



NECTAR IN A SIEVE (1954): RUKMANI THE MOTHER FIGURE IN THE NOVEL OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA.

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ABSTRACT:

The novel brings to us the picture of the impoverished gruesome conditions, the human sufferings and degradation of landless peasantry of INDIA. The paper analyses the struggle of Rukmani, the protagonist, against catastrophes and hard challenges, accepting the irony of fate with serene dignity. Markandaya has placed RUKMANI, the poor peasant on the highest pedestal of womanhood, that of a MOTHER embracing all joys and sorrows. The paper intends to bring out the importance of Rukmani as a MOTHER FIGURE in the Novel.

KEYWORDS:

HUMAN SUFFERING, LANDLESS PEASANTRY, IRONY OF FATE, HIGHEST PEDESTAL OF WOMANHOOD, MOTHERHOOD.

INTRODUCTION

NECTAR IN A SIEVE (1954) brings to us the picture of the impoverished gruesome conditions, the human suffering and degradation of landless peasantry of INDIA. Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a village headman is married to a poor tenant Nathan at a tender age. "A bride at twelve, Rukmani is a mother at thirteen, mother of six children at twenty four, old at forty." Reconciling to her destiny she accepts her husband "who was poor in everything but in love and care for his wife." (page 2). Living from hand to mouth they dwindle day by day into poverty. She bears to Nathan children amidst hunger and squalor. There life is a tale of misery. Her husband yields to another woman. Her daughter Irrawady's marriage turns out to be a failure. Kuti, the youngest son dies of starvation. Ira resorts to prostitution and gives birth to an albino child. Two of her sons emigrate to Ceylon in search of work. The third son Raja dies in a quarrel. The hardest blow comes when they have to leave their own land. Rukmani and Nathan leave their village to join their fourth son Murugan who was married and had children, but to their despair, he had vanished abandoning his wife and children. Adverse and unfavorable conditions make them stone breakers in a quarry. Unable to bear the strains and vicissitudes of life Nathan dies. The sordidness and meanness of town life, however, feels to subdue the nobility of spirit of Rukmani. She returns to her soil with the leper, Puli whom she had adopted as a son. Her patient love breathes serenely. Markanday portrays with effective strength the real grandeur of spirit of the peasant and the down-trodden and their ability to remake a crumbling world.

RUKMANI AS A SYMBOL

Rukmani, the heroine symbolically stands for the agrarian peasant Indian woman, belonging to the farming community of the lower strata of rural society. She must have been a woman of mid-twenties as portrayed in the

novel but she is alive today also. Each village has a Rukmani to narrate her tale of Woe and misery even in the present times. The daughter of the soil bearing a close affinity to her land and its traditions, undergoes enormous afflictions after generations of increasingly severe exploitation. Her's is a struggle against an omnipotent and indifferent fate, against the unknown calamities of nature and man-made forces of the society that tend to crush an individual completely. Buffeted by both man and nature, Rukmani sums their tragic life:

"Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was stronger no one could say of the latter. Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at the hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear, fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of the blackness of death."

The principal character is trapped in a situation more against the environment than against other characters. It is with fortitude that Rukmani faces all catastrophes and tribulations and still accepts the irony of fate with a serene dignity. There is a sympathy and admiration for her in the eyes of the reader.

MOTHERHOOD- UNSELFISHNESS PERSONIFIED

Transcending all barriers of time and space, a mother is the finest and noblest expression of love. The uncommon dedication and selfless love with which she addresses herself to her life's task both as a creator and nourisher is unsurpassed. It can be asserted "excathedra" that a mother, the symbol of unselfishness personified makes life richer and fuller in the world. Undoubtedly Markandaya has placed Rukmani, the poor peasant on this highest pedestal of womanhood, that of a mother embracing all joys and afflictions. She is not only a dutiful wife but a provider of food and comfort in the family. This had been

the dominant metaphor of woman handed down to us from ancient and oral literatures that is of "Sati Ma Annapurna", the dutiful woman, wife and mother, having an unfailing devotion towards the family. Motherhood has been celebrated as a crowning accomplishment and the normal aspiration of every Indian woman.

Endowed with a tremendous capacity for tolerance, nothing can ruffle a calm surface. She stands as hard as a rock. But beneath the brave surface lies a poignant heart patiently absorbing all sorrow and agony. With an unyielding tenacity for life, she stands like a giant pillar protecting all her family members. The ravages of hunger, starvation, calamities of food and death hover over her. The rain plays havoc with her emotions and gives her nothing but utter penury, "Sometimes from sheer rebellion we ate grass although it always resulted in stomach cramps and violent retching." (PP 87-88). The sore heart of a mother silently cries for two of her sons Arjun and Thambi who leave for Ceylon in desperate search for work and food. She suffers for Ira and sees her as a prostitute; she suffers for Raja and finds him beaten to death; and she suffers for Kutti, her youngest child snatched away from her by the clutches of hunger. She suffers vicariously for her children.

Rukmani cherishes the sterling qualities of her husband as a man which have mitigated her own suffering to a large extent. She stands by him when the crop withers in the drought. She supports in with loving labour when the harvest is rich. Her will is strong, but it is not discordantly assertive. There is a beauty in their lives in prosperity as well as in adversity. Their spirit never breaks. Her relation with her husband is supreme. In the face of calamities, she is not given to pessimism of extreme emotional outbursts.

The love of the soil and the bitterness of being dispossessed of it makes her cry out when she is forced to leave her humble hut for the town. In the town, she thinks nostalgically about her own village, the land of their birth, the land that she and Nathan had farmed for thirty years-

"Better to starve, where we were bred than live here... whatever happens, whatever awaits us we must return." (PP 167)

C.T. Indra beautifully remarks, "what is the secret of this triumph? It is in the affinity of Rukmani for the land and its fertility. She is the archetypal mother earth searching for happiness which she finds in the village. The mother and the daughter form a fine parallel creating a matrix of matriarchy for the members of the family to belong to. Both mother and daughter are the symbol of endurance which is tempered by love. The beauty of the novel lies in the spirit of scarifies which Rukmani, Nathan and Ira exhibit."

Nathan and Rukmani leave the village in search of work. Passing all hard tests of courage, she consoles and stands by Nathan when danger and disasters befall them. Unfortunately, Nathan's death is the hardest blow that hits her. Though abandoned by her husband in this hostile

world, fate reducing her to a stone breaker, still, it is the loving heart of her mother that attracts the destitute leprosy-stricken boy Puli towards her. In the face of all calamities, she unfolds her lap to take in everything and everybody around her.

The conception of Rukmani as an integrated personality is a reality made possible by the nature of the culture in which she lives. She proves that within the traditional roles she can accommodate her other roles as a human being. Kamla Markandaya's picture of portrayal of Rukmani conforms to the traditional image of the Indian womanhood, always bold enough to face the fickleness of fortune, suffer, silently endure, self-sacrifice, persevere and boldly encounter all alone the hardest blows of fortune. These are the remarkable traits that go to make the true image of an Indian woman.

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