



Quest for feminine Autonomy with special reference to
select Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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In kamala Markandayn's first novel Nectar In a sieve published in 1954 deals with the life and travails of a peasant women Rukmani represents a large number of under privileged women of India in general and rural women in particular. Their backs are bent due to poverty and labour for which they are hardly paid. Further writers seldom wrote about them because urban readers take no interest in such writings. Rukmani and her family face every kind of problem imposed on them by a cruel fate and also by cruel and unjust social order. The author not only brackets the poor and the women but also shows us how the defects in the exiting society affect women the most Krishna . Ahooja Patel represents statistically the facts and status of women in society.

Women constitute half of the world population and one third of the official labour force, perform nearly two thirds of the hours worked but according to some estimates (bases on UN, ILO statistics) received only on tenth of the world income and possess less than one hundredth of the world property.

Just as the poorer nations of the world are struggling through conflict and confrontation for an equitable share of man's worldly goods so also are women all over the world battling for a redistribution of privilege and power and property between men and women. Through Rukmani the author indicts a harsh and unjust society which restricts and exploits woman-hood. Her indictment is on the same lines as the well known charge sheet drawn up by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, Both accuse society for making



woman what she is—a meek, sub-ordinate second rate being—instead of what she should be an equal, full fledged partner of man.

In her novels, especially so in this earliest one, Kamala Markandaya not only pleads for proper distribution of privilege, power and property between men and women; she raises a passionate cry on behalf of plain humanity. The injustice of sexism is, according to her, as glaring as that of racism. In her article entitled “reminiscences of Rural India” she writes that she is astonished at the peasant. Everyman’s stupefying degree of endurance and resignation. If the peasant is Everyman, then, by logical extension, the peasant woman is Everywoman—here she is Rukmani. In Rukhmani’s story of one rural family’s struggle against adversity and search for self respect and autonomy is mirrored the collective history of the rural women of India.

Rukmani exemplifies the poor rural woman who works long hours, longer than the man, in low paid or non-paying jobs with backward technologies. She tells us how she was married off at the age of twelve to a poor tenant farmer, Nathan. The advent of industrialism in the rural area, the expansion of a shoddy tannery which swallows up all arable lands, the advent of drought and famine, the necessity of bringing up a large family on meager and unsteady income all these drive the couple to the verge of utter despair. A son dies in the tannery labour strike and another goes away to Ceylon as indentured laborer. A third son vanishes into the city nearby. Ira or Irrawaddy, their only daughter, a pretty and well behaved girl, is married off by them to a neighboring villager’s son. Despite the saving and scrimping and despite the dowry that Rukmani manages to put by for her, her marriage ends in failure because of her barrenness.

Ira’s husband sends her home to her parents and coolly takes another bride. The poor girl seeing her family starve during the famine turns into a woman of the streets, and irony of all ironies, gives birth to an illegitimate albino child. Nathan gets evicted from the land he has farmed for over thirty years. The couple, old and enfeebled, go to the city looking for their son, and end up, losing their meager belonging as stone breakers in a



quarry. The work is harsh, the weather cold and rainy and Nathan succumbs to a heart attack. Rukmani, just over forty, widowed, returns to the village with an adopted orphan boy, back to Ira and there is a hint of better times to come with the English doctor Kennington's clinic being established in the village. Rukmani joins him in assisting the needy and the sick and strangely enough, despite all her suffering, seems to be looking forward to a fully lived and contented old age-

“Contentment” is perhaps an inappropriate word. Resignation to her lot in life would fit more correctly- Yet Rukmani being a resilient figure, looks forward to caring for the needy and the sick in her village in a positive way. Her contentment springs from the fact that she no longer has to dazzle to retain a husband's favors vis-à-vis Kunthi, she no longer has to struggle alone to keep the kitchen fire going, she is no longer obsessed about the fetishes of bringing up a male child; she has willing and enlightened hands to shore her up, at least in her old age, In essence, her contentment, if it can be called so, springs from her caring for her fellow human beings. Her quest for autonomy, her felt needs of nurturance all ends in the culminating point of her kinship with the world at large.

Rukmani, however, has to travel a long and hazardous road before she reaches this stage. In her we see the social and economic forces in conflict. There is always the clash between the old and the new, the poor and the rich, the East and the West, between religion and science and between men and women. Though the English doctor tries hard to prod her sensitivity, her thinking, she remains passive and pathetic for too long. She does not realize the tragedy of her life, nor does she try to alleviate the suffering until it is too late. Her daughter Ira's life and marriage could have been salvaged with a little bit of timely help on her part. Yet she chooses to rest passive with her religion as her cure all until it is too late. When Kenny rails at her, “Acquiescent imbeciles... do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering?” she is bewildered. “Her



religion has taught her to bear our sorrows in silence and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed.

Her folk, rooted to the soil, have been conditioned for centuries by the vagaries of the climate and the money lenders. Her attitude of passive acceptance, fuelled by economic insecurity and religious tenets is hard to break. Dr. Kennington's concepts, Western and scientific, are totally new and radical and it takes quite some time for her to absorb them. She accepts him finally, only warily : "a strange nature, only partly within my understanding. A man half in shadow half in light, defying knowledge" (p.100), he, on his part says, "I go when I am tired of your follies and stupidities, your eternal shameful poverty, I traditional attitude towards suffering:" Rukamani sums up the traditional attitude towards suffering: "We are in God's hands." (p.131). she cannot fight back much as he urges her, for according to her, to fight back against a pre-ordained set-up is futile, to cry out for help is a sign of weakness. We are made aware of the differences between the Eastern and Western attitude towards suffering.

On the basis of this novel it is concluded that an adolescent Indian girl changing into a fully developed woman faces so many problems. In this novel a peasant woman faces great odds like famine, death, infidelity and prostitution amidst a backdrop of bone chilling poverty, she wages a constant struggle. She wins our sympathy by dint of her sheer willpower that endures a life without hope like nectar in a sieve. In this novel the writer sets forth an inspiring goal-i.e. autonomy for the self.

Rukmani's life indicates that economic difficulties are only part of what hinders her progress towards full-fledged autonomy.

Title:- The feminist approach in Kamala Markandaya's Novel, Nectar in a Sieve.

OR

Quest for Feminine Autonomy in Kamala Markandaya's Novel Nectar in a sieve.



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