

## **Silence as a Motif in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve***

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### **Abstract**

With the evolution of feministic discourse, post-colonial female writers began to raise the voice of marginalized. Kamala Markandaya too belongs to this group and she uses 'silence' as a motif in her novels. *Nectar in a Sieve* which is considered a marvellous creation of her also reflects the same spirit. The present paper deals with the minute description of marginalized people's suffering and struggle due to 'culture of silence' in the prevalent patriarchal system of the society specifically in rural India through the family of Rukamani and Nathan. In due course of the novel, it is observed that silence has been imposed forcefully on the people of the lower strata by the powerful in such a way that it became their weakness. It made them helpless and hopeless. They begin to think that they do not have power to bring out the change and completely retired themselves on the hands of God. The conditions of women were too miserable. For them the words of man stood as an authority and they had to follow them silently. Religious and socio-cultural practices moulded their psyche in such a way that they begin to consider 'silence' as their virtue and left everything to happen in the name of fate. Sporadic efforts to break this silence prove useless as neither from their own class nor from the higher one supported them in their attempts.

**Keywords-** *Marginalized, Patriarchal Order, Post-colonial, Mechanism, Resistance.*

## Introduction

The sentence ‘silence speaks louder than words’ does not always prove true as it depends on the situations under which it is going to be applied. If it is adopted as choice it becomes strength and if it is imposed as compulsion it becomes weakness. As far as the silence of marginalized section of Indian society is concerned, it is expressive of weakness only. Henry Giroux in his essay “Culture Power and Transformation in the Work of Paulo Freire” said that domination and oppression engender what Freire terms as a ‘Culture of Silence’ by eliminating the paths of thought that lead to a ‘Language of Critique’.<sup>1</sup> Silence has always been imposed forcefully on the marginalized community of the society. Their existence is considered so negligent that even if they try to speak, their voice remains inaudible. Women too belong to this section. In the patriarchal order of the society, they have always been considered secondary in their status. The words of men stood as authority and she had to follow them without any expression of her own desires. The social construct was such that silence of woman began to be treated as her virtue. In such conditions it ultimately became her lot to bear whatever male dictated. Religion also glorified the so called virtue of women and in due course of time women, began to think it to be their precious possession and they turned to be the idol of sacrifice. The picture began to change with the evolution of feministic discourse, and it became clear that “Silence represents the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy that form of social organization in which males assume power and creates for female an inferior status”.<sup>2</sup>

The theme of silence has been treated in different ways in the creative writings of Indian English writers, but the deep probing in its psychological interpretation came with the work of postcolonial female writer like Venu Chitale in *In Transit*, Shanta Rama Rao in *Remember the House*, Nayantara Sahgal in *The Day in Shadow*, Bharti Mukherjee in *The Tiger’s Daughter and Wife*, Anita Desai in *Cry the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, Maha Sweta Devi in *Water* and Shashi Desh Pande in *That Long Silence*. They intentionally raised the voice of doubly marginalized women. As women themselves belonged to marginalized group they can better understand the whole of the mechanism of patriarchy. Kamala Markandaya is one of those female writers whose works reflect her efforts to give voice to the marginalized section of society. In her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* she gives the minute description of a female’s suffering and struggle due to silence in the prevalent patriarchal system of the society in rural India. In the words of Uwakwe.

Silence comprises all imposed restrictions on women’s social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or muted female structure.<sup>3</sup>

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In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani, the protagonist narrator told her tale of life. She had been represented as an embodiment of suffering throughout the novel. One of the major reasons behind her suffering was her silence which began to affect her life even before her marriage. She silently accepted the match searched for her by her father in his dwindling economic conditions. She nurtured the dream of grand marriage as she had witnessed the marriages of her sisters with full glory and perfection but it could not be possible in her case owing to her father's changed financial conditions. Though she did not like it, she remained silent and accepted her lot like an obedient daughter. This chain of silence continued even to her in-laws place. When she reached there with her husband Nathan, she felt depressed up to a great extent after looking the home with "two rooms one a sort of store house for grain the other for everything else" (P-4) in which she had to live. She could not even think of it. "I wanted to cry. This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch as my home. My knees gave first the cramped one, then the other and I sank down". (P-4). Though she wanted to "cry", she had to keep forceful silence on her lips as it did not suit a newlywed to lodge any complaint against the status of her in-law's house.

