
**Resilience Amid Despair: The Stoic Strength of Women
in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve***

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Abstract

Indian novels often mirror how women have long been in the race of acquiring financial, social and physical freedom by depicting them struggling against the male-oriented society which is deeply rooted with stereotypical views of gender. Amidst these struggles, where their voices are sidelined and their individual demands are dismissed, it is fascinating to note how they strive to retain their individuality. Kamala Markandaya's novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* serves as a microcosm of the broader Indian society that narrates the harrowing tale of Indian rural life during the transitional period. It talks about the gender disparity that has imposed a fixed sphere to women, limited their roles and also curtailed their freedom. The women characters in the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* are represented in a new light; they do not conform to the traditional imposed rules and instead emerge with a new spirit and optimism which is also seen the way they relentlessly resist to their oppressive surroundings. Thus, the present paper seeks to unfold the pathetic journey of women in this novel, who oscillate between different circumstances like whether to fulfill different societal expectations or to follow their inner voice in order to defy these constraints. It also aims to examine their myriad of strengths and their stoic resilience against the adverse situations which mark them as the symbol of hope in the face of utter despair.

Keywords: Hope, Stoicism, Gender performativity, Societal transition, Intersectionality.**Introduction:**

The richness of Indian literature lies in its profound depiction of the social evolution and the cultural ethos attached to the Indian society. The major concerns of the society like casteism, discriminations, socio-economic upheavals along with the patriarchal norm that is deeply rooted with gender inequality have been explored through literature. Being the integral contributors of the society, men and women are assigned to different

spheres. The former, Men as the sole earners of the family, play the productive role are hence assigned to the public sphere, whereas the latter, the women are confined to the enclosed four walls of the domestic sphere, where their roles are fixed; they perform the reproductive roles. This relegates them to a secondary stature; whose identity and existence solely depends upon the men. Within that sphere, she cannot aspire more than that of a house keeper, a nurturer, a caregiver of the family. Both man and woman have been expected to act and behave according to their gender roles. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity considers, 'gender' as an ideological conception and which is unnaturally conditioned with someone's outer actions. She associates it with the word 'performance.' Its stability derives from its very performance which means to practice the attributes of feminine and masculine repeatedly. According to Butler, "if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural significance, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender" (180).

This artificial and ideological construction of gender roles triggers a number of discriminations on women's part and becomes the chief reason for their subjugation. The unnatural demarcation of superiority and inferiority in terms of gender, has always been unfavourable towards women. It sets limitation on their natural right to get education, employments and to live in freedom. The only way of their survival is not according to their own wishes or choices but as per what is the already decided. It obscures the true identity of women as a human being, and also their autonomy. Literature as the reflection of a society reflects the peripheral or marginal position of women and confronts these societal prejudices. Indian literary realm from the earliest time to the contemporary period has been depicting the true condition of Indian women, often shown navigating through the patriarchal landscape. It reflects the helpless struggles of women against the oppressive regimes and their years old battle for the recognition and validation of their individual identity. Indian English fictions have highlighted women's position during the great transitional periods like the pre and post independent era, their vulnerable status amidst the cultural and communal struggle, the transitional moment from traditionality to modernity and the colonial and postcolonial periods. Their journey is narrated from subjugation to assertion, and it offers revamped insights into the challenges and triumphs they encounter through these transitions.

In Indian literary canon, no doubt the voices of women have been amplified. Writers, beginning from Toru Dutta, Cornelia Sorabjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Anita Desai, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahari, Amrita Pritam, Sashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee to the contemporary writers, all have narrated the unfathomed struggles and suffering of women protagonists in their works. Each work has articulated a different angle of women's perspective in relation to the socio-political atmosphere. Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, is a clear portrait of gender oppression in Indian society. Sashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* focuses on the suffocating domestic sphere and the silent suffering of women. Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar*, narrates the petrifying story of partition that has inflicted deeper

wounds on women's body and spirit. Whereas, Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, talks about how women become the victims of different types of exploitation. All these novels not only showcase the variety of women's experiences in different contexts, but also provide a social critique against these unnatural barriers.

Kamala Markandaya as an Indo-Anglian novelist most remarkable for her realistic portrayal of characters. Markandaya at once was a revolutionist, a visionary, a critique of society and a humanitarian writer. Her works not only appeal to the broader issues of society but also, successfully depict the inner conflicts and perspectives of the characters.

Markandaya's character-centric approach is an uncommon trait that distinguishes her from other contemporary writers. Her speciality as a distinguished writer is due to the first-hand experiences she gained on Indian rural life, its hunger and poverty. Having both the knowledge of Western and Indian way of life, Markandaya, as a visionary was well aware about the Western impact on Indian society. Thus, all her works are infused with Indian sensibilities and the impact of modernity. Markandaya was a "visionary in her own wider way, she was not only concerned with Indian women and their suffering but she embraced other burning problems of Indian like the political encounter, the religio-philosophical encounter and the socio-cultural, economic encounter also" (Singh 4).

