



Symbols in the novels of Kamala Markandaya

V Sathish¹, Dr. J Ranjith Kumar²

¹ Assistant Professor of English, Chennai Institute of Technology, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

² Associate Professor of English, Chennai Institute of Technology, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

This paper aims to deal with symbols in the novels of Kamala Markandaya. She published *Nectar in a Sieve*, her first novel, in 1954, to wide critical acclaim. In the United States, it was chosen as a Book of the Month Club Main Selection, and in 1955, the American Library Association named it a Notable Book. Remarkably, Markandaya was the only woman in a group of mid-century Indians writing in English, a group that included Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Khushwant Singh. Despite her success, Markandaya remained an intensely private writer who revealed little about her personal influences. She was so private, in fact, that she used a pen name—she was born Kamala Purnaiya. However, we can gain insight into her work by evaluating the religious, political, and social contexts in which she lived and wrote. Raised in India as a Hindu-Brahmin, Markandaya addresses a fundamental question of Hindu belief in her work. Human beings have free will and can choose their own actions to produce joy or misery for themselves and others. Suffering is a form of purification. The soul's highest goal is liberation, and truth transcends all other moral values. Such Hindu beliefs are central to *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Keywords: Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, fundamental question, religious, political

Introduction

Hindu traditions are also important in Markandaya's writing. Rukmani, the main character in *Nectar in a Sieve*, worships the Mother Goddess, the Earth incarnate, who embodies creative energy, passion, and power. Echoes of the epic *Ramayana*, one of the best-loved Indian stories, are clear in this novel. *Ramayana* recounts the adventures of Prince Rama and his ideal Hindu wife, Sita, who must prove her faithfulness to her husband after her abduction. Years later, gossips question her fidelity. In despair, Sita cries out to her mother, the Earth Goddess, who opens the earth to take Sita home. Critics of Markandaya's work compare *Nectar's* Rukmani to the legendary Sita. Markandaya shapes Rukmani's story around the traditional life stages of the Brahmin caste. Celibate student hood is first, followed by the householder stage of marriage, procreation, work, and duty. After the first grandson, the forest-dweller stage begins, characterized by withdrawing from material concerns. The final stage, wandering beggar, marks the end of wanting and fearing and of being at peace with oneself and the gods. Rukmani passes through all of these traditional stages.

In addition to the beliefs and traditions of Hinduism, contemporary Indian politics contribute to an understanding of *Nectar in a Sieve*. When Markandaya was growing up and attending college, India was governed as a conquered colony of Great Britain. British law transformed Indian zamindars, traditional land-revenue collectors, into landowners and absentee landlords. British rule brought the Industrial Revolution to India, changing traditional rural life. Young men moved off the land to earn money in factories instead of by growing crops. The British also introduced English education and ideals to India's students, including the

literature of revolution and freedom. During World War II, Mahatma Gandhi, the great figure of freedom and civil disobedience, began his "Quit India" campaign against British rule. India earned its independence in 1947. Britain partitioned the country into predominately Hindu India and predominately Muslim Pakistan. This partition created millions of refugees, and in the chaos and terror that followed, a million people died. In India's first general election in 1952, Nehru won the presidency with his goal of freedom from want for the masses. Markandaya was not yet twenty when the famine of 1943 in Bengal claimed over three million lives and her detailed, realistic portrayal of human starvation comes from those desperate times. India's conflicts between Hindus and Muslims often erupted in violence during the years before independence, and she scrutinizes religious intolerance in her novel as well. The status of women in Indian society was a major issue of the day, and new laws regarding women's rights were not enacted until after independence. Traditionally, procreation was so important that if a bride failed to conceive, her husband could take another wife. The birth of a daughter was considered a liability, but the birth of a son was celebrated with festivities, and these events appear in the novel. Gandhi believed that the whole structure of urban, industrialized society was violent and repressive, crushing human souls and destroying the beauty of nature. *Nectar in a Sieve* captures the effects of such social upheaval on its characters.

Symbols

Rice

Rice is the overriding symbol for life itself in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Nathan presses grains from his harvest into Rukmani's

hands to impress his bride with their prospects for prosperity. As Rukmani learns to plant, she is struck by the wonder of seeds that contain, for her, life itself. Mounds of rice tinted with saffron and fried in butter mark the birth feast for Rukmani's first son. The monsoon floods destroy the paddy and, with it, the family's chance to eat that season. They use their precious savings to buy rice at exorbitant prices, for without it they will not live. When the drought takes their harvest, Rukmani runs her fingers obsessively through the last of her hoarded rice. She loves the feeling of the rice because she loves life so fiercely.

Bullocks

By their strong and patient work, bullocks are closely allied with the hardworking peasants who live on the land. The bullocks who carry Rukmani as a bride to her new home wear bells on their horns to tinkle a happy accompaniment to the song of birds and sweet smells of the land. Like Nathan and Rukmani, the bullocks underscore the harmony of nature. They provide the dung Rukmani uses to burn for fuel and waterproof her hut. But like the peasants, the bullocks suffer from the injustice of overwork. One of the bullocks pulling them to the city develops a festering sore. The carter explains that he has to continue to work the animal in order to make his living, just as Nathan and Rukmani must work to gather in their harvest even while they are starving to death. The bullock flinches when the yoke is put upon his raw neck, but he patiently accepts his fate. Rukmani's sympathy for the injured beast is indicative of her stand against the injustice of the peasant's lot.