In the course of time she gave birth to a female child Ira and after her birth she did not have a male child for six years. She went to her mother and with the treatment provided by Kenny, an English doctor she gave birth to a male child. The moment filled both Nathan and Rukmani with happiness. Sometimes social taboos become responsible for silence of women. The same happened with Rukmani and she could not share with her husband the information that their son's birth had been made possible by Dr. Kenny's treatment. On the tenth day of child's birth there was a feast and Rukmani wanted Kenny to be there. Nathan asked Rukmani what now, are you not happy. She replied indeed 'No'. Her fear what her husband would think kept her silent.

And for us I thought, but could not say it for the beginning I had not wished my husband to know that I was putting myself in the hands of a foreigner for I knew not what his reaction would be. I had consoled myself that it would be time enough to tell him if a child was born; and now I found I could not do it, because he would surely ask why I had not told him before....'what harm,' I thought, 'if he does not know; I have not lied to him, there has just been this silence. (P-22)

After Arjun's birth she gave birth to four more sons respectively Thambi, Murugan, Raja and Selvam but she did not share the information with her husband later she was blackmailed by Kunthi for keeping this silence. It often happens in the due course of life, if one could not break ones silence at the right moment, it becomes very difficult for him to break the chain. 'Silence' in fact leads one ahead on the path of silence.

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Rukmani had been well acquainted with the changes that came in the life of people as she had seen her father's changing position. Now it came into her life in the form of tannery. She did not like the establishment of tannery from the beginning. She resisted this change saying, "they had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played and had made the bazaar prices too high for us." (P-27-28). Her husband Nathan insisted on her to accept these things but she again denied.

Never, never," I cried, "They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were that we have done these things.(p-28)

Rukmanifore saw the future after the establishment of Tannery but nobody paid heed to her words. Not only Nathan, her husband but whole of the village thought tannery to be a boon in their life to live life happily as they would get the opportunity to earn money. Her protest against tannery was crushed. Rukmani is the spokeswoman of Kamala Markandaya. She tried to assert her identity by telling the people consequences of tannery. She was not against development but she did not like this development which had been going to disturb the peace of her village. It was for the first time that Rukmani gathered courage enough to express her feelings but her voice remained inaudible to the people because they could never think that a woman could have such a vision people had accepted patriarchal order in such a way that words of a common female did not impress them, though she in objecting the establishment of tannery was right.

The problem in the life of villagers never came to an end sometimes these raised their heads in the form of natural calamities or at others by hurdles put forward by powerful forces. In spite of this these marginalized villagers lived their life in hope for the times to be better without even raising their voice for change. Spivak's famous phrase "can subaltern speak?" seems to be justified here. The villagers' philosophy of life was such that they could not think about any change for betterment so they could not raise their voice rather they adopt 'silence' and 'resignation' to fate as their principles of life. Kamala Markandaya through the mouth of Kenny instigated these villagers to break the silence when he shouted at Rukmani for her foolishness in accepting everything.

Times are better, times are better," he shouts. "Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand-cry out for help-do something? There is nothing in this country, oh god, there is nothing!"(P-43-44)

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Undoubtedly Kenny's words were motivating but they could not make a desired impact on people like Rukmani and she called Kenny "raving". It did not impress them and they even did not want to think in that way. "What can we do-what can he mean. The man is raving. We go on our way". (P.44) It is the age long silence that crept in the mind of marginalized in the form of their incapability which choked them to raise even a word of protest besides they think that the people who talk about resistance are foolish or mad.

With the passage of time, Rukmani got maturity and learnt to raise her voice against female cause. When her son-in-law brought back her daughter Ira with a blame of barrenness on her after five years of their marriage she said: "You have not been married long". I said with dry lips. "She may be as I was, she may yet conceive". (P-50)

She also tried to make her husband understand all this but he did not realise the gravity of matter and took the side of his son-in-law. In these conditions, Rukmani had not got any option except to keep silence. The decision taken by male in patriarchal order of society always remains supreme, while the outlook of woman does weight nothing in front of him. The responsibility of not getting the children had been shifted on Ira and she could do nothing except adopting silence. Even she could not put her own perspective in front of her husband because in his eyes, her position was no better than a child making machine.

