

## Self-denial to Self-realization: A Roller Coaster Ride of a Woman in

### Nectar in a Sieve

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### ABSTRACT

*Nectar in a Sieve* depicts the roller coaster ride of Rukmani, who represents the normal and typical Indian woman's journey of turmoil and suffering. A society which denied the basic rights to live as a girl child has been forced to realize that a woman is capable of enduring the unendurable challenges for the sake of the loved ones. The protagonist knit within the familial setup, by her strong and deep love for her loved ones, coexist with her inability to safeguard and shield them. Eventually, she emerges as an epitome of sacrifice and protection by undergoing the metamorphosis from self-denial to self-realization.

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### INTRODUCTION

“We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope”  
- Martin Luther King

The magic of making us experience the world of a woman from the point of view of another woman is performed by the author. A journey into the mind and heart of a woman which is always considered as a mysterious and profound one is witnessed. The protagonist is drawn into the stream of sympathy and understanding and who passes through the crucible of agony and turmoil only to emerge stronger. A close analysis of *Nectar in a Sieve* helps to experience this world.

*Nectar in a Sieve*, a heroic book of Kamala Markandaya, is a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry whose life is afflicted by the existing social institutions and rituals such as child marriage, widowhood, negligence of female child, slavery, landlessness and homelessness. Among the rural folk, there is a clear dichotomy between the upper-class, the landlords and the money-lenders on the one hand and the poor tenant farmers and the laboring class on the other. Written almost half a century ago, describing events from two decades before that, is still timely and well worth reading and has undoubtedly stood the test of time. Married to a

poor farmer Nathan, because it is convenient for her family, Rukmani, the protagonist, leaves everything she has ever known and learn how to run a household by herself at the age of twelve. In a society where raising sons is the purpose in life, Rukmani finds that she can bear only a single daughter, Irawaddy. She seeks out the help of a local European doctor, Kenny, who is able to receive her fertility and allow her to have six sons. Rukmani faces many difficulties in her adult life. From the time she arrives at her husband's humble mud hut, she knows that life will be more difficult than she imagined. Her new life requires hard work for little money and few comforts. She finds herself the wife of a poor tenant farmer, but takes comfort in the realization that she is happily married to a man who loves her deeply.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays its woman characters as ideal sufferers and nurturers. The cause of their 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 courage lies in meek or at times cheerful way of facing poverty or calamity. Rukmani, the main character, and her daughter Ira display suffering throughout the novel. Rukmani works hard and is

devoted 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.

Rukmani faces loss after loss over the years and as her endurance is continuously tested, her capacity for anger intensifies and with her spirit she is chiseled into a perfect sculpture. Rukmani grows in generosity and compassion. She gives up the strictures of caste when her sons go to work in the tannery, and she gives up the tradition of shame when her daughter turns to prostitution. Rukmani forgives her daughter-in-law for failing her duty to help them, and she learns to judge the strangers not by their differences but by their deeds and their hearts. Finally, she extends her love and care to Puli, a child even more destitute than she is. By the end of the novel, Rukmani has conquered the hardships of her existence.

Throughout the novel, Rukmani is faced with struggle after struggle with no indication that her circumstances will improve. Each time her situation worsens, Rukmani endures quietly, holding on to the hope that things will soon be better. She believes that a person's spirit is the most important factor in overcoming the harsh realities of life. "Well and what if we gave in to our troubles at every step: We could be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not a man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes?" (NS111)

Rukmani has a spirit filled with hope and longing for something more than what she has. This theme runs throughout the novel along with optimism. "Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but was always with us". (NS 78)

Rukmani experiences the changes typical of a young woman in her time. She marries a man whom she does not know, becomes a mother, and, as she has more children, learns to share limited resources with more people. The picture of impersonal economic forces creating very personal individual tragedy is the bottom-line of the story. Getting used to change becomes a necessity in Rukmani's life. By the end of the story, her sons

have grown and started their own lives, leaving her with an all but empty household. After her married daughter is returned by her husband for not bearing children, Rukmani considers Nathan's advice to get used to it, because it is out of their control.

