

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

WOMEN ASPIRING EMANCIPATION FROM THE SHACKLES OF PATRIARCHY IN
ASHAPURNA DEVI'S *SUBARNALATA* AND KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S
NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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Article info

Article Received:18/08/2023

Article Accepted:27/09/2023

Published online:30/09/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.3.256](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.3.256)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide a comparative study of Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* and Ashapura Devi's novel *Subarnalata* in the light of gender bias. Both novelists try to depict how the women are trapped in the labyrinth of patriarchal society through the female protagonists of the above-mentioned novels.

Through the presentation of the protagonists, we see women who seek to rise above the lowly place assigned to them by society. In vain they beat their wings against the bars of their cages to try to escape. In India, millions of women were similarly placed and did not even realize that they are simply the prey of patriarchy. But the female protagonists of both novels suffer more because they were sensitive to their victimization for the patriarchal society. In both novels, we observe that they have been marginalized. They did not find a suitable atmosphere to blossom their individual talent as they simply are females not males. Through them we find a picture of Indian women as helpless victims of patriarchal forces which prevent them from becoming complete and fulfilled women. Indeed, compared to women of the western world, the majority of women in India are still taught that they cannot and should not aspire for success and glory as individuals. In this paper, I like to discuss and compare the position of two women in life in the works of two women authors who are more or less contemporary. Both felt deeply about the things these women crave for.

Keywords- victim, gender discrimination, inequality, injustice, marginalized

Introduction

Subarnalata and *Nectar in a Sieve* are written by two Indian female novelists - Kamala Markandaya (23 June 1924 – 16 May 2004) and Ashapura Devi (8 January 1909 – 12 July 1995). Both of them are almost of contemporary period. Ashapura Devi has

written in her vernacular language i.e., Bengali and Kamala Markandaya has written in English. Their above-mentioned novels of these novelists have mainly prioritized the women issues. Being women novel, they were successful in bringing the inner thought and feeling of the women through their women characters. They belong to two different

states of India. But their novels have dealt with universal matter. Both of them have tried to uplift the condition of women in the society through their power of writing. Through their created women characters, they have tried to show their concern for the women, not only of India but of all the women all over the world.

Ashapura Devi, as a writer, was something of a miracle. Born more than a hundred years ago (1909) in a conservative household of Calcutta, she had never been sent to school, yet she was a keen reader. Married off at the age of fifteen, she became a part of an enormous joint family, where a new bride was simply a component of machinery of a smoothly functioning household. She fulfilled her duty and yet continued to write stories and novels that cast a clear, sometimes pitiless light on human nature.

Ashapura Devi was especially adept at portraying her own mind- women within the four walls of their homes. In the contemporary pre independent India, women were deprived of all kinds of opportunities, which were enjoyed by men only, from the society. They were looked upon like a caring woman whose primal duty was to cook food for the family members, give birth to baby and take care of them along with their husbands also. They were deprived of making any decision and or decision-taking meeting. They were not given any choice; as if they were born to have no choice. As if they kept in the darkness of ignorance without proving any education. So, they always longed for light and freedom, and beat their wings against the bars of their figurative cage. Subarnalata was one of such women who tried to break away from the fetters of inequality. In the trilogy of *Pratham Pratisruti*, *Subarnalata* and *Bakulkatha*, Ashapura has told the story of three generations of women belonging to the same family. They all were ordinary women who became extraordinary by expressing their thirst for knowledge and quest for freedom.

Subarnalata is the eponymous heroine of the second novel of the trilogy. She is daughter of Satyabati, the protagonist of *Pratham Pratisruti* and the mother of Bakul, the protagonist of *Bakulkatha*. What set Subarnalata or Subarna as she

is familiarly referred to, apart from other women of her age? After all, her story was no different from thousands of other women of her times. Married off at the age of nine, she became a part of an affluent joint family. This was the fate of all Bengali middle-class women, and generally no one thought there was any other way out. No woman of that time could imagine free herself from the periphery, drawn by the patriarchal society.

But Subarnalata did. Her mother had made her father leave the ancestral village home and take the family to Calcutta, simply for the sake of providing her children with the privilege of education. Little Subarna, her mother's last child, was sent to school by her mother. She was destined for higher things because girl children were generally uneducated and married off at a very tender age, early in the nineteenth century; they were often mistreated by their in-laws. Sometimes they were victims of marital rape, domestic violence and other kinds of abuse. Satyabati, the mother of Subarna, vowed that she would not marry off her daughter early. Instead, she would educate her daughter.

