

PERSONIFICATION OF MOTHER FIGURE AS RECKOED IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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Indian women novelists in English constitute a significant group. Unfortunately, the critical attention they have received does not adequately recognize them as such. The present study attempts to examine them as a class of writers who, directly or indirectly, are engaged in the vital task of formulating a new consciousness regarding women in our rapidly-changing environment. Examinations of their works from this particular perspective will almost inevitable take recourse to popular theories of feminism.

As a creative process, fiction is an expression of the most intimate awareness of the society in which it is born and in which it evolves. Small wonder, therefore, if the evaluation of fiction and the evolution of consciousness of societal apparatus are simultaneous and interlocked. Indian English fiction which stuck deep roots in the Indian soil has inextricable links with the socio-political milieu since its inception. By imaginatively treating the contemporary themes, the Indian English novelists sought to explore and interpret Indian significantly in its various aspects _ social, political, economic and cultural. And, inspired by the vision of a just social order, they artistically expressed the urges and aspirations of people who were heroically involved in the struggle for equality and liberty. They have also been able to portray powerfully the real grandeur of the poor and the downtrodden and their ability to remark the world. Hence, the far-reaching significance of the Indian novel with a social purpose, and more so the need to asses it critically with a view to brining out its salient features and highlights its artistic achievement.

Woman shapes her personality by a careful cultivation of certain virtues. Her strength lies essentially in her innate capacity for compassion and sacrifice. The strength may not be a match for man's physical might. Yet her influence on man is indeed great. He seeks in her love and peace, comfort and solace. Woman finds her utmost fulfillment in motherhood and that is her greatest achievement too.

The embodiment of such a mother figure is found in Rukmani in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*. The single force that unites the whole structure of the novel is the character of the narrator, Rukmani. She is not simply a village girl, a loving & devoted wife and a sacrificing mother. She has transcended these limited physical identities to represent the universal mother figure. She is the centrifugal force providing sap to the other aspects of the body of the novel and helping it to stand erect. Kamala Markandaya has not confined Rukmani to any particular class, creed or convention. She is conceived as the encompassing, enduring, devoted, sacrificing, suffering, loving and forgiving mother figure. She is the eternal mother bound by love and affection to her hearth and home. Biologically, she is the receiver giving birth to human beings. Emotionally, philosophically and spiritually too she is the absorber who imbibes within her everything that comes her way—joy, happiness, hardship, poverty loss, pain suffering – nectar as well as poison. Her journey from home to her husband's house is her journey to motherhood. The thatched mud hut gradually assumes much significance with the passage of time. Maturity and understanding fast invade her and these help her absorb all the 'clamour' of life that lies in her store.

Rukmani is the axis, the immovable, affirmative force around whom all the other characters in the novel revolve. She has no illusion in life, is disturbed by no desire or longing, her support does not waver. As such, they lean on her for help, for consolation, for refuge. Rukmani is ever ready, ever attentive to stoop, to render, to extend her eager heart to the person in need. The English doctor, Kennington, helps her out of her physical unfitness, cures her inability to give birth after first issue, and lifts away her great fear and anxiety. There follows a warm friendship between them. He finds in her that vibration of life, that intimacy of which he has been deprived in his own family circle. Thus he is attracted to her warmth, her simplicity. Their friendship deepens in the course of years. There is little flutter on the surface, but deep in their hearts they are full of love, gratitude and esteem for each other.

Rukmani has been endowed with a tremendous capacity for tolerance. Corroding poverty and misfortunes one after another cross her path. The first major attack of starvation & sorrow comes to her with the calamities of the calamities of the flood. All her attempts to feed her family prove fruitless. Hunger a monstrous shape.

At dusk the drums of calamity began; their grave, throbbing rhythm came clearly through the night, throughout the night, each beat, each tattoo, echoing the mighty impotence of our human Endeavour. I listened. I could not sleep. In the sound of the drums. I understood a vast pervading doom; but in the expectant silence between my own disasters loomed larger, more consequent and more hurtful. She is not ruffled into extreme emotional outburst. But deep inside, she is highly disturbed and depressed, and suffers for her loved ones. Her adolescent stage has been tamed into maturity and womanhood and she absorbs all misfortunes that her way. She does not give up her endeavour to live and let live. She has

extreme tenacity for life and she works her way out. The next blow comes to Rukmani when Ira is returned to her after five years of marriage only because she is barren. She seeks no reason, no coherence. She has known the torment, the agony from her personal experience. And she suffers for Ira.

