

Kamla Markandeya's Rukmani: Portrayal of Deprived and Exploited in Literature

Dr. Jayant Anant Kulkarni.

Asso.Prof. & HOD, English, S.B.D Mahavidyalaya, Atpadi, Dist. Sangli, (M.S.) India

Abstract

Post independent Indian English literature reflects changing Indian society. Particularly, women novelists have thrown light on the changing female world. Kamala Markandaya is pioneer among them. One of the subthemes of this conference is Feminist Literature. This research paper focuses on the plight of the Indian women after independence. For this, the famous novel of Kamala Markandaya 'Nectar in a Sieve' and Rukmani's character is selected here to present transcendental struggle between good and evil. Rukmani's character is the portrayal of the deprived and exploited. It presents the contemporary socio-economic, cultural and political issues. This research paper points to an exhilaration and suggests the beginning of fresh awakening. It tries to explore the voice of marginalized, exploited and deprived in society. It forwards the need of social reform. Rukmani and others were the victims of two evils- zamindar system and industrial economy. We notice that tannery destroyed the traditional villagers. Series of sufferings- drought, no crops, starvation, no money, no jobs to her sons, unsettlement and at last death of Nathan made Rukmani a tortured figure in and out. She oscillates like a pendulum in between good and evil. Spiritual stamina of Rukmani symbolizes that *work without hope draws nectar in a sieve and hope without an object cannot live*. She is the representative of the large mass of unprivileged and helpless women in India. They endured injustice and inhuman treatment as a part of their destiny. She is the mother of sorrows receiving shocks after many shocks. The cycle was unending. But, at last she forwards the message that *one must hope and try to discover nectar in a sieve*.

Keywords: Deprived, struggle, good & evil, helpless, tortured figure, destiny, victim

LPG has encompassed everything now. It has marked great changes in the lives of the people in the developing countries like India. Post independent Indian English literature reflects all this. Particularly, women novelists have thrown light on the changing female world. Kamala Markandaya is the pioneer among them. One of the subthemes of this conference is Feminist Literature. This research paper focuses on the plight of the Indian women

after independence. For this, the famous novel of Kamala Markandaya 'Nectar in a Sieve' and Rukmani's character is selected here to present transcendental struggle between good and evil in the developing Indian society. This research paper points to an exhilaration and suggests the beginning of fresh awakening. Transcendental struggle between good and evil can be viewed through the portrayals like Rukmani. It forwards the need of social reform.

Rukmani, a typical Indian woman, reflects life of a deprived, exploited woman. Educated daughter of a village headman fallen on hard times, Rukmani was married at the age of twelve to Nathan, a tenant farmer. He treated her with kindness and respect as she learnt the chores her new life. Within a year they had a beautiful daughter, Ira, and good rice harvests. During the next six years, Rukmani did not understand the fact that she could not produce a son for Nathan. It troubled her lot. Rukmani visited her ill mother and there met Kenny, a foreign doctor. He treated her infertility without Nathan's knowledge. In quick succession, Rukmani bore five sons. With each birth, however, the family has a little less to eat. When a tannery was built nearby, unpleasant changes come to village life. Rukmani's two elder sons eventually went to work there. They helped the family with their wages but were eventually dismissed for being ringleaders in a labor strike.

The year they arranged a good marriage for Ira, monsoon rains destroyed all their crops. Rukmani sacrificed her savings to buy food for the family. Ira's husband returned Ira to her parents' home because she was barren. Again Rukmani turned to Kenny without her husband's knowledge, this time to help Ira. His treatments were too late, however, since Ira's husband has taken another woman. She learnt to help other women in childbirth, to adapt, to accept the unpleasant changes the tannery has brought to the village, and to withstand seasons of want and hunger. Instead of petulance, Rukmani exhibited tenacious and life-affirming endurance.

Rukmani became pregnant again and bore her last son, Kuti. Caring for Kuti

recovered Ira out of her depression and despair until the crops failed from drought and the family once again faced hunger. They sold most of their possessions just to pay half of what they owed to the landowner for their lease. Reduced to foraging for roots and leaves, the families began weak and starved. Some villagers speculated that Kenny was kind to Rukmani because they had an illicit relationship. Kunthi, a neighborhood wife who became a prostitute has spread this rumor. When they were both young, Nathan fathered Kunthi's two sons.

Now, as Nathan was of about fifty, he has no sons left to work in the land. He suffered from rheumatism and debilitating fevers. Rukmani and Ira tried to help, but they were not strong enough. Ira has a baby to care for, an albino boy conceived in prostitution, Sacrabani. The family experienced its greatest loss when the land agent told Nathan and Rukmani that their land has been sold to the despised tannery.