Fate did not always cooperate with us. Subarna had gone to her village home with her father during her summer vacation. Her grandmother, conspiring with father, married her off to a friend's son, thus effectively ending her mother's scholarly ambitions for Subarna. Hindu marriages, in that age, were irreversible. Subarna became the part of a large joint set up. Her family members were not especially bad or vicious in any way, and her husband was caring, if possessive individual. By ordinary standards, Subarnalata would be thought a fortunate woman. She had a good home, a loving husband, and healthy children. Yet she yearned for the one thing, which she did not have, is freedom.

All her life Subarna had aimed at the pursuit of excellence. Yet in a middle-class household, her modern ideas were thought eccentric, she was reviled and laughed at because she wanted to travel outside her home, because she supported the freedom movement. She lived her obeying the rules society imposed upon a woman, trying to rebel but

being forced to conform. Even her children, her own flesh and blood, did not understand her. They wished that their mother was 'normal', like the women all around. Only the youngest daughters, Parul and Bakul were sympathetic towards her, but they were powerless to fulfill her ambitions, for they too were female. Thus, the greatest ambition of Subarnalata was to become a complete human being, not merely a woman, and her greatest tragedy was that she was prevented from doing so.

What is gender bias or what is gender discrimination? Gender bias means the preference or prejudice over one sex to another. This gender bias can be felt in the field of culture, finance and education; it can be in one's Id and Super-ego or I can say the conscious or unconscious state of mind. If this inequality i.e. gender bias is in one's mind, the impact can sometimes be easily manifested or sometimes the impact is not easily apprehensible. My paper entitled *Women aspiring emancipation from the shackles of patriarchy in Ashapura Devi's Subarnalata and Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve*.

has the intention how the gender bias, that are manifest or hidden, can easily be pinpointed in the novel *Subarnalata* of Ashapura Devi and in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* of Kamala Markandaya.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani, who is the heroine of the novel, is one of the two pillars of the family. The other pillar of the family is her husband after the marriage between the daughter of a poor father (though once upon a time he was a financially affluent person being the Pradhan of a village) and the tenant farmer Nathan. During the time of marriage Rukmani was not adult but just a teenager. This premature marriage of girls was very common scenario of India whether in ancient time or in modern time, as we can come to know from some pages from books, the newspaper and T.V. channels also. In case of marriage, which is a vital issue in every woman's life, the woman in the present Indian patriarchal society are given any option or opportunity to choose her life partner because their marriage depends not on her own opinion but on the decision of the male members of the family. In the matter of education, the same scenario is there.

Actually, they have not been provided any scope or they have not given any room as their own. If we read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* we can easily imagine some common pictures of not only of the women of England and but also of India.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, after her marriage, Rukmani immediately accepts her fate and she tries to find her happiness from her domestic service and also, she tries to find out her happiness from the happiness of her husband. Her principle of maintaining domestic life i.e. to find happiness from the happiness of her husband reminding us the story of the creation of Eve by the God as mentioned in the Bible. The story of the creation of Adam and Eve in the Bible is as follows- Jehovah God proceeded to form the man out of dust from the Ground and to blow into his nostril the breath of life, and the man came to be a living soul. Further Jehovah God proceeded to take the man and settle him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and take care of it. After the creation of Adam, the story of the Eve goes like this. When Adam was sleeping, Jehovah God took one of his ribs and then closed up over its place. After that God proceeded to build the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman and bring her to the man. Rukmani's sense of duty also reminds us John Milton's famous line in "Paradise Lost" (Book IV): "He for God only and she for God in him". Like Eve in "Paradise Lost" thinks that everything is beautiful if Adam is by her side, Rukmani thinks that her happiness is in the happiness of Nathan, i.e. the husband of Rukmani.

Now let us highlight on some laws of Manu as coded in *Manusanghita*:

"In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent." Or "A man can leave a barren woman after eight years and one who only gives birth to daughters" (www.sacred-texts.com).

Again, the popular Hinduism also believes that if a woman gives birth to a son her status is even further enhanced. Giving birth to sons vastly improves her standing with her mother-in-law and with the rest of her husband's family. A proverbial

blessing for a woman among Hindus is 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons.' Popular Hinduism has even produced "male producing rituals" to help a couple ensure the birth of a son. There are not corresponding female producing procedures. A recent study about abortions in all over India shows that most of the abortions were performed on female foetuses.

