But they are sacked for anti-management activities, and leave for Ceylon, as hired labour, in the hope of less wretched life. Rukmani makes a futile attempt to stop them. Tears cometo Rukmani's eyes because she knows that they will never be able to come back. Her third son, Murugan, becomes a domestic servant in the city, eventually disappears and is not heard of again.

Rukmani is not just emotionally deficient and passive, but she is spiritually and mentally strong. This rare characteristic of Rukmani is brought out by her reaction to the death of her fourth son Raja; when he is beaten up by the tannery watchman, while he is allegedly trying to steal a calfskin. She warns her daughter Ira not to cry "What are you crying for? …. You have little enough strength, without dissolving it in tears." Neither she holds any one reponsible for the death of her son nor she claims any compensation for his death from tannery people.

The worst blow of all falls on Rukmani, when her only daughter irwaddy, who has been sent back from huger husband's house since she can't bear a child, takes to prostitution in order to buy food for her ailing younger brother Kutti during a famine. Rukmani tries to stop her from going out. She soon realizes that Ira has made up her mind that she will neither go hungry herself nor allow her brother to do so. She helplessly allows her to do as she wishes. In spite of this Kutti eventually dies of malnutrition, and Ira, who has been abndoned by her husband, gives birth to an albino so. Rukmani and Nathan accept their only grandchild, who is born out of wedlock, with characteristic courage and resignation.

Finally, Rukmani and Nathan are forced to leave their village when they are asked to vacate the plot of land which Nathan has tilled all his life and which is now to be sold to the tannery would eventually be their undoing. She grieves and mourns when she loses huger beloved plot of land. Rukmani and Nathan decide to go to their third son, Murugan who is in the city. Selvan and Ira, with her son, are to stay back. They enter the city and flounder in it throughout the whole day. They try in vain to meet their son in the enormous city and take shelter in an overcrowded temple. Their life turns miserable, when they are robbed of their money and belongings in the temple. Rukmani once again makes use of their skills at the time of difficulty, to rescue her suffering husband. She starts working as a letter-writing artist. After trying for the whole day she earns an anna or two to feed her husband. The couple, with the help of an orphan Puli, find work in a quarry as stone-brakers. But, soon, Nathan dies of starvation and sickness. Rukmani poignantly and starkly accepts even death of her beloved husband Nathan.

> So I laid my face on his and for a while his breath fell soft and light as a rose petal on my cheek, the he sighed as if in weariness and turned his to me, and so his gentle spirit withdrew and the light went out in his eyes. [32]

The widowed Rukmani, along with a leprosy boy Puli, whom she as adopted in the city, returns to her village to live with her son Selvan and daughter Ira. She remains stoical in the face of hardship and like a realist accepts every change in her life:

> Yet I have no fear now: what is done is done, there can be no repining. [33]

In Handful of Rice Nalini is always a source of peace to her husband Ravi. Whenever he is mentally disturbed, she restores his peace. She is very affectionate and gay. Nalini is a hardworking woman and never sits idle. She tries to be helpful to her father and her husband in their profession often. She is busy in knitting. She is very tolerant. Even after giving birth to twins, she takes up her household tasks without fuss. Ravi is proud of his tender, loving, and lovable wife Nalini.

Markandaya's protagonists are endowed with certain great traits. They are not victims of modern female problems like self-identity, self-laceration, alienation, fulfillment in marriage within or without. They know the meaning of life. They never create problems or be problematic to other. Whenever they have problems, they analyze and understand them, try to endure them and face them boldly instead of moaning silently. They attain self knowledge through expansion and communion.

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