Kamala Markandaya's first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* is a saga of existential struggles relayed in different forms; on the one hand it is a battle between the unyielding spirit of human beings against the power of nature and on the other hand the characters' responses and resistance against the dogmatic shackles of the society. The American novelist, Earnest Hemingway's words resonate strongly in this regard: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (93). But in this instance, it would not be inappropriate to say that 'women can be destroyed but not defeated', for the women characters of this novel exhibit the extraordinary characteristics of Indian women known for their self-abnegating qualities as a mother and as a wife. This novel represents a stoic portrayal of women figures. The philosophy of stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium in ancient Greece, which believes that with rationality, self-discipline and mental resilience one can achieve happiness. The women characters of this novel show their stoic resilience to tackle down the challenges of life.

Nectar in a Sieve presents an Indian rural life scenario during the mid-twentieth century with a woman protagonist, Rukmani as its narrator. Markandaya shows both the outer and inner world of the characters in this novel. She brilliantly represents the inner experiences of women, their interpersonal relationships and also the intrapersonal connections. The readers peep into the struggling phases of the characters through the eyes of Rukmani. While expressing her journey as a daughter, wife and a mother, she focuses on the flaws of Indian societal systems pertaining to women in terms of education, marriage and motherhood.

Rukmani shows how women are victims of societal expectations throughout the life; since the birth to the end of their lives, they are expected to live in accordance with society's wishes. This is clearly evident in Rukmani's earlier experiences as a daughter. Being the headman's younger daughter, she got little fortune on her part compared to her elder sisters as the family's prosperity is wiped out due to the evil tradition of dowry. Rukmani becomes a child bride of a landless tenant farmer called Nathan, without any objection. As being aware of the family's depleted situation, she passively resigns to her fate, by accepting her father's choice. Rukmani's condition can be compared with the female protagonist, Parvati of Asapurna Devi's *The Distant Window*, where Parvati too had to compromise with her wishes and happiness due to her poverty-stricken father. She had to marry someone who was double of her age. In this way, society robs away women's autonomy over themselves. Marriage as an institution in this case appears as a mode of domination rather than liberation.

Rukmani's pathetic situation can be comprehended through her painful remembrance of her married life. She had to adjust in two room shelter and start a new life. "I wanted to cry. This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch as my home. My knees gave first the cramped one, then the other and I sank down" (6). Though she felt like crying, she was the only listener of her sighs, and she was compelled to suppress it. Rukmani as a stoic character accepts the situation, and with the love of her husband she hopes for a better future.

Nectar in a Sieve talks about women's sexuality and gender disparity. The women characters of the novel like Rukmini and Irawaddy battle against the societal oppression throughout their life. Rukmani for instance, first time blessed with a girl child and she fails to conceive for next six years. Both Rukmini and Nathan unconventionally accept their girl child with content. However, the existence of a daughter is not considered sufficient for the society and since they need male child to work outside, Rukmani dwells on the pressure of giving a rightful heir to her husband. For which she secretly takes the help of Dr, Kenny and becomes the mother of five more sons. This unveils gender disparity that has set fixed societal roles for man and women. A woman's worth is always counted in terms of her reproductive functions which becomes a mode of enslavement. As Beauvoir points out, "the female feels her enslavement more and more keenly, the conflict between her own interests and the reproductive forces is heightened" (53).

This subjugation in terms of reproductive role of women is more prominent in the case of Irawaddy also. After Rukmini, Irawaddy is the next woman figure who becomes the victim of societal coercion. As a woman, she has to follow the same path of marrying at a very early age. But her fate takes a downturn and she is abandoned by her husband as she fails to conceive. Irawaddy's situation shows how women's value is limited to their reproductive functions, that is as long as she functions as a reproductive machine, she is valued. Critic Radha Chakravorty comments that "in India, women's self-worth and value are usually dependent on their reproductive function. This valorization of motherhood has its own built-in paradoxes: maternity is associated with a capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice which

entitles the mother to her quasi-divine status” (77). This leads Irawaddy to forcefully turn into a prostitute in order to feed her little brother Kutu. In due course, she gives birth to an albino child.

Gender disparity can be seen through the amount of liberty, man and women receive as social beings. Rukmani as a woman has to endure the ill treatment of societal prejudices. As a wife and a mother, she always thinks for the family first, that is why she does not bother about the society while taking treatment from Dr. Kenny. While narrating her story she expresses that, “And for us I thought, but could not say it; for at the beginning, I had not wished my husband to know... for I knew not what his reaction would be” (21). Her hesitation to unveil the secret to her husband clearly shows the struggle of women with limited liberty. Rukmani’s situation is contrasted with Nathan’s sexual liberty, when she gets to know about Nathan’s extra-marital affair with the neighbour Kunthi, who becomes the mother of Nathan’s two sons. This is indeed due to society’s biased view regarding gender. Rukmani has to bear the social criticism from Kunthi and the moneylender Biswas, who engage in mudslinging her character time to time for secretly taking treatment from Dr. Kenny.