From the angle of providing education, the females are marginalized as it can be seen in this novel also. After reading this novel, we come to know that Rukmani has got education from her father's house. She got inspiration from her mother. Her mother said that a girl child should be provided the opportunity of education. But the spring of inspiration has not come from her father. When Rukmani was pregnant, she determines to provide education to her upcoming child and to teach her properly. she prepares her mind in advance: "When my child is ready, I thought now, I will teach him too: and I practiced harder than ever lest my fingers should lose their skill" (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 22) but she was discouraged soon by her neighbours:

When Janaki, recovered from her sickness, came to see me, she marvelled that I could write; but Kali, who had come too, was scornful of the strange symbols which had no meaning for her and dismissed it as a foible of pregnancy.

"You will forget all about such nonsense when your child is born," she said. "Besides, there will be others and your hands will be full. Look at me, do I have one spare minute to myself?" (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 22)

But the matter of gender bias is notified when the typical attitude of her husband is felt by Rukmani: "I am sure it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself, it was, for Nathan alas could not even write his name, yet not once did he assert his rights and forbids me my pleasure" (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 23). The attitude like that of Nathan was not only the contemporary picture of a village of South India as depicted in the novel, but also the picture of present society. The attitude of few husbands of present society proves that they have not the soft corner in heart for their

wives that they would be in higher position or rank in job. In some cases, it is also seen that many husbands do not heartily expect that the salary of their wives will be higher than his salary. So, what is seen from the attitude is that gender bias was prevalent once upon a time and is present in our society.

Gender bias is also noticed in Nathan's attitude of the expectation of male child. In this novel, we see that Nathan was not happy when their first daughter Ira was born. Nathan did not even pay any heed initially as it is noticed in the text-

We called our daughter Irawaddy, after one of the great rivers of Asia; for of all things water was most precious to us; but it was too long a name for the tiny little thing she was, and soon she became Ira. 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 pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind; but soon she stopped being a puling infant and when at the age of ten months she called him "Apa" which means father, he began to take a lively interest in her. (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 27)

Again, the gender bias is felt acutely after seven years of the birth of Ira when a male child comes to the lap of Rukmani after the medical treatment of Dr. Kenny. Again, on the tenth day after the birth of male child Nathan invited every villager to attend the feast arranged by him and to become the sharer of joy. The menu of the feast also proves their happiness brought by the new male member of the Nathan family: "Between us we prepared mounds of rice, tinting it with saffron and frying it in butter: made from chilies and dhal; mixed sweet, spicy dishes of jiggery and fruit; broiled fish; roasted nuts over the fire; filled ten gourds with coconut milk; and cut plantain leaves on which to serve the food" (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 34)

The other point that cannot be overlooked to pinpoint about the gender bias in this novel is that the father being also a representative of a male becomes very happy for becoming her grandfather of a grandson not a grand-daughter. For example,

the father of Rukmani did not come when Ira was born. But when a male child was born, the scenario is to some extent different. For example, Rukmani's father, though he was old, he came to the village where his daughter was married to Nathan to hold his grandson: "My husband was overjoyed at the arrival of a son, not less so my father. He came, an old man, all those miles by cart from our village, to hold his grandson" (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 33-34)

We can easily feel the gender inequality or the glass ceiling, set up by the patriarchal society, if we imagine the scene when Ira was born before seven years before. No grandfather has come to hold the girl child. No happy male face was seen. No feast was arranged and no villager was invited to come and enjoy. Only black and pale face of Nathan was seen.

So, from the above analysis, we may come to the conclusion that both novels' main characters are female characters. Subarnalata is an urban woman and Rukmani is a rustic woman. Both of them are forced to fit in mold. Subarnalata struggled and protested against injustice all her life, though apparently having a happy life. On the other hand, though Rukmani felt the injustice, she adjusted and adapted herself to it- her way of survival. The two protagonists are similar because both of them were ignored, deprived and mentally tortured in different ways. But both of them are very strong women. They thought of their own betterment as well as their children. Being conscious of the importance of education, they hoped to provide education to their girl children. They felt that their daughters being educated could be the equal partner like that of men in the formation of better society.

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