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**Portrayal of Women Protagonist: A Study of Kamala Markandaya's
*Nectar in a Sieve and Some Inner Fury***

Krutika Vyas

Research Scholar

Dept. of English

C U Shah University

Wadhwan City

Dr. Rajeshkumar Joshi
Assistant Professor & Dean,
Department Of English
C U Shah University

Wadhwan City

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**Abstract:**

Kamala Markandaya is regarded as a celebrated Indian English Novelist. She gained national and international popularity from readers and critics for her outstanding contribution in the field of Indian English novel. All her eleven novels deal with the theme of East-West encounter, rootlessness, human relationships, poverty, hunger, exploitation and female awakening. Her women protagonists possess life-affirming qualities and indescribable strength. Her understanding of woman sensibility and representation of woman attitude in the social, political and spiritual crisis has made her different and unique novelist other than her contemporaries. In her fiction, Markandaya tries to awake the consciousness of Indian Woman against the orthodox and traditional society. Therefore, her writing reflects the spirit of Indian woman and expresses her own experience as a woman in the present time. The present paper focuses on two woman protagonists Rukmani from the *Nectar in a Sieve* and Mirabai from *Some Inner Fury*.





The novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is about Rukmani, the narrator and heroine who describes the pathetic plight of villagers in a nameless south Indian village in colonial India. In the novel, Rukmini leads the life of mental and physical tortures, financial shortage and hardship. However, she shows outstanding patience and forbearance. Through the character of Rukmini, Markandaya presents the positive and self-motivated image of heroism in the midst of inexperienced hardships and despair. The novel also highlights Markandaya's quality to peep into the psyche of the character and to depict the suffering, aloofness and humiliation of female characters.

The story is set in a small unnamed village of south India. Markandaya has adopted the autobiographical mode of narration through the protagonist. Rukmani tells the story of her life and suffering from her marriage with a poor farmer, Nathan and ending with his death in the city and her returning to the village. The novelist has used flashback technique to reveal the life and story of Rukmani. There are many characters in the novels but the story of the novel reveals around Rukmani and her life. Perhaps, she is one of the most influential woman characters of Kamala Markandaya who never loses faith in life and constantly struggles against different situations. A.V. Krishna Rao describes the character of Rukmani in the following words:

The real truth of the novel is the spiritual stamina of Rukmani against formidable enemies to her culture: the draconian landlord, and the soulless industry. She knows: "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve and hope without an object cannot live". And this mother of Rural India lives in her children, Selvam and Ira who belong to a different age but who are of the same self. (122)

Rukmani is the fourth daughter of the headman of a south Indian village. Her three elder sisters Shanta, Padmini and Thargam were married with good dowries long before she is. Gradually, the village headman's position declined and he could not afford a good dowry at the time of her marriage. "This was the first time I have ever heard that my father was of no consequence. It was as if a prop on which I leaned had been roughly kicked away, and I felt frightened and refused to believe him. But of course he was right, and by the time I came to womanhood even I had to acknowledge that his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they couldn't find me a rich husband..." (34). In her opinion, her other sisters were married with bridegrooms having better status than her.



She was not happy with this marriage proposal and it was against her wish and status. Therefore, she has to marry with a poor tenant farmer called Nathan. However, she finally decided to marry with Nathan who was good human being. She becomes victim of dowry system and has to marry unwilling with a person whom she dislikes initially. After necessary rituals of marriage, Rukmani and Nathan leave for their village in a bullock cart. "Words died away, the listening air was very still, the black night waited. In the straining darkness, I felt his body moving with desire, his hands on me were trembling, and I felt my sense opening like a flower to his urgency." (21) Rukmani weeps at the time of departure but Nathan consoles because separation is inevitable part of life. In the journey, Rukmani was throughout uncomfortable. At the time of entering in the house, Rukmani falls down due to cramp.

At the course of time, Rukmani learns to adjust with life happily and starts co-operating her husband in all activities. Both, Rukmani and Nathan lead a contented life. This is the major change in the character of Rukmani as she goes beyond her limitations and finds meaning to life. Being a woman, she gradually finds out her best qualities to manage life from all perspectives. She does not surrender herself against misfortune of her destiny and accepts challenges by remaining calm and peaceful. It show that she understand the fundamental principles of surviving in the society. Her character reflects that there is no need to rebel against the society if someone wishes to have a place and make others realize of one's presence. Her achievement lies in her realizing her goal while following the norms and values of society. To highlights such qualities of Rukmani's character, G.R. Taneja writes:

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Young Rukmani 's reactions of the world around her are motivated by are cognition that life is for living and when going get s tough human mind must draw its strength from an unambiguous acceptance of the inescapable and that admit the desire to escape is an a the ma. Not to break-up or destroy, but to persist and rebuild is what life is about .Not self pity but selfless team is what human existence e must derive its sustenance f rom.