Markandeya shows, however, that Rukmani is not a woman who allows adversity to destroy her. She has enough in her life that fulfills her (children she loves, friends, and a happy marriage) to find the will to continue seeking improvement. While she is sometimes struck with despair, she never wallows in self-pity. At the end of the story, she is at peace with herself and her life. She is hopeful and cherishes her memories because she clings to the happiness in her past, rather than to the heartaches. Thus it is very obvious that Rukmani is an epitome of wisdom and intelligence and it is with these crutches she becomes sturdy to tread on the paths of depression and desperation. A.K.Srinivasa Rao aptly remarks on the moral depravity:

Markandeya is not content with mere fatalistic poetic explanations of human misery; nor is she satisfied with a survey of superficial situations of social injustice and economic inequality that continue to plague our society. She seeks to probe rather deeper into the moral dilemma that an individual is forced to face in a developing country. (226)

Hope gives Rukmani motivation to work as hard as she can, even when the benefits are not immediately apparent. If Rukmani does not have hope, she will be overcome with fear because the future is uncertain. Whenever fear is in control, it is like nectar in the sieve. To Rukmani, it seems as if her hard work is for nothing because the results of this hard work, the nectar, always seem to disappear, as if through a sieve. Eventually, however, she always finds a glimmer of hope and refines herself to emerge as a bark in the midst of the troubled oceans.

The poor in Markandeya's novel often suffer at the hands of the strong, but some of them understand that knowledge is a powerful weapon for change. Rukmani insists on teaching all of her children to read and write, even though many in the

village believe such knowledge leads to trouble. Her eldest sons are branded troublemakers because they dare to band the workers together in a strike for better wages. The tannery wins because the workers' sentiments as an educated outsider. Rukmani turns to Kenny because, she says, white men have power. Kenny uses his power for good, and finds to build a hospital to treat the poor. Kunthi uses her knowledge to exercise an evil power, but once Nathan and Rukmani share the truth with each other, Kunthi's power over them is broken. Puli shares his knowledge of the city to help Nathan and Rukmani save money for their fare home. Throughout the novel, the admirable characters are those who apply their knowledge to help people stand together in a display of moral power.

Rukmani is a strong voice for the world's poor because she speaks with clarity and truth. She reveals a world, the literate are seldom forced to examine, and her descriptions of the physical ravages of starvation are simple, powerful, and timeless. One of Rukmani's particular strengths lies in confronting her own misconceptions, as people and events often challenge her traditional views. Her sons repudiate their cast, her daughter redefines dishonor, and her grandson crosses the barrier of skin color. Kenny demands that she rethinks her preconceptions about distrusting strangers, suffering passively, and taking action against injustice. In each case, Rukmani gets stronger because of her devotion to truth and hope. Thus Kamala Markandaya, in her debut novel has shown a woman's gradual journey from self-effacement to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-sacrifice to self-fulfillment. By exercising her own free will and by exhibiting her own self, she gets fulfillment and recognition in life.

It seeks to explore Markandaya's concern with the predicament of the individual subject to a process of change. An attempt has been made to substantiate the hypothesis that in the process of this change, the self confront tension, uncertainties and conflicts that lead to deep psychological and spiritual wounds. The self with its desires, instincts and dreams, encounters a world of reality governed by racial; economic and cultural forces. This encounter leads to a crisis of identity. The self tries to surmount this crisis through resistance or reconciliation, through protest or surrender. In this

process of self's graphing with reality, there is anguish and suffering. It's exploring the paradox of human condition in terms of conflict between self and society, between free will and necessity.

Despite all her suffering, her solitary struggle against all odds, she returns to the village with the leper boy, Puli with the hope of curing him in Kenny's hospital. Observing Nathan and Rukmani as symbols of teeming millions, Hari Mohan Prasad comments:

It is an epic of the Indian life at the grassroots, a full view of the village world where peasants grow and live, suffer and endure and emerge more dignified, more human in their elements with their tattered rags, their dying means and their obstinate clinging to the soil like the stamp withered all over but its roots delved in the earth. (98)

Rukmani returns to her native place with a new self-awareness and new wisdom of the world obtained from her bitter experiences in the city whose unfortunate product is Puli, the leper boy. She remains calm and composed amidst all losses and sufferings. The novel culminates in the return of the native, the glorious figure of the mother sorrow. The sight of her village gives life and enlightenment to her starving and withered spirit. All her past experiences recede into a gloomy reverie.

Kamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve* exposes the traditional attitude of the Indians towards a female child at her very birth. With the birth of her first born Ira, Rukmani with tears of disappointment exclaims "A girl's body – what woman wants a girl for her first born?" she supports her husband's view that a male child is an asset and a girl child is a liability to the family. But ironically the couple can't lead a happy and prosperous life even if five sons are born to them successively. The irony is that in their abject poverty it's the daughter, who has become a prostitute helps the family financially and the family accepts such a daughter though initially she was rejected. Their sons are no longer symbols of hope. One must hope and persevere, if one is subjected to trickle down like the nectar in a sieve, to accept the challenges of life and emerge buoyant like Rukmani. This is the nucleus

and the concept of New Woman Consciousness in *Nectar in a sieve*. Rukmani, the central figure, is the embodiment of rapture in times of rupture, sanity in times of insanity, marvel in times of gravel.

#### Works

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