Rukmani's daughter Ira had to face the separation from her husband because she remained silent. Her husband abandoned her after five years of marriage and she bears this trauma patiently because she had already felt in her mind that ultimately her husband would leave her. Her fear forced her to think so and when her husband left her she said to her mother "Leave me alone mother. I have seen this coming for a longtime. The reality is much easier to bear than imaginings. At least now there is no more fear. No more necessity for lies and concealments."(P-50) After sometime Rukmani got Ira treated and she went alone to summon her daughter's husband. "Take her back",....."There is nothing wrong with her now, she will bear you many sons yet". (P-60) But Ira's husband gave the blunt reply, "I would.....with a hint of sorrow in his eye for she was a good wife to me, and a comely one, but I have waited long and now I have taken another woman." (P-61) Both Rukmani and Ira bore all this silently even Rukmani consoled her daughter saying that "you must not blame him, he has taken another woman". (P-61) Ira did not utter even a single word and she even did not want to understand. It is the social system prevalent in India where woman is treated as commodity. If she does not satisfy the demand of her male counterpart she is left in lurch. After this incident Ira's "ways become more strange, she spend long hours out in the country by herself, spoke little withdrew completely into herself and went about her tasks with a chill hopelessness". (P-61)

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Hunger forced her to involve in prostitution when her father tried to stop her to go late in the evenings she resisted saying that “It is better not to speak” and refuses to answer him and says “Tonight and tomorrow and every night so long as there is need I will not hunger any more”. (P-99) Had Ira got this confidence and courage earlier and broke her silence against the patriarchal order of society where male are dominant and act according to their will she might have been escaped from falling in the gutter but it was too late and she ruined her life before the male Chauvinism.

Rukmani marked the presence of her resistance at many places but her voice was given no importance when her sons expressed their desire to join tannery she resisted their joining tannery by saying. “You are young”....besides you are not of the caste of tanners”, what will our relation say?”(P-51) In spite of her refusal, her sons did not pay heed to her words and join the tannery and they had to bear the consequences resulted into their loss of job and death of Raja. After some time they called a strike in the tannery for raising their wages but their voice was suppressed by the tannery officials as they were the representative of the marginalized section of the society. Their efforts to break their silence proved fruitless. Rukmani knew it better as there was no use of resistance. She felt that there was no one to hear their voice. They would have to suffer endlessly. “What was it we had to learn? to fight against tremendous odds? What was the use? One only lost the little one had “of what use to fight when the conclusion is known?”(P-65)

Rukmani tried many times to raise her voice to assert her identity but her voice remained always inaudible to the people of village and even her family ultimately she had to reach the conclusion that nothing was going to change in the order of society.

Kenny, the English doctor had tried again and again to make the people of village to realize the power of their voice but the villagers were so terrified that they did not break the silence. Kenny said “I will repeat it again; you must cry out if you want help. It is no use what so ever to suffer in silence. Who will succor the drowning man if he does not clamor for his life”. Kenny further said “There is no grandeur in want or endurance”. (P-113) Rukmani after listening these words of Kenny, replied.

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? As for our wants, they are many and unfilled, for who is so rich or compassionate as to supply them? Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change? (P-113)

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They had been facing the problem since their birth so considered these problems as their lot as there was not a single ray of hope in their life. Thus, silence becomes the indistinguishable part of the people, living at the margins and they are taught to bear their sorrows in silence.

Kamala Markandaya has used silence as a motif in her famous novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. She has presented different perspectives of silence imposed on the marginalized section of the society by the powerful forces. Women too come in this section and the social construct of patriarchal order forces them to remain silent. As it is an obvious characteristic of center- margin politics that people belonging the rich class do not listen to the voice of the poor. Kamala Markandaya has realistically portrayed the condition in the novel that the attempts made by the marginalized section of society to raise the voice are nullified in one way or the other by the patriarchal forces. She has also traced the cause of this silence which is often 'fear' or 'hopelessness' of the marginalized. They feel that they could not change the established system. They accept the conditions as their fate and do not make efforts to change them. If someone from them tries, he has to leave in the middle because he does not get support from his companions and his individual voice is crushed by the powerful, resulting into complete silence.

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