

# INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL

Styles & Motives



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Savitribai College of Arts  
Pimpalgaon Pisa, Tal. Shrigonda, Dist. Solapur

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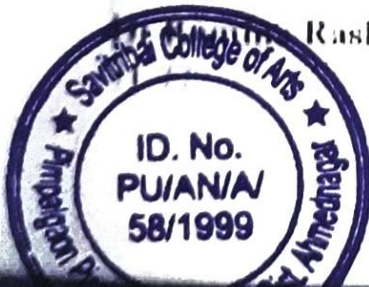
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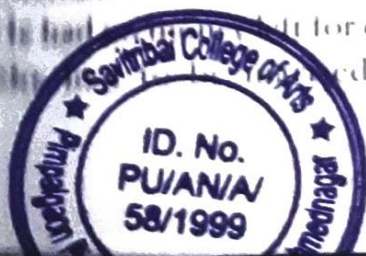
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**A FEMINIST STUDY OF KAMALA  
MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE***

**Dr. Shantilal Ghegade**

'*Nectar in a Sieve*' is a remarkable novel which illustrates how Rukmani, a peasant woman of pre-independence rural India struggles for survival against all kinds of odds. The novel is set in an anonymous village in south India. The events center on the life of Rukmani. Kamala Markandaya has a feminine sensibility. She presents the trials and tribulations of the simple, naive and traditional character of Rukmani. Rukmani accepts and endures suffering with an innate strength, vigour of mind and true spirit of tolerance.

Rukmani is the narrator protagonist of the novel. She is an elderly woman looking back over the events of her life. Rukmini's father was a village headman and a man of wealth and respect. Before Rukmani's marriage she lived a comfortable life as a girl. Rukmani's father lost his wealth and position in the course of time. He had to sell the land for dowry for his fourth daughter, Rukmini. She was married to Nathan. This was the foreful



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compromise she had to make in life, followed by a series of compromises till the end. Nathan was a tenant farmer. He tilled a rented farm. Rukmini had to help him with the farm work, something that she had never done before. She also had to agree to live in a tiny mud hut built by Nathan with his own hands. Rukmini's only solace was that although poor, Nathan was a loving husband. Rukmi's father had taught her to read and write. Nathan was illiterate, yet he was proud of her. Rukmini accepted her fate gracefully. She was happy and contented. Her life was a continuous trial for her, starting with her marriage to Nathan.

Her first joy was their daughter Ira but the joy was short lived. The birth of the first born daughter Ira was a critical situation for Rukmini. As it was a girl child, Rukmini sheds 'tears of weakness and disappointment for what woman wants a girl for her first born?' (Markandaya 25). She knows that irrational conventions and traditions frown at female offspring. In the eyes of society, a successful woman is one who begets as many sons as possible.

Rukmini wanted to have a son but even six years after marriage, she had only one daughter. It was not Rukmini's nature to expect anything from life. Rukmini knew that Nathan always wanted a son who would help him on the farm. Nathan also believed in the superiority of a male child. Nathan, like a typical Indian, believed that a son was necessary to be the successor and perpetuate the family name. After all, the daughter would marry and go to another's house. Rukmini says, "Nathan at first paid scant attention to her; he had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a puling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind" (Markandaya 15). The system of dowry that prevails in India even today is an evil. The parents of daughters are expected to pay huge amounts and give expensive gifts to the groom's family at the time of marriage. Moreover, the expenses of the marriage ceremony are to be borne by the girl's family. This is one more reason why a daughter's birth is not welcome. It incurs expenses and sometimes debts to the girl's father.

Nathan was in order to please Nathan that Rukmini secretly visited Dr. Kenny, a foreign doctor. Dr. Kenny had treated her mother when she was ill. She told Kenny about her problem. After his treatment, she gave birth to six sons in succession. Rukmini and Nathan were happy. They now had a big family.

The attitude of Indians towards girls is reflected here. The birth of Ira was a joyful occasion but only short lived. Rukmini did not care about having a son. In spite of financial difficulties, Nathan always wished for a son. Nathan did not think practically. Rukmini did not think about expenses that a child's birth can incur. The writer has shown that anything can happen in life. Sons may be a blessing at the time of birth but prove to be a source of grief for several reasons throughout life. Kuti fell ill and was an additional burden to the family.

