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Negotiating Female Subalternity in Kamala Markandaya's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The term 'subaltern' as used by Antonio Gramsci signifies a subjugated social category and the people of 'inferior rank' who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. They are the lowest in terms of class, caste and gender and therefore the excluded people in the dominant structures of representation of a nation. In her essay *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2011), Gayatri Spivak defines the subaltern as the person 'removed from all lines of social mobility'. Subaltern subjects may include peasants, workers, ethnic minorities and other groups who have no space of enunciation of their own. The concept of the subaltern as the 'other' has been problematized in feminist discourse as well and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1997) shows how women have been otherized as inferior under the bondage of patriarchy and gender hegemony. Beauvoir's significant remark that 'one is not born a woman, rather becomes a woman' significantly points to the fact that the dominant male is always projected as the powerful self and the 'subject', whereas a woman is marginalized as the 'other' (16). Gayatri Chakra borty Spivak in her seminal essay *Can the subaltern speak?* (1988) talks about class and gender subalternity and she maintain that woman as a subaltern is voiceless.

The female subalternity is an important theme of the Indian fiction writers in English. Kamala Markandaya is a renowned name in Indian literature. Female identities, the crisis of identity, identity formation and reformation, all these issues are explored in almost all her novels. *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is the debut novel of Markandaya where she speaks about the marginalization of females in the hands of patriarchy. In the backdrop of subalternity, this paper aims to situate female subalterns in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954).

Key words: Subaltern, marginalized, periphery, subjugated

Subaltern studies constitute a powerful segment of post-colonial discourse. It has gained increasing popularity in the late 20th Century and the contributions of Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and the south Asian subaltern studies scholars such as Ranjit Guha, Dipash Chakraborty, Partha Chaterji, Gautam Bhadra and David Hardinan stand prominent. Etymologically speaking, the term subaltern point to people of

'inferior rank' and it was initially used by the British Military to indicate their inferior subordinates-people of 'below rank'. It was the Italian Neomarxist Antonio Gramsci who first used this term in a non-military sense to signify the people of marginalized class in society- the people living in the periphery and often called the 'other' in post-colonial studies. The other question involves a binary relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat, rich and poor, center and

the margin, elitist bourgeoisie historiography and subaltern historiography.

The concept of the subaltern as the 'other' has been problematized in feminist discourse as well and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* shows how women have been otherized as inferior under the bondage of patriarchy and gender hegemony. Beauvoir's significant remark that 'one is not born a woman, rather becomes a woman' significantly points to the fact that the dominant male is always projected as the powerful self and the 'subject', whereas a woman is marginalized as the 'other' (16). The idea is further extended in post-colonial feminist discourse and 'black feminism'. Carde Boyce Davis maintains that like a colonized subject, women have been otherized in terms of 'double colonization'-suppressed and oppressed by the colonial dynamics of power in society on one hand and by patriarchy and hegemony on the other. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay *Can the subaltern speak?* (1988) talks about class and gender subalternity and she maintains that woman as a subaltern is voiceless. Spivak grounded her theory of Subalternity by interrogating the Gramscian concept of subaltern -autonomy. She argues that bereft of unity, identity and history, homogeneity of the subalternity is unthinkable.

In the backdrop of the above discussion on subalternity, the present paper aims to situate female subalterns in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). It is also worthwhile to mention the various types of subalterns while going to explore the female subalterns in the novel. The first type of subaltern is the old subaltern who is voiceless and meek; the new subalterns are characters by protest, and spirit of resistance. The third type is the situational subaltern. The other two are gender subaltern and caste subaltern.

The female subalternity is an important theme of the Indian fiction writers in English. They have created a new awareness of females in society by the inclusion of female issues and thereby wanted to elevate the subjugated condition of Indian women in society. They have tried to paint their sweets and spoils, pleasures and pains, banes and blessings and created a turning point in portraying the female

world. Kamala Markandaya is a renowned name in Indian literature. Female identities, the crisis of identity, identity formation and reformation, all these issues are explored in almost all her novels.