The character of Rukmani is a symbol of every Indian woman. Rukmani as a daughter, wife and mother plays significant role and remains in the centre of the action. She boldly accepts all challenges of life and adjusts according to the situations. Kamala Markandaya portraits Rukmani's characters in such a way that she leads the role and influences people around. Arundhati Chatterjee highlights her feminine qualities and remarks, "Rukmani, the mother figure, symbolizes the mother earth, is the virgin soil, the source, the origin, the well-spring, the life-giver, the superior, the sustainer, the nourished and even more, the last resort,



the consoler, the healer. It is the positive, sustaining force of life... Her integrity is never on the brink of collapse.”(92) Her fights against destiny, poverty and rigid social system make her different than other characters. In the novel, Rukmani faces a lot of hardship at different occasions. At the same time, she has demonstrated her true character each time she overcome one of her problems. It is seen that misfortune cross her path again and again, poverty and starvation do not dehumanize her and Calamities of the flood bring major attack of starvation and sorrow. “Under the calm composed self is found the strong undercurrent of pain and suffering. She absorbs all pain; she is the womb immune to all shocks. Her grief-stricken visage has dignity and nobility.” (Poonam 4)

At the different level, Rukmani is not same like other women of the village. She is conscious about her role in the family and society. For her situation, she never complains and try to see the context in a larger way. She has great feminine sensibility and a spirit of true woman who discover positive sense in the hard time. As once she remarks that, “It is true, one gets used to everything. I had got used to the noise and the smell of the tannery, they no longer affected me. I had seen the slow, calm, beauty of our village melt in the blast from the town, and I grieved no more, so now I accepted the future and Ira’s lot in it, and thrust it from me; only sometimes when I was weak, or myself rebellious, protesting, rejecting and no longer calm”.(65) Additionally, she represents the rural, woman in general. But she differs from Janaki, kali and kunthi who are quite not educated. She gives every possible education to her children and tries to be the best mother. In a way, her character is more complex than that of others who figure in the novel. As the chief character and protagonist, she adopts the dramatic role of a sad chronicler of the traditional life of an Indian village in the period of transition. In the novel, Rukmani achieves the great height from philosophical and spiritual point of view.

In brief, *Nectar in a Sieve* presents Markandaya most memorable woman character. Rukmani is a strong woman who dominates even male characters in the novel. In this novel Markandaya changes the notion of Indian woman who is treated badly and remains the puppet in the hands of men. The novelist has seen life of woman in the Indian society closely and reveals her own image of woman through the character of Rukmani. Appreciating, Markandays’s first novel and the character of Rukmani, Poonam observes:

Being a woman novelist, Kamala Markandaya expresses all aspects of a female, the inner voice, sentimentality of a woman, depression, frustration, feeling of dominate over some one, the hope of achieving aim, the happiness and sorrow, the patriotic feeling, the maternal instinct in the character of Rukmani. That’s why



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Rukmani is one of the immortals of literature, and her life-story, once read, can never be forgotten.

Like *Nectar in a Sieve*, the novel *Some Inner Fury* has also central woman character and narrator named Mira. But Rukmani and Mira differ in many ways. Mira belongs to a highly educated, upper class ultramodern society. There is another woman character named Premala in the novel that represents Marknadaya's feminist view of life. She represents different perspectives of life. She is an idealized typical girl who symbolizes Indian traditions and culture. In this context, Laxmi R. Moktali compares both the characters and writes:

If her heroine Rukmani in *Nectuar in a Sieve* represents the peasant folk, Mirabai of *Some Inner Fury* represents the rebellious young blood of pre-independence India. If one is rural the other is urban. But the situations in which these women are placed are more or less, the same, in that both of them had once their golden days and are now thwarted. (54)

Mira is sensitive and imaginative woman who plays significant role in the novel. She is modern woman, brought up in a westernized custom and household where there are two dining halls and two sets of cooks and whose members go to European clubs and dance and play. She is aware of her superior place as she describes her family, "My mother went to play bridge and to keep my father company. I went because I was taken, and to learn, to mix with Europeans. This last part of my training, for one day soon I would marry a man of my own class, who like my brother, would have been educated abroad, and who would expect his wife to move as freely in European circles as he himself did." (4) However, she has Indian heart and respects Indian value system. She does not forget the place the woman is given in the traditional Indian family in spite of her exposure to Western ideas and life style.

The character of Mira presents Markandaya's concept of upper modern class woman who synthesizes both the East and the West values. She earns modesty and western life style from the rich family background. Mira breaks cultural boundary by deciding to marry with Richard, an Englishman without concerning to her mother. Her relationship with Richards gradually turns into intimate love. Mira was seventeen years old and her mother asked her to wait to marry with Richards till she grows to be twenty one. Mira and Richard were in deep love with each other and eager to marry. However, her dream of live is completely destroyed with the commencement of the year of 1942 when the Quite India Movement created



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heat of revenge, hatred and hostility against the white people.

The relationship between Mira and Richard is symbolic. The parting of Mira and Richard is symbolically parting of India and England. The death of Richard brings great sorrow in the life of Mira. Richard was cruelly killed by Indian revolutionaries during the conflict between Indians and Englishmen. Mira unconditional love for Richard is ideal portraits of typical Indian woman. Her love for Richard was more than just living together. She greatly reflects deep concern for Richard as “What had been given us had been gifted freely, abundantly, lit with a splendour which had coloured and enriched our whole living; it could never be taken from us. We had known love together; whatever happened the sweetness of that knowledge would always remain”. (p.191) Describing the character of Mira in the novel *Some Inner Fury*, Monica notices

Mira ruminates that individual fall or suffering is irrelevant in the event of a great cause. Through the character of Mira, a mentally a liberated woman, Kamala Markandaya emphasizes that personal losses do not count for a noble cause. Mira sacrifices her love at the altar of national loyalty. In the beginning the ardent love of Mira for Richard seems to cut across boundaries of hatred, but it ultimately fails because they belong to two different cultures or races of the ruler and the ruled. (186)

In a way, Kamala Markandaya gives full attention to develop her women characters in the novel. Rukmani leads the role in *Nectar in a Sieve* while Mira plays central role in *Some Inner Fury*. Though both these characters are different in their life style, nature and attitude but remain the chief focus of the novel.



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