The quiet and peaceful life of Rukmini's family was first affected by the advent of the tannery. Rukmini hated it from the beginning. Rukmini had seen many changes in life but the change brought about by the tannery was too sudden. The tannery changed the life of all the members in Rukmini's family. It also affected life in the whole village. Rukmini denounced this change and always believed that it was bad for the village. At the same time, it is important to notice the way Rukmini adjusts to all kinds of changes, desirable or otherwise, gradual or sudden and rapid. This is an interesting trait in her character which enables her to accept life with strength and equanimity.

Their only source of income was the farm. India is an agricultural country. Most villagers are farmers. Due to lack of irrigation facilities and modern techniques, the farmers depend entirely on rains. Sometimes, it rains very heavily; sometimes, there is very little rain. In both cases, harvest is affected. Nathan also depended on rain and when there was no rain for two consecutive years, the harvest was poor. Rukmini was finding it difficult to support her large family. This was the condition of the whole village. Rukmini had been wise and had saved rice for difficult times. She cared for her family more than she cared for herself.



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We often find that women are wise. They think of the future and take necessary steps. Comparatively, men are carefree and they live more in the present. They believe in enjoying the present rather than sacrificing it for the future. Rukmini had also saved rice for the future but destiny was cruel with her.

Kunthi had learnt about her secret visits to Dr. Kenny. Kunthi began to blackmail her and Rukmini had to part with a great deal of the rice and give it to Kunthi who threatened to tell Nathan about Dr. Kenny. In fact, Rukmini had done nothing wrong. She had no reason to fear Kunthi. Rukmini decided to give the rice to Kunthi rather than make an issue. After all, she thought, Kunthi was doing it because she had to feed her family. One day, Rukmini discovered that the remaining store was also stolen. It was taken by Nathan in order to give to Kunthi who was blackmailing him. She threatened Nathan that she would tell Rukmini that he was the father of two of her sons. Nathan had fallen a victim to Kunthi's charms and Rukmini had no idea about it. She was very faithful to Nathan and always believed in his love. It was a shock to her. She becomes heartbroken and inconsolable when she learns that her husband has betrayed her for the trivial and insignificant woman like Kunthi.

Rukmini accepts her husband's betrayal with calm resignation. She suffers silently. It does not mean that she lacks sufficient strength and courage to protest against her husband. She accepts her husband with all his weaknesses and limitations because she loves him deeply and profoundly. Her genuine love for him enables her to forgive him and accept him wholeheartedly.

The relationship between them was smooth again. Rukmini should not have been afraid of Kunthi's threats when she had done nothing wrong. Rukmini should have been sure of him. But Nathan, being a man, would readily have believed Kunthi. Rukmini was aware of this possibility. Even when the truth about Nathan and Kunthi's relationship was confirmed, Rukmini forgave him. Men expect women to cherish a clean character. The same rule does not apply to them. They give in to the joy of the moment.

Rukmini would never do such a thing.

Fortunately, Rukmini and her family left the village for good and there were no further complications in her married life. But it is important to note here that there were no grudges on either side and that is because there was genuine love between Nathan and Rukmini. Subramanian Markandaya wants to emphasize the positive role of love in a marriage. Another thought that strikes us is that Rukmini had a number of reasons to avoid to make an issue of the matter. Her children were quite grown up and she did not want to defame her father in their presence. Secondly, she had no alternative. She had to continue living with Nathan as she did. She could not go back to her parent's house or live independently. More than half her life was spent before the discovery. There was no point in making matters. Perhaps, she would never have learnt about it. Nathan was discrete enough and had the sense and wisdom to tell her nearly and rationally. She was capable of taking decisions. Rukmini must have felt the guilt more sharply because she forgave him so easily. Had she raged and fumed and grumbled, there might have been a quarrel. Nobody was going to benefit that way. Thus, she chose the wisest path. It would have been different if Rukmini had been unfaithful. Men are not so liberal in their views. They do not hesitate to think of their wives reactions to their treachery. Men are possessive about their wives and do not tolerate ill behavior from them. Rukmini knew that Nathan would not have appreciated her going to the British doctor for treatment. Though she did not have an extramarital relationship with Kenny, she always kept it a secret. Rukmini knew Nathan well and this gave her a chance to take the advantage of both, husband and wife.

