
Gender Roles and Women's Struggles in Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is a seminal work that paints a vivid picture of rural Indian life during a period of socio-economic upheaval brought about by colonial influence and industrialization. Through the eyes of Rukmani, a tenant farmer's wife, the novel explores the lived realities of women constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, poverty, and the rapidly changing social landscape. This research paper examines the construction of gender roles within the novel, the state of motherhood, and the multifaceted struggles of women, emphasizing the resilience and quiet resistance of the female protagonist and her community. The analysis further contextualizes these struggles within the broader framework of colonial modernity and its disruption of traditional social structures.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Colonial Modernity, Female Resilience

The Construction of Gender Roles in Rural India

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, gender roles are delineated by cultural traditions and social expectations that assign women primarily to domestic spheres. Rukmani's life is framed by her duties as a wife, mother, and caretaker of the household, reflecting the dominant patriarchal ideology that values women chiefly for their reproductive and supportive roles. Early in the novel, Rukmani's arranged marriage signifies the limited agency women have over their personal lives. According to Sinha, "Traditional Indian rural society constructs femininity around obedience and sacrifice, often subjugating women's desires to familial and social needs" (78).

Rukmani internalizes these ideals, finding meaning and identity through service to her family despite the hardships she endures. However, Markandaya subtly critiques this system by portraying the emotional and physical toll it takes on women, highlighting the contradictions within traditional gender expectations.

Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* explores the intricate dynamics of gender roles and the multifaceted struggles of women in a traditional, rural Indian society. Through the protagonist Rukmani, Markandaya presents a poignant depiction of the female experience shaped by patriarchy, poverty, and cultural expectations. While women in the novel are bound by rigid gender norms, they also exhibit resilience and agency in the face of relentless adversity. The novel ultimately offers a profound commentary on the endurance and quiet strength of women who bear the burdens of both familial and societal expectations.

From the outset, Rukmani's life is circumscribed by traditional gender roles. Married off at a young age to Nathan, a poor tenant farmer, she is thrust into the role of a dutiful wife and expected to bear children—especially sons—without complaint. Her value as a woman is closely tied to her fertility, as reflected in her deep distress over her initial inability to conceive. She states, “A woman who has not borne a child is not a woman” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 8). This belief illustrates how deeply ingrained cultural norms dictate a woman's worth. Her eventual decision to seek help from Dr. Kennington, a foreigner, reflects both desperation and agency—an attempt to reclaim power over her own body, even within a patriarchal structure.

Rukmani's struggles are further intensified by poverty, which places immense pressure on women in her community. While Nathan works the land, Rukmani not only contributes labor in the fields but also manages the household, cares for their children, and endures the emotional toll of hunger and hardship. Despite losing several children, facing eviction, and seeing her daughter Ira become a sex worker, Rukmani carries on with quiet dignity. Ira's decision to sell her body to feed her brother, though heartbreaking, is also an act of survival and sacrifice that highlights the limited choices available to women: “What is shame compared with hunger?” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 150). As critic Uma Narayan argues, “Indian women's oppression is often tied not only to patriarchy but also to economic and structural injustices” (Narayan 216). This synthesis of gender and poverty is central to Markandaya's narrative.

Despite the constraints imposed on her, Rukmani is not merely a passive sufferer. She adapts to changing circumstances, and her quiet perseverance becomes a form of resistance. Her friendship with Dr. Kennington, although unconventional, demonstrates her openness to new ideas and her willingness to act in the best interest of her family. When she travels to the city with Nathan in search of their son, Rukmani's actions underscore her commitment and courage. Scholar S. Iyengar notes that "Rukmani's strength lies in her stoic acceptance and moral willpower, which allows her to survive when many others would falter" (Iyengar 183). These moments reveal that even within a rigid social framework, women can assert agency in subtle yet powerful ways.

Traditional Gender Expectations

Rukmani's life is shaped by the expectations imposed on her as a woman. Married off at a young age to a poor tenant farmer, she is immediately placed within the domestic sphere, expected to bear children, maintain the household, and support her husband without question. Her identity and value are closely tied to her fertility—a common burden for women in traditional societies. The shame Rukmani feels due to her initial inability to conceive highlights how women are often reduced to their reproductive roles. The arrival of a foreign doctor, Kennington, who helps her conceive, further illustrates how little control Rukmani has over her own body and health, relying on male intervention for what is deemed her primary function.