The tannery invades into her life too and she is dismayed when she finds her sons getting estranged from her. Imposing her choice, her opinion over them is not in her nature. She accepts their choice and adjusts herself to the change her future brings. Her period of involvement in the strike in the tannery. As she recollects, "Into the calm lake of our lives the first stone has been tossed"². Her sons refuse to submit to exploitation and they remain unemployed, restless, hungry. This uneasiness assumes a grotesque, miserable form and she suffers in silence. But parting from them forever tears her apart. She is tortured and tormented by her intense feelings. Yet, like a monument of patience, she accepts and absorbs all pangs of separation. Only time proves a great healer and she develops resistance.

The failure of rain brings in acute frustration along with persisting poverty. To add to this, there is the threat of the landlord. She sacrifices her possessions, her sentiments and cherished memories attached to them, to pay the rent of the land. The drought continues, so does hunger as well as starvation. Her brave struggle for existence is pathetic, yet heroic.

Rukmani has imbibed the spirit of acceptance and endurance. This helps her to put up with the adversity that follows the period of drought. She is ever conscious of her starving family. The acute crisis makes her divide her 'secret hoard' of grain as though measuring life in little handfuls. She is shocked and bewildered at kunthi's blackmail. Moreover, the censure, of which Rukmani had been ignorant, numbs her sensibility with bitterness and pain. Finally, the knowledge of Nathan's illicit relationship with kunthi, leaves her hurt, disillusioned, broken and in utter agony. She is stirred from inside. But the intensity of her feelings knows no manifestation. She is a mute sufferer. Starvation reaches an acute stage with her family.

Sometimes from sheer rebellion we ate grass although it always resulted in stomach cramps and violent retching. Her personal pains are overpowered by her suffering for her family, particularly, for the youngest son, Kuti, on whom the toll is the worst. The worst is still in store for her. She has given birth and has known the intimate, umbilical bond of love that ties her to her children. She is constantly vexed by her failure to feed them. But when she finds Raja beaten to death, his limp, fragile body lain at her feet her grief knows no bounds. The intensity of her sorrow and misery leaves her speechless. She ruminates:

For this I have given birth my son that should lie in the end at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness in your limbs and yourself if departed without trace, leaving this huddle of bone

and flesh without meaning. Her silence is the silence of the deep sea. Under the calm, composed self is found the strong under-current of pain and suffering.

Misfortunes do not come alone. Poverty continues and this time it is Kuti who suffers and deteriorates gradually before Rukmani's eyes. She suffers with him and for him and in her desperation, she almost wishes him dead. Poverty shows its another wretched face to Rukmani by driving Ira into prostitution. Disillusioned and pained initially, she accepts all. She suffers much, but acceptance is in her nature. With the same spirit of acceptance, she greets Sacrabani, Ira's albino son. She has room in her heart for all. She extends her loving and protecting arms towards the baby.

Kuti's struggle for life is pathetic. For a mother, to watch her little child gradually drift to his end, starving and suffering all his way, is too painful to hear.

Yet, although I grieved it was not for my son, for in my heart I could not have wished it otherwise. The strife has lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to continue it.p.100

It seems as though the words have been wrung out from her very being. Yet, "without the least break or imbalance of body, mind, or spirit, she lives on now supporting her husband and her younger children". It is not that her sorrows are blurred in her memory. Only acceptance and absorption have made her endurance stronger. She says: "The memory of those days was ever with me, yet the passing of time had made it quiescent."

To rukmani, misfortunes and sorrows are the essential ingredients of life. Claiming or demanding help is an alien thought to her for she is well aware of negations. However, her view of life is optimistic. "We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not a man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes?" This elevated, philosophical outlook is the outcome of the depth and integrity of her character, her heroic struggle, and her mute acceptance and silent suffering. She explains to Kenny that there is 'grandeur in endurance':

Yet our priests fast , and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence , and all this so that the soul may be cleansed.p.114

She derives her sap of life from this firm belief, this deep and blind faith. This is what sublimates the mother figure of Rukmani.