Nectar in a Sieve is the debut novel of Kamala Markandaya where she speaks about the struggles of a rural woman. Poverty, hunger, gender discrimination and female subordination are the various themes the novelist deals with in the novel. Female subalternity is a very important issue dealt with by the novelist in the novel. That's why, the novel can be critically examined in the light of subaltern studies with special reference to female subalternity. The novel explores how a female suffers from a crisis of identity in the familial and social world because of patriarchy and gender discrimination. The females in society have to lose their traditional identity as wives and mothers due to some hostile attitudes of society to them. On one hand, Markandaya has explored in the novel how the very existence of a female is threatened in family and society by the patriarchal clutches, on the other hand, she also tried to show the strengths of Indian women who never breaks and fights always to get dignity. Rukmani and Ira are the two main female characters portrayed in the novel. Rukmani is the traditional Hindu woman who becomes the victim of child marriage. Again, her very identity as a traditional Indian woman is threatened when she fails to give birth to a child soon after her marriage. Markandaya explores how infertility or barrenness creates havoc in the path of attaining self-hood in the life of women in India. Ira, Rukmani's daughter in the novel is tortured due to her suspected barrenness. Her husband has not the patient to wait and throws her out like an unnecessary thing. The male dominance is apparent in his voice:

"She has not borne in her first blooming, who can say she will conceive later? I need sons (52)". The male domination and female subordination are reflected through his words. In Indian society sometimes, women have been treated as the child-giving machine. Even the women have no voice to protest this; instead, they mutely watch this and even sing the same song with the males. Ira receives the same treatment from her husband. She suffers in the name of the unwritten cruel social customs. Even her

mother Rukmani does not protest this because she knows the social norms, instead, she speaks:

I do not blame him-he is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient (52).

Moreover, after some treatment for curing barrenness, when Rukmani takes Ira to her husband, till then he has taken another woman as his wife and he makes them stunned by his sharp words: For she was a good wife to me, and a comely one, but I have waited long and now I've taken another woman' (63). Ira becomes dumb; she becomes the victim of the tyranny of tradition. She becomes 'voiceless' because she is a woman.

The patriarchal attitude towards an infertile woman hinders her to get a secured position in her domestic world as well as in society. She becomes a 'deserted' woman in the eyes of society and becomes the 'other'. Later she becomes a 'fallen woman' for the society. Her sacrifices are never counted by society, which labeled her as a 'prostitute'. It will be worthwhile to quote the comment of Dubey in this context:

The infertility of a woman was considered as a curse, in patrilineal groups she is expected to produce a son to continue the line. In matrilineal societies, this was not considered a necessary, though it was desirable. But even among them, as in patrilineal societies, procreation is a social necessity and a value (Dubey 112).

For Ira, infertility becomes a curse. She faces a great deal of uncertainty in her life. Her dreams as a wife are scattered. The utter poverty in her parental home compels her to go against the mainstream of society. She becomes a prostitute to save her brother Kuti from hunger. Here the voiceless subaltern raises her head and protests and is transformed into a 'new' subaltern. The dumb Ira becomes very confident and it is reflected through her speech to her father when he prohibits her not to go out at night:

Tonight, tomorrow, and every night, so long as there is a need. I will not hunger anymore (103).

Though an immoral act that is, it is the supreme self-sacrifice, as she wants to serve her brother Kuti from starvation. She accumulates extraordinary power characteristic of a 'new subaltern' to bring forth the albino child whom she

conceives outside wedlock. She strongly stands for a cause though it meant defying her parents as well as the set moral standard of a traditional Indian society. Her indomitable spirit and will power gives her a new identity to lead and live her life and in that sense, Ira is not only a glaring instance of the 'new' woman but also shines bright as a rebellious 'new subaltern' who teaches a new lesson to the society by sacrificing her so-called 'traditional morality'.

