

Women's Struggles under Patriarchy in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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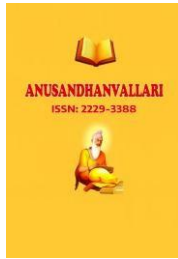
Abstract: Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* presents the life of a rural Indian family at a time when traditional agrarian society is being disturbed by poverty, industrial expansion, and changing social relations. Although the novel is concerned with the survival of the family as a whole, women's experiences provide much of its emotional and social depth. Rukmani, Ira, and Kunthi occupy different positions within the same patriarchal environment, and their lives reveal how gender inequality is reinforced by poverty, marriage customs, reproductive expectations, economic dependence, and social judgement. Rukmani's life demonstrates the burden placed on women to preserve the household even when material resources are scarce. Ira's rejection by her husband and her later struggle to support her family reveal the vulnerability of a woman whose social value is linked to marriage and motherhood. Kunthi, in contrast, illustrates a more confrontational and morally complicated form of female agency. This paper argues that Markandaya's novel does not merely depict women as victims of patriarchy. Instead, it explores the limited choices through which women negotiate oppressive conditions and demonstrates that endurance, care, literacy, and survival can themselves become forms of agency. The novel consequently offers a nuanced critique of patriarchal power by connecting women's oppression with class, poverty, sexuality, and economic change.

Keywords: Patriarchy, women, feminism, female agency, poverty, gender inequality.

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya is an important figure in Indian English fiction, particularly because her novels bring ordinary lives and social difficulties into close literary focus. As L.V. Shende remarks about the works of Markandaya: "The fictionalization of women's problems and their study forms a significant aspect of contemporary Indian English fiction. Kamala Markandaya has shown how women suffer due to patriarchal hegemonic structure and the way these women protest against their subjugation. The study of her female protagonists reveals how the distortions in the economic and social order affect women more adversely than men" (71). *Nectar in a Sieve*, published in 1954, centres on Rukmani, a peasant woman whose life unfolds against the pressures of poverty, uncertain agriculture, family responsibilities, and the arrival of industrialisation. The narrative is therefore both a personal account and a wider commentary on social change. Women occupy a particularly important place in this narrative. Their experiences reveal that social transformation does not affect all members of a community in the same way. Women often carry responsibilities that remain invisible in conventional accounts of economic hardship: they maintain households, care for children, endure reproductive expectations, and attempt to secure food and stability when family resources collapse. For women who are poor, these burdens become still more severe.

A study of patriarchy in the novel must therefore move beyond the question of whether individual men are kind or cruel. Patriarchy also exists through customs, economic dependence, ideas about respectable womanhood, and assumptions about reproduction. Rukmani's relationship with Nathan, Ira's marital rejection, and Kunthi's unconventional behaviour all demonstrate different ways in which women are positioned within this system. This paper examines these experiences through a feminist reading of the novel. It argues that Markandaya



presents women as constrained by patriarchal structures but never completely without agency. Their responses vary from endurance and caregiving to negotiation, sacrifice, and self-directed action. Such differences make the novel a complex study of women's lives rather than a simple account of victimhood.

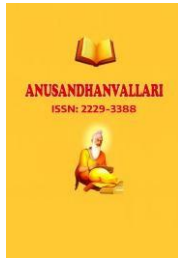
Patriarchy as a Social Structure

Patriarchy in *Nectar in a Sieve* is most visible not through a single oppressive institution but through a network of expectations governing women's lives. Marriage, motherhood, economic dependence, sexual morality, and family reputation all influence the choices available to women. Their social position is often defined in relation to men and to the roles they are expected to perform within the family. Rukmani's life illustrates this pattern from the beginning. Her movement from her parental home into marriage places her within a new household where her duties are clearly defined. She becomes wife, mother, food provider, and caretaker. These roles are meaningful to her, but they also limit the range of identities that society readily permits her to occupy. The novel is especially effective because patriarchal authority is not always represented through open cruelty. Nathan is not a stereotypical tyrant, and his affection for Rukmani is genuine. Nevertheless, the economic and social arrangements of their marriage leave Rukmani more vulnerable than a financially independent woman would be. The distinction between a caring husband and an egalitarian social system is important. Personal affection can exist within a structure that still distributes power unequally. Markandaya consequently presents patriarchy as something embedded in everyday life. It influences what women are expected to become, what kinds of choices they can make, and how their bodies and labour are valued.