The cup of misfortune and sorrow of Rukmani is not yet full. The knowledge of her landlord's decision to sell the land they had rented for the past thirty years comes as another

blow to her as well as her family. The futility of man's existence and the struggle for life assume a magnified and threatening shape.

Rukmani's struggle, intense, pathetic and desparate, assumes a tragic aura. To her, nothing is beyond acceptance and endurance. When Selvam opts for a career instead of cultivating the land, she decides her dentiny. She set out, with Nathan , her voyage, plunges into uncertainty, at the evening of her life leaving her still she dares to face life extending her love and support to Nathan. There follow tremendous hardship, loss, starvation and suffering. She bends to them like the grass, as Nathan had said, but never breaks. Even in the most adverse of circumstances, she is protective, loving and compassionate to her aging husband.

It is her universal motherhood that attracts puli towards her. She feels a spontaneous affection and love for the destitute, leprosy-stricken boy and takes him immediately into her protective fold. "I could not help feeling a vague responsibility which certainly I knew I was in no position to fulfill." She is concerned about his child-like nature. Therefore, the boy, forgetting his shrewdness, approaches her with his childish whinings and gets a large concession from this mother figure.

After all the hopes are frustrated, both Nathan and Rukmani work hard and strain themselves to collect the money so that they could go back to their village. This claims the life of Nathan. This is the final, shattering blow to Rukmani. The torture, pain and tremendous suffering are obvious through the narration.

If I grieve," I said, "it is not for you, but for myself, beloved, for how shall I endure to live without you, who are my love and life?"p.188

Ironically, she endures 'to live. She accepts her fate mutely. She stoops low to take in all sorrow and suffering, to struggle, to live and let live. She absorbs all the poison of life in silence. And ultimately she absorbs the destitute puli into her warmth and love, brings him along with her to her village, gets him cured of his disease, and infuses meaning into his life. In turn, she finds in him consolation and comfort for her deep, gaping wounds of sorrow and suffering.

Everything that crosses her path is sieved through her kind, simple, tolerant, understand, sympathetic and loving self. Everything undergoes a metamorphosis and emerges in a refined, purified, creative, aesthetic and divine essence which renders a sense to human life, which helps man to maintain a personal integrity, to live in unison and harmony against all adverse circumstances.

The novels begin with a passive narrator. She seems detached from the hustle- bustle of life and ruminates over her past. But she is not indifferent to her circumstances. Her passivity, as Uma Parameswaran points out, "does not signify absence of emotion." She has been capable

of absorbing and imbibing all – extremes of pleasures and pain. But as a narrator, when she expresses her varied experiences, it seems as though everything has been sieve capable of filtering only nectar from her bottomless pit.

Ultimately she is creative. She has been creative biologically, giving birth to the unique creation of human life. Her intense involvement with life and the depth in her character have helped her to create a philosophy of life. She believes that in tolerance, durance, and mute suffering , man is purged of all guilt and sin and he emerges a purified being; his soul is ‘cleansed’ of all earthly bondages. This mystic and philosophical truth comes of character and richness of experience. Spiritually too she is creative. She paves the simplest way to emancipation from earthly bondages. Her present calmness of character, of temperament is the calmness of the abyss, not of wisdom. It is not that her memories have lost their intensity or that she fails to remember or recollect them. Her attitude of acceptance, which has been maintained all through her life, is a mystery because most of the times it is inexplicable. However, her present impersonal stand only goes to show that the structure of the novel has been adopted in a way to emphasize her creative passivity.

Rukmani, the mother figure, symbolizes the mother earth. The earth is the virgin soil, the source, the origin, the well-spring, the life- giver, the supporter, the sustainer, the nourisher and evenmore, the last resort, the consoler, the healer. It is the positive, sustaining force of life. It does not waver or falter. The mother earth is ever present with outstretched arms to welcome all and sundry. The inherent quality—‘dust thou art, to dust returneth’—refers to its ability to give everlasting shelter. It is the primeval power affected by nothing stronger than its own self. And again, it is the compelling , centrifugal force radiating life and energy. So Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is the mother-earth. Her integrity is never on the brink of collapse. In the face of all calamities, she unfolds her lap to take in everything and everybody around her. She is the eternal mother figure.

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