The Sari

Rukmani's wedding sari is the material possession she most prizes, and she holds fast to it as a source of prestige, dignity, and pride. Made of rich cloth with wide borders in silver thread, it communicates that her father was a headman and that she comes from important people. For Ira's wedding, Rukmani brings forth hoarded stores of food and delicacies to make a fine showing for the feast, but, more important; she provides the wedding sari for Ira to wear. During their hard and hungry times, Rukmani holds on to the wedding sari to wear at her sons' future weddings so she will not shame them. When faced with destitution, Rukmani must choose between the sari and the land. She offers the sari for sale along with their bullocks and household possessions in order to hold on to the land they need to live. By relinquishing her most prized possession, Rukmani reduces her attachment to worldly goods as an important step toward achieving the Hindu virtue of dharma.

Nature and its beauty appear in the sun and the green fields as the first source of her well-being. Rukmani expresses her appreciation for Nathan, who has discovered a beauty in her that she did not know she possessed. At the same time, Rukmani conveys Nathan's appreciation for her and for a beauty that is more than skin-deep. The all-important grain represents life itself. A good store of grain means more than sustenance—it means freedom from fear and doubt about survival. Her mention of the shelter of a roof foreshadows a time when the roof is threatened by monsoon floods, but it also acknowledges that the hut Nathan built for her with his

own hands is sufficient for her needs. Initially, she felt diminished by the mud hut with its thatched roof, but she has grown in understanding since her first days as a bride.

Since fertility is such an important concern for Rukmani, the sweet stirring of pregnancy to which she refers completes her catalog of happiness. Procreation is the critical role for a woman in Rukmani's society, and a woman who fails to conceive early in her marriage may be renounced by her husband, as Ira is. After Ira's birth, Rukmani's failure to produce a son for Nathan nearly destroys her happiness. When she first meets Kenny, the signs of grief in her face reveal her desperation to conceive. Fertility and procreation celebrate the precious quality of life for Rukmani. Her "sweet stirring" is linked to her awakening sexuality and the bond of desire and love she and Nathan share. In one sentence, Rukmani captures the elements of her happiness.

After Kenny offers Selvam a position as his assistant, Rukmani counters Kenny's philosophy on want and endurance in Chapter 19. Once again Kenny exhorts Rukmani to cry out when she needs help rather than suffer in silence. Yet even her argument against his position is silent, expressed only in her thoughts. In this passage, she highlights the contrast between Western and Indian traditions. Kenny stands for action, particularly to alleviate physical suffering, and as a doctor, he dedicates his life to this goal. In the chapter just preceding the quote, Kenny admits to Rukmani that he has lost his wife and children because of his work in India, another concept quite foreign to Rukmani, for whom family is critical. As a westerner, Kenny fights the appalling poverty of India with his will and his skills. He works among the people until he droops with fatigue. Kenny lives what he preaches, taking direct action against suffering by treating the villagers' illnesses and crying out for help through his fund-raising.

Rukmani, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on the spirit than on the flesh. She considers it a weakness to give in to trouble. As her losses mount, her endurance increases. When Raja dies at the hands of the tannery guards, Rukmani does not cry out for compensation, for she believes there is no compensation equal to a human life. When the monsoon flood ruins their crops and damages their shelter, Rukmani turns to her resources and savings rather than expecting help from outside. With her strong spirit, she refuses the role of "pitiable creature" even though she is poor. In Hindu belief, suffering is a form of purification, and Rukmani is willing to bear her suffering and rise above misfortunes. However, there is one exception: when she realizes she is barren, she cries out to Kenny for help. By consulting Western medicine, Rukmani reaches across the philosophical divide.

Conclusion

As Rukmani begins to grieve for her impending loss, Nathan reminds her of their important contribution to the continuation of life. She will not be alone, he says, because he lives on in his children. Throughout Rukmani's story, she has celebrated life and its abundant fertility. The years of her barrenness were harder for her to bear than the years of privation and loss. While she endured hardship with quiet dignity, she cried out for help to conceive her sons. When Nathan assures Rukmani that he lives on in their children, he promises his continued care. She need not be alone or unloved because of the lives

they created together from their separate selves. Nathan also assures his wife that he is at peace. His physical journey is over, but his enduring spirit has achieved the liberation and transcendence that are the great goals of a Hindu life.

References

1. Agarwal B. The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India, in *Feminist Studies*. 1992; 18(1):119-158.
2. Birkland J. Linking Theory and Practice, in Gaard, G. Edi. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals and Nature*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
3. *A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2. University of Nebraska Press. URL: [//www. Jstore.org/stable/3346962](http://www.jstore.org/stable/3346962).
4. Michael E, Zimmerman J. Baird Callicott, George Sessions, Karen J. Warren & John Clark (Edi.), 1993.
5. *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Englewood Cliffs: NJ: Prentice Hall.
6. Markandaya K. *Nectar in a Sieve*. New York: Day, 1954.
7. Shiva V. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. New Delhi: Indraprastha Press, 1988.