Rukmani, Marriage, and Female Dependence

Rukmani's life begins within the traditional structure of arranged marriage. She is married to Nathan while still very young, and her understanding of womanhood is initially defined by marriage, domesticity, fertility and family. The opening of the novel immediately establishes the gendered nature of memory: "A woman, they say, always remembers her wedding night" (Markandaya 4). Rukmani's marriage to Nathan marks the beginning of a life in which personal happiness and structural dependence coexist. Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement in her book *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," draws attention to the ways social expectations shape feminine identity (267). Rukmani's movement from daughter to wife and mother illustrates this process. She develops an affectionate relationship with her husband, but she does not possess the same economic security that would allow her to determine her future independently. At the beginning of her marriage, Rukmani finds happiness in her husband, home and agricultural surroundings: "what more can a woman ask for?" (Markandaya 8) The family's survival depends heavily upon the uncertain agricultural economy, and Rukmani's position is tied to that uncertainty. Her dependence is not simply financial. It is also social. Her identity is closely associated with her role within the household, and major decisions are shaped by circumstances over which she has limited control. Even when she demonstrates intelligence and practical ability, her contribution does not automatically translate into authority. This aspect of Rukmani's character complicates a simplistic feminist reading. She does not reject marriage, motherhood, or domestic life. Instead, she finds dignity within them while simultaneously experiencing their restrictions. Rukmini is the silent sufferer who according to Meena Shirvadker, is the daughter of the soil "who has inherited age-old traditions which they do not question. Their courage lies in meek or at times cheerful ways of facing poverty or calamity." (49).

Her story suggests that women may value relationships that are also part of structures that limit their autonomy. Markandaya's achievement lies in holding these two realities together. Rukmani can love Nathan and still live within an unequal social order. The novel therefore directs attention from individual morality toward the larger question of how gendered power is organised.



Women's Labour and Invisible Work

Rukmani's daily existence reveals how much work women perform without receiving corresponding economic recognition. She contributes to agricultural tasks, prepares food, looks after children, manages household needs, and participates in the continuous effort to keep the family functioning. During periods of scarcity, these responsibilities become even more demanding. Such labour is essential, but it is rarely described as a source of independent power. The household benefits from Rukmani's work without that work giving her ownership or financial security. She is depicted as elderly, lonely woman living in excruciating discomfort in her mud and thatch cottage: "Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together. morning comes, Then the wavering grey turns to gold, there is a stirring within as the sleepers awake, and he softly departs" (Markandaya 1). This reflects a wider patriarchal assumption that domestic and caring labour is naturally feminine and therefore does not need to be recognised as an economic contribution.

The novel also shows the emotional dimension of this labour. Rukmani must absorb the fear produced by hunger, crop failure, illness, and the suffering of her children. She continues performing ordinary duties even when she herself is exhausted or grieving. Her experience demonstrates that poverty has a gendered character. When resources decline, the consequences do not fall equally upon everyone. Women often become the people who stretch limited food, manage household survival, and absorb emotional pressure. Markandaya therefore turns everyday female labour into an important part of her social critique.

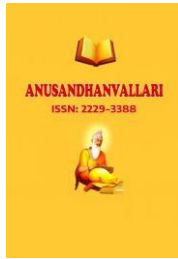
Motherhood, Reproduction, and the Value of Women

Motherhood is central to Rukmani's identity, but the novel also exposes the pressures that accompany the cultural ideal of motherhood. Women are expected not merely to become mothers but to fulfil particular reproductive expectations. The preference for sons and the importance attached to family continuity place additional pressure on women's bodies. Ira's experience makes this problem especially clear. Her marriage breaks down because she is unable to have a child. The burden of reproductive failure is placed upon her, even though reproduction cannot reasonably be understood as the responsibility of a woman alone. Her rejection shows how patriarchal culture can turn a biological circumstance into a judgement about female worth. Ira's return to her parents' home is therefore more than a family event. It represents the loss of the social identity that marriage had provided. Once she is no longer accepted as a wife, she becomes economically and socially vulnerable. Through Ira, Markandaya questions a system in which a woman's status can depend upon her reproductive capacity. The novel suggests that motherhood may be a source of profound love while also being an institution through which women are evaluated and controlled.