The birth of Ira, Rukmani's first child, underscores the societal preference for male offspring. The disappointment Rukmani feels upon Ira's birth reveals the deep-seated value placed on sons as carriers of family lineage and providers of economic security. This preference is further exemplified by the cultural practices surrounding dowries, where daughters are seen as financial burdens and the societal stigma attached to female infertility.

Economic and Social Oppression

The struggles Rukmani faces are compounded by poverty, a burden she shares with her husband but bears in different, gendered ways. While Nathan works the land, Rukmani not only helps him in the fields but also manages the household, raises children, and endures the emotional weight of hunger and loss. The novel underscores the silent labor and emotional strength expected of women. Despite suffering the loss of multiple children, eviction from her home, and witnessing the degradation of her daughter Ira into prostitution, Rukmani persists with quiet dignity. This endurance is not celebrated by society, but rather expected.

Resistance and Adaptation

Despite the oppressive structures, Markandaya portrays Rukmani as a figure of strength and resilience. Her labor in the fields, her efforts to maintain familial harmony, and her determination to ensure the survival of her children demonstrate a form of resistance to the forces that seek to subjugate her. Rukmani's relationship with nature is central to her identity; the land is both a source of sustenance and a symbol of continuity and belonging.

The intrusion of a tannery into the village signifies the onset of industrialization and the disruption of traditional ways of life. The environmental degradation and economic instability that follow exacerbate the hardships faced by Rukmani and other women in the community. However, Rukmani's unwavering commitment to her family and her land illustrates the enduring spirit of resistance against external and internal forces of oppression.

Although constrained by tradition, Rukmani is not a passive victim. Her inner strength and adaptability show the quiet resistance of women who survive against all odds. Her relationship with Kennington is one example—despite cultural taboos, she seeks medical help and forms a friendship that transcends conventional roles. Her journey to the city to find her son, and her attempt to earn money in the face of starvation, also reflect her evolving agency. Ira's decision to become a prostitute to feed her brother may seem tragic, but it too is a form of resistance—an act of agency in a system that offers women few choices.

Rukmani's Character Development: Strength and Vulnerability

Rukmani's character development is central to the novel's exploration of gender and struggle. Initially, she embodies innocence and hope, eager to fulfill her role as a dutiful wife and mother. Yet as the narrative progresses, the relentless cycle of poverty, loss, and social change hardens her resolve and deepens her understanding of her limited societal position.

Chaudhuri argues that Rukmani's evolution “represents a microcosm of the female experience in patriarchal India, oscillating between submission and empowerment” (114). Rukmani's pragmatic approach to survival—taking on physically demanding labor, managing household crises, and making difficult decisions—reflects a nuanced form of agency within a restrictive context. Her resilience becomes a form of silent resistance against the systemic forces that seek to diminish her value.

Relationships Among Women: Solidarity and Shared Struggles

Markandaya also portrays the communal relationships among women as crucial to their survival. Rukmani's interactions with other village women, such as Kunthi and Muthu, reveal a network of solidarity amidst hardship. Although these relationships are sometimes marked by tension and jealousy—often stemming from the scarcity of resources—they generally provide emotional support and collective strength.

Basu notes that “female friendships in rural settings often serve as counter spaces where women negotiate their identities and resist patriarchal isolation” (52), highlighting the communal nature of their survival despite hardships.

The novel also portrays how motherhood can create bonds between women. The relationship between Rukmani and Ira, and between Rukmani and her daughter-in-law Ammu, reflects a shared understanding of the burdens of womanhood and motherhood.

Ira's own experience with infertility and later, her decision to raise an albino child alone, mirrors and extends Rukmani's experience. Ira defies social norms to fulfill her maternal instinct, showing that motherhood can also be an act of defiance. Even the character of Kunthi—though manipulative—represents a contrasting portrayal of motherhood. She uses her children to gain power and support, highlighting how motherhood can be distorted by survival instincts in a harsh world.

Women's Struggles: Poverty, Motherhood, and Social Expectations

The intersection of gender and poverty is a persistent theme in the novel. Rukmani's struggles are compounded by economic deprivation, which restricts her choices and exacerbates her vulnerability. The loss of children to disease and famine symbolizes both personal tragedy and the harsh realities facing rural families. Rukmani's identity is deeply tied to her role as a mother. Like many women in traditional societies, she is expected to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother without question. Her sense of self is built around nurturing her children and ensuring their survival.