Nectar in a Sieve exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal systems. It is evident how society is critical of both Rukmani’s defiance of rule as she takes modern treatment to have more children and Irawaddy’s unconventional profession as a prostitute and getting an illegitimate child. Whereas, Nathan freely enjoys sexual liberty and also Irawaddy’s husband who easily gets a second wife after abandoning her.

Women’s vulnerable status owing to gender disparity further aggravates due to other factors. Gender is often intersected with various other social, cultural and economic factors like class, race, ethnicity, caste, financial issues, infertility, sexuality, disability etc. which culminate into oppression and discrimination. The theory of ‘intersectionality’ “interrogates the overlapping systems of oppression operating within the institutionalized practices of a society to create discrimination or inequality” (Sharma 42). It was coined by the American professor, Kimberle Crenshaw initially for black women’s experience in terms of gender and race, but later it was extended to other factors as well. For instance, Rukmani and Irawaddy become the victims of patriarchal pressures. At first, both of their inability to produce child becomes the source of oppression. Apart from that, their low social class, Irawaddy’s abandonment due to her infertility, and her dragging into prostitution due to poor financial condition display how multiple social identities overlap and become oppressive on women counterpart.

The women characters of the novel, such as Rukmani, Irawaddy and Kunthi undermine the fixed social order and resist the gender stereotype in many ways. They not only carry out their reproductive roles but also display their productive capacities. Rukmani’s

resistance can be seen through the way she raises her own vegetable garden; a symbol of her independency and autonomy. By selling these garden products, she nurtures her family during the financial hardships. Furthermore, due to her unconventional ability to read and write, she makes some money by writing letters for others at a time when her family has to undergo a destitute life in the city. Whereas, in case of Irawaddy and Kunthi, though the profession of prostitution is not due to their personal choices, rather they are compelled to get into it, still they uphold agency and freedom in sustaining their families.

Markandaya provides a social critique on this transitional period in India through this novel and puts emphasis on many social issues faced by the rural people. Rukmani and her family suffer a lot on the hands of the moneylenders, combat natural disasters and become unhoused. Amidst these struggles, whether stemmed from natural or artificial causes, the women characters of the novel withstand all the circumstances due to their unbreakable zeal. *Nectar in a Sieve* shows the impact of societal changes on human beings. It portrays a world on the edge of modernism and how women respond to such transitions. The introduction of the tannery as a symbol of industrialization and modernity disrupts the peaceful world of this rural village. Rukmani gives an account of her family's pathetic situation on the arrival of the tannery that usurps their farming land- the only source of earning. As an agrarian family, their sustenance majorly depends upon the success of their farm land. Rukmani grieves over this situation, she and her family are succumbed to- "This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on the land that belonged to another" (132). They have to leave the vary place, where she entered as a bride, supported her husband and raised her children. In comparison to the traditional, expected passive role of women, *Nectar in a Sieve* weaves different angles of women personality. It proves that, an Indian woman's true beauty is defined through her ability to draw happiness amidst the storms and turbulences of life. These woman figures of this novel stand out from the traditional picture, due to their grit and fortitude, self-abnegating nature, adaptability and adjustability. Rukmani though conforms certain social codes, but resists in many ways. She predicts that the arrival of tannery into their village would hamper their way of living and destroy their social harmony- "But the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye" (25). But nobody pays a heed to her protest against this establishment of tannery, rather she has to "bend like a grass" (28), so that she cannot break. Rukmani's voice remains unheard due to her secondary position in society. Her rebelling inner spirt against the disordering society in the form of tannery affirms her individual agency. As Rukmani says, "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 wilt in the blast from town, and I grieved no more.... When I was weak, or in sleep while my will lie dormant, I found myself rebellious, protesting, rejecting, and no longer calm" (62). In due course, battling against poverty and hunger, she loses her home, bears the pangs of losing her sons and husband early. But going through all these hopeless circumstances, she comes out as an

indomitable warrior. Despite of having critical remarks from society about her profession, Irawaddy too asserts her individual identity by raising her illegitimate albino child.

Conclusion:

Nectar in a Sieve displays women's indomitable strengths in facing life's striking strokes that often make life hopeless and helpless. They not only manage to resist their oppressive surroundings with regard to gender discrimination, preordained impositions or the survival battle against poverty and calamities, but also, they evince a life lesson to stay hopeful in any kind of adverse situations and to be able to draw nectar in a sieve. Their stoicism in the form of adjustability and adaptability asserts their resolute nature against the daunting situations of life.

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