Rukmani faced loss after loss over the years, and as her endurance was continuously tested, her capacity for anger intensified, but her spirit also grew. Kunthi aroused her rage by suggesting several times that Rukmani was sexually involved with Kenny. The first time, Rukmani grabbed her and shook her so furiously her sari dropped away. The second time, her wrath so overpowered her that she tried to kill Kunthi. Finally, in a murderous rage, Rukmani attacked and almost killed Ira, mistaking her for Kunthi. After this near disaster, Rukmani found peace by telling Nathan the truth, forgiving him for his transgressions, and learning to control her anger so she was never again tempted to injure another person. Rather, she grew in

generosity and compassion. She gave up the strictures of caste when her sons went to work in the tannery, and she gave up the tradition of shame when her daughter turned to prostitution. She has forgiven her daughter-in-law for failing her duty to help them, and she learnt to judge strangers not by their differences but by their deeds and their hearts. Finally, she extended her love and care to Puli, a child even more destitute than she was. By the end of the novel, Rukmani has conquered the hardships of her existence.

Rukmani, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, recalls with clarity the choices and decisions that have brought both joy and despair i.e. good and evil. Her father taught her to read and write, and she passed these valuable skills on to her children. She developed a great love for the beauty and the land. Though not outwardly beautiful, she was loving, hardworking, thrifty, and patient. Here, she is presented as meek, traditional and deprived. It means that she accepted her lot easily and endured, moulded herself as per it. Like many other traditional women, she behaves as per existing moral ethics, codes and social norms. She tries to discard and defy all these bindings and traditions but, she could not. She sacrificed her happiness for well being of her family. She is shown as gentle, adjustable, accommodative and service minded. Novelist presents Rukmani as the representative of the traditional, deprived women who retained their individuality. Through Rukmani, novelist has presented typical Indian feminine sensibility of Indian women having strong strength to face calamities of life by making adjustments in their lives.

This novel highlights problem of postcolonial India. In a simple way, it narrates the sufferings of the peasants of rural India and the hard life of the tenants like Nathan. Poverty, starvation, sufferings, hard work.... etc. was very common. They thought that survival was important. Novelist shows that all this only happened due to illiteracy. Rukmani and others were the victims of two evils- zamindar system and industrial economy. We notice that tannery destroyed the traditional villagers. Series of problems shows the futility of these new changes. Actually they were good for the society. But, they proved evil for the villagers. Series of sufferings- drought, no crops, starvation, no money, no jobs to her sons, unsettlement and at last death of Nathan made Rukmani a tortured, deprived figure in and out. She oscillates like a pendulum in between good and evil. Spiritual stamina of Rukmani symbolizes that *work without hope draws nectar in a sieve and hope without an object cannot live*.

She is the representative of the large mass of unprivileged and helpless women in India. They endured injustice and inhuman treatment as a part of their destiny. Rukmani shows capacity to compromise with harsh facts of life. It denotes heroic acceptance. She is the mother of sorrows receiving shocks after many shocks. The cycle was unending. But, at last she forwards the message that *one must hope and try to discover nectar in a sieve*.

Different *themes* in this novel also present deprived Rukmani's struggle between good and evil.

1. Hunger as a Threat to Dignity

In Rukmani's quest for dignity, hunger is a prominent enemy. To her, Fear of hunger, torments the peace of every peasant who lived by the vagaries of the wind and rain. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, hunger breeds thieves, prostitutes, murderers, and subhuman beasts. Not only nature's whims but also the choices of an unjust society produce the shameful misery of starvation.

2. Knowledge as Power

The poor in Markandaya's novel often suffer at the hands of the strong, but some of them understand that knowledge is a powerful weapon for good and favorable change. Rukmani insists on teaching all of her children to read and write. She turned to Kenny because, she believed- white men have power and that was the power of knowledge.

3. The Strength of Truth

Rukmani is a strong representative voice of the peasants. She speaks with clarity and truth. Her devotion to truth and

her exhibition of the Hindu belief that truth transcends all other moral values made her unique.

4. The Importance of Fertility

Fertility was so precious to Rukmani that she took risks to pursue it. When she was pregnant with Ira, she encountered a cobra in her pumpkin vine; she did not fear and stopped it. She compared their rounded shapes to fertile young women. She conquered her fear of a foreign doctor to seek treatment for barrenness, risking Nathan's disapproval. Ira's miseries also stem from infertility, and she lost her husband to another woman because she couldn't give him sons. The fertility of the land was of high importance, for when the land didn't produce, the family starved. All this shows that her character is modeled on the mythical characters of Sita and Savitri as symbols of sacrifice and true love. Rukmani presents a firm conviction and rare strength of mind, self sacrifice and self denial as Indian womens' virtues.

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