Ira and the Economics of Sexual Exploitation

Ira's later struggle is one of the most disturbing parts of the novel because it reveals how gender inequality and poverty reinforce one another. After her marriage fails, she returns to a family that is already struggling to survive. Her economic options are extremely limited. When she turns to prostitution, the decision is connected to the urgent need for food and family support. It is important to read Ira's situation within the economic conditions of the novel rather than treating it simply as an individual moral failure. Her body becomes a resource because other resources have been denied to her. This does not make the situation less exploitative; rather, it shows how poverty can create conditions in which a woman's sexuality becomes economically valuable while her dignity remains socially vulnerable.

Ira is consequently judged according to contradictory standards. Society can condemn her sexual behaviour while providing few meaningful alternatives for a poor, rejected woman. Her experience exposes the unequal relationship between economic power and sexual autonomy. The episode also reveals the limitations of the idea



of free choice. A decision made under conditions of hunger and extreme financial insecurity cannot be understood in exactly the same way as a choice made from a position of economic independence. Markandaya's portrayal therefore connects female sexuality to class and material survival.

Rukmani and Female Sexuality

Rukmani's story offers a different perspective on women's sexuality. Her marriage contains affection and physical intimacy, and the novel allows her to possess emotional and bodily desires rather than presenting her only as a reproductive figure. This gives her an interiority that is significant in a patriarchal context. At the same time, sexuality remains closely linked with marriage and motherhood. Rukmani's socially acceptable sexual identity is largely defined by her position as Nathan's wife. The contrast between Rukmani and Ira demonstrates how differently female sexuality can be judged according to marital status and social respectability. Markandaya therefore avoids treating female sexuality as either purely liberating or purely oppressive. It can be a source of intimacy and personal feeling, but it can also become a site of social control. The novel's women occupy different positions within these conflicting pressures.

Kunthi and the Problem of Female Agency

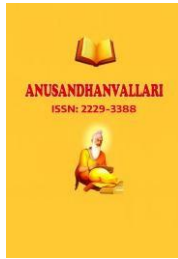
Kunthi represents a markedly different response to the social restrictions surrounding women. She does not conform comfortably to the ideal of the self-sacrificing wife and mother, and her relationships with men give her a degree of influence that Rukmani does not openly seek. Yet Kunthi cannot simply be labelled a liberated feminist figure. Her actions are sometimes manipulative and harmful, which makes her character morally complicated. This complexity is useful because it shows that agency and morality are not identical concepts. A woman can exercise power without necessarily using that power for collective liberation. Kunthi's presence also demonstrates that women are not passive recipients of patriarchal rules. They can learn to negotiate, manipulate, evade, or exploit the same structures that constrain them. Their methods may differ because their circumstances differ. Taken together, Rukmani, Ira, and Kunthi reveal three distinct responses to patriarchal pressure: endurance, survival through sacrifice, and active negotiation of power. Markandaya thus presents female agency as varied and sometimes contradictory.

Literacy and the Possibility of Empowerment

Rukmani's literacy is an important part of her identity. Her ability to read and write distinguishes her from many people in her environment and gives her an intellectual space that extends beyond physical labour. Mary Wollstonecraft's emphasis on women's autonomy also illuminates Rukmani's literacy, judgement, and developing sense of self: "I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*). Education does not immediately transform her economic circumstances, nor does it remove the patriarchal expectations placed upon her. Nevertheless, literacy allows her to engage with the world through reflection and communication. It contributes to her sense of self and gives her a form of authority over her own narrative. The significance of literacy is therefore both practical and symbolic. It represents access to knowledge, but it also suggests that women possess intellectual capacities that patriarchal structures may overlook. Markandaya does not present education as a magical solution to women's oppression. Instead, it is one resource through which a woman can develop consciousness and interpret the conditions surrounding her. Rukmani's literacy becomes part of the larger process by which she remains a thinking subject rather than merely a social role.

Industrialisation, Land, and Gendered Vulnerability

The tannery's arrival changes the economic and social landscape of the village. Industrial development introduces employment and new forms of economic activity, but it also threatens the agricultural order on which Rukmani's family depends. The novel therefore questions the assumption that economic development



automatically benefits every section of society. For women, the consequences of economic change are particularly severe because their security is already tied to household and agricultural stability. When the family loses control over the conditions of its livelihood, Rukmani has fewer alternatives available to her. The relationship between the exploitation of land and the vulnerability of women also invites an ecofeminist interpretation. Both women and the natural environment are placed under pressures created by economic systems that value productivity and profit over long-term security. The tannery consequently represents more than a building or workplace. It symbolises a new order in which traditional forms of livelihood are weakened and those with the least economic power carry a disproportionate share of the cost.