When her first child is a daughter, Ira, Rukamani is disappointed, reflecting the societal preference for male offspring. Yet, she grows to love Ira deeply, and this marks the beginning of her emotional journey as a mother. Rukmani's subsequent infertility becomes a source of anxiety and shame, revealing how a woman's worth is often linked to her ability to bear children. Her secret visit to Dr. Kennington to treat her infertility shows both desperation and determination, qualities that define her

motherhood. Motherhood in the novel is characterized by profound sacrifice. Rukmani constantly puts the needs of her children above her own. Her life is one long series of compromises and hardships endured for the sake of her family. Feeding and educating her children: Even during times of starvation, Rukmani attempts to feed her children, sometimes going hungry herself. She also places importance on their education, particularly for her sons, believing that it might help them escape the cycle of poverty. Selling possessions and laboring in the fields: She sells off personal belongings, toils in the fields, and even moves to the city to support her son Murugan's family—actions that show the lengths to which she goes for her children. Rukmani's motherhood is also marked by tragic losses. She experiences the death of several children, and each death chips away at her, but never breaks her spirit. Her son Raja is killed by tannery guards. His death symbolizes the brutality of industrial exploitation and the helplessness of mothers who cannot protect their children from larger socio-political forces. Perhaps the most heart-wrenching moment in the novel, Kuti dies of starvation despite Rukmani and Ira's desperate efforts. Ira resorts to prostitution to feed him, a tragic example of how motherhood sometimes demands moral compromises in the face of dire necessity. When Rukmani and Nathan go to the city to find Murugan, they learn he has abandoned his wife and children. This emotional betrayal is another kind of maternal loss, where the child's physical survival is overshadowed by moral abandonment.

Motherhood, while celebrated culturally, becomes a source of anguish in the face of infant mortality and societal pressure to bear sons. The inability to fulfill these expectations often leads to social marginalization. As Nair explains, "In patriarchal societies, a woman's worth is frequently linked to her reproductive success, with failure leading to diminished status and increased vulnerability" (39). Rukmani's perseverance in caring for her family despite these pressures underscores the emotional labor women perform.

Colonialism, Modernization, and Changing Gender Dynamics

The novel situates women's struggles within the broader socio-political context of colonialism and modernization. The arrival of the tannery in the village disrupts traditional agrarian life and social hierarchies, creating both opportunities and challenges for women.

Industrialization undermines the village economy, leading to displacement and uncertainty. While men often migrate for work or confront unemployment, women like Rukmani are forced to adapt by taking on new forms of labor or increasing their

domestic responsibilities. This shift complicates traditional gender roles, revealing tensions between continuity and change.

Dasgupta writes that “modernization in colonial India simultaneously destabilized and reinforced gender inequalities, as economic transformations redefined women’s roles but often failed to grant them autonomy” (86). *Nectar in a Sieve* reflects this ambivalence, portraying both the hardships and subtle shifts in gender relations prompted by colonial economic forces.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Nectar in a Sieve* examines how gender roles shape and often limit women’s lives, yet it also highlights their capacity for resilience and adaptation. Through Rukmani’s journey, Kamala Markandaya brings attention to the often-overlooked strength of women who bear the weight of societal expectations. The novel does not romanticize suffering but instead honors the endurance and quiet heroism of women like Rukmani, who navigate poverty and patriarchy with remarkable grace. Markandaya’s work remains a compelling testament to the resilience of the human spirit, especially that of women marginalized by culture and circumstance.

Nectar in a Sieve offers a rich and nuanced portrayal of gender roles and women’s struggles in rural India during a period of profound social change. Through Rukmani’s life, Kamala Markandaya exposes the limitations imposed by patriarchal traditions and economic hardship, while also celebrating the resilience, solidarity, and quiet agency of women. The novel situates these personal struggles within the larger dynamics of colonialism and modernization, illustrating the complex and often contradictory impact of these forces on gender relations. Ultimately, *Nectar in a Sieve* underscores the strength of women who endure, adapt, and resist in a world that frequently marginalizes them.

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