Nathan was sent back by her husband because she was unable to have children. In patriarchal society, barren women are considered to be a curse and inauspicious. They are not respected. It is believed that barren women have children because they have committed some sins and husbands get punished for their sins. Hence, men have a strong belief in the role of barren wives. Nathan says about his wife, "She is a barren woman. He is justified, for a man needs children."



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children. He has been patient" (Markandaya 50). By the time Ira is able to bear children after taking medical treatment, her husband had married another woman. This was a distressing situation for Rukmani. She realized that Ira would permanently have to stay with them. There was no chance of any other man accepting Ira as a wife, especially when she was sent back for being barren. Ironically, men do not mind using her to satisfy their physical hunger illegally. Rukmani accepts this situation of Ira with equanimity. She bravely reconciles herself to it and permits Ira to continue to stay in the house. She also consoles her daughter with the words, "You must not blame him. He has taken another woman" (Markandaya 65).

Many destitute women are compelled to choose this path when there is no alternative. It requires no investment and fetches easy money. As soon as society notices that a girl is helpless and poor, she is tempted and seduced. A poor girl easily becomes a prey. Once she agrees to sacrifice herself there is no way to return. This profession has no turning back. It is shameful that young girls and even married women have to forgo self-respect and agree to sell their bodies. We feel sorry for Kunthi, Ira and Murugan's wife. We sympathize with them because we know that they had no alternative. The mothers can understand the grief of seeing the blooming flower of their garden spoiled by lustful men. If only men could control their bodily hungers and develop an acute sense of decency, there would be no flesh trade in the world. Unfortunately, even girls' fathers cannot understand the misery. One can imagine how painful it must have been for Rukmini to see her daughter engaged in prostitution. Only women are capable of showing this kind of immense understanding.

Another grief that Rukmini had to bear was the loss of her sons. She craved for sons for six long years, took a medical treatment from a doctor. She lost her sons one by one. Only Selvam survived. The two eldest sons went to Ceylon to work in tea plantations. Even as they took leave, Rukmini sensed that she would never see them again. As a traditional and loving mother, Rukmini is against

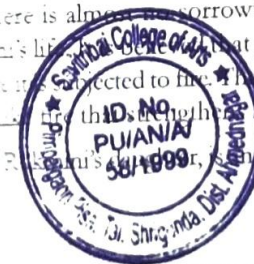
getting shattered. When she appeals to her sons to give up the idea of going away, Rukmani is sad when she realizes that they are obsessed with earning money. She is miserable when she realizes that they do not care for the family, for their parents and are divided between them. They are ready to cut themselves away immediately from the family. This was young blood. She understood their attitude and curbed her own feelings. They never returned or wrote to her. Nobody knew about their whereabouts.

The third son Murugan went to work in the city where Dr. Selvam had found a job for him. Murugan was unable to help his father in the farm. He did not get work in the tannery. When the third son was separated from the family, Rukmani was more desolate. Yet she endures the ordeal without giving up hope in life.

Most women are dependent upon their husbands. They cannot manage life without a husband. Rukmani loved Nathan and had spent many years with him. They had seen good and bad times together and shared joys and sorrows. Nathan died unexpectedly in the city. Pul was her only companion at the time. Rukmani missed his company as that sent for her by God. She had lost her two sons. At the time when she needed someone, this strange boy was her comfort. This must have been very agonizing for her.

Rukmani's fourth son Raja was caught stealing animal skin at the tannery. He was beat in punishment. He was so weak with hunger that he died. The tannery people shrugged off their responsibility. Rukmani was shocked and horrified when Raja's dead body was brought home by the tannery officials. They told her that he was caught in the act of stealing a calf-skin and when he tried to escape, he accidentally died. The death of Raja was like a nightmare. Rukmani's heart ached. Only a mother can understand the grief that lies in losing a son and that too a young, grown up son. There is almost no sorrowful experience that does come in Rukmani's life. The fact that gold becomes stronger and purer through the process of being subjected to fire. The grueling experiences in Rukmani's life strengthen her spirit and also make it pure.

Rukmani's other important woman character is Selvam's wife.



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