Poverty, Class, and Patriarchal Oppression

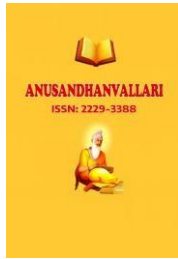
Gender alone does not explain the suffering of the women in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Class and poverty are equally important. Rukmani is vulnerable because she is a woman, but her vulnerability is intensified by her position as a poor rural woman. She has very few material resources with which to challenge social expectations. Ira's situation makes this relationship even more visible. Her choices become narrower after the collapse of her marriage because she has no secure independent income. Her sexual exploitation is therefore connected to both gender and class. A feminist reading of the novel must consequently consider how different forms of disadvantage overlap. Patriarchal expectations become particularly destructive when women lack land, money, education, or stable employment. Markandaya's representation anticipates a broader understanding of women's oppression in which gender cannot be separated from economic circumstances. The novel's women are not simply "women", they are women situated within specific class and material conditions.

Endurance as a Form of Resistance

Rukmani's endurance is one of the defining qualities of her character. She survives hunger, loss, uncertainty, and the destruction of the world she has known. Her ability to continue caring for others despite repeated suffering might initially appear to be simple submission, but such a reading would overlook the strength required to survive under these circumstances. Rukmani's endurance can instead be understood as a quiet form of agency. She does not possess institutional power, wealth, or political authority. Her power lies in her ability to preserve relationships, remember experiences, adapt to changing circumstances, and continue living. Her strength of survival is well articulated here: "Well, and what if we gave in to our troubles at every step: 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?" (Markandaya, 111) This does not mean that suffering should be romanticised. The novel makes clear that women should not have to endure deprivation in order to demonstrate strength. Rather, Markandaya shows how women create forms of resilience when formal avenues of power are unavailable to them. Rukmani's survival therefore becomes an implicit challenge to the patriarchal assumption that women are merely dependent beings. Her life demonstrates capacities for judgement, adaptation, care, and persistence.

Women Beyond the Category of Victim

A major strength of *Nectar in a Sieve* is its refusal to represent women as a single, uniform group. Rukmani, Ira, and Kunthi respond differently to similar social pressures because they have different personalities, circumstances, and resources. Rukmani's agency is expressed through care, endurance, literacy, and reflection. Ira's agency emerges through her willingness to make difficult decisions for the survival of her family. Kunthi's agency takes a more confrontational and morally ambiguous form. These differences are significant because they prevent a simplistic opposition between oppressed women and powerful men. Women can be constrained and still act; they can suffer and still make decisions; they can resist one form of power while participating in another. Markandaya's women therefore inhabit a complicated space between restriction and agency. Their choices may be narrow, but they are not meaningless. The novel's feminist value lies partly in recognising this complexity.



Conclusion

Nectar in a Sieve presents patriarchy as a force that operates through marriage, reproduction, domestic labour, sexuality, economic dependence, and social expectations. Through the lives of Rukmani, Ira, and Kunthi, Kamala Markandaya demonstrates that women's struggles are inseparable from the material conditions in which they live. Rukmani's experience reveals the hidden burden carried by women who are expected to maintain families despite poverty and insecurity. Her marriage provides affection but does not remove structural dependence. Her labour sustains the household without granting her equivalent economic authority. Ira's rejection exposes the patriarchal assumption that a woman's value can depend upon her ability to reproduce, while her later economic struggle demonstrates how poverty can turn the female body into a means of survival. Kunthi, meanwhile, shows that women may negotiate patriarchal structures in unconventional and morally complex ways. The novel's importance lies in its refusal to stop at victimhood. Markandaya gives her female characters inner lives, choices, memories, desires, and forms of resistance. Rukmani's literacy and narrative authority are especially important because they allow a poor rural woman to become the interpreter of her own experience. The novel can therefore be read as a nuanced feminist critique. It reveals how gender oppression becomes more severe when combined with poverty, class inequality, economic transformation, and restrictive ideas about sexuality and motherhood. At the same time, it recognises women's resilience and capacity for agency. Rukmani's story ultimately suggests that survival can become a form of resistance when women continue to preserve their dignity and humanity within systems designed to limit their choices.

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