In the case of Rukmani, we see that her husband does not torture her and they live a happy life despite the various hardships of life. However, she is also a sufferer in the hands of patriarchy, which dominates her in the guise of some social systems like child marriage and dowry. She becomes the victim of these two cruel social systems. At first, she meekly admits the decision of her parents when they perform her marriage at her early age of twelve with a poor tenant farmer giving a small dowry in her marriage. Rukmani reminds:

My three sisters were married long before I was. Shanta first, a big wedding this lasted for many days, plenty of gifts and feasts, diamond earrings, a gold necklace, as befitted the daughter of the village headman. Padmini next, and she too made a good match and was married fittingly taking jewels and dowry with her; but when it came to Thangam, only relations from our own village came to the wedding and not from the surrounding districts as they had done before, and the only jewel she had was diamond more-screw (1-2)

However, in the case of Rukmani, it becomes difficult to give dowry. Therefore, she ends up betrothed to a poor farmer and her prospects are extremely limited. Rukmani ruminates:

By the time, I came to womanhood. Even I had to acknowledge his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but love and care for me, his wife, whom he took at the age of twelve(4).

Child marriage leads to multiple pregnancies and health hazards. It affects Rukmani's life because

she gives birth to too many children and that becomes an indirect cause of their sufferings in life.

The very fact that Rukmani was forced to accept child marriage against her will and that she is given in marriage to an economically moth-eaten farmer 'Nathan' vindicates the fact that in the domestic periphery the daughter is reduced to 'mute' and 'voiceless' subaltern. This is strongly reminiscent of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's comment in her seminal essay *Can Subaltern Speak?* that a subaltern is essentially voiceless. That is more predominantly true in the case of a female subaltern. Spivak has problematized female subalternity and considers women as voiceless and bereft of identity in society.

Again before the birth of her first male child for a temporary period, she was about to lose her weight as a wife. She finds herself in a critical situation when she gives birth to a girl child as her firstborn. Because disliking for female child and worship of male child is a common picture in Indian society and more importance is always given to a male child and female child is always thought to be an obligation. Parents want a son to continue the family line. It is also believed that if the son performs the funeral rites of his parents then only they would go to heaven. Even at this age, no jubilation or celebration takes place when a girl child is born in a family. Even female feticide is practiced by some people to save themselves from the burden of giving dowry during the time of the daughters' marriage. On the contrary, when a son is born in a family, there happens great feast for all the relatives and friends. This age-old tradition finds exposure in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. In the novel Rukmani is disappointed first upon the birth of a female child. The patriarchal attitude is firmly rooted in her mind and she becomes very unhappy and upset when a baby girl is placed in her arms:

They placed it in my arms when I had recovered a little from the birth, in silence. I uncovered the small form, beautiful, strong, but quite plain, a girl's body. I turned away and, despite myself the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born? (16)

Rukmani's voice exposes the traditional attitude of Indians towards a female at her birth. Her husband Nathan is also not happy to have a daughter as his first-born, so he does not pay much attention to the child. 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 (4). But he looks overjoyed in the birth of their first son. As Rukmani states—"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 (5)".

Here Rukmani proves herself as a situational subaltern. However, she is very bold to elevate her subordinate condition. When after her first-born she fails to give birth to a child, she secretly does her treatment near Dr. Kenny and later becomes the proud mother of six male children. Moreover, she becomes successful to regain/reform her lost identity as a wife and mother. Again, she proves herself as a situational subaltern when she endures the infidelity of her husband. After a long-married life when she comes to know the infidelity of her husband, she first becomes speechless, later full of speech.

Disbelief first; disillusionment; anger, reproach, pain to find out after so many years, in such a cruel way. At last, I made an effort and roused myself: It is as you say a long time ago, I said wearily, 'That she is evil and powerful I know myself, let it rest (90).

This was undoubtedly a hard stroke for Rukmani, but she is patient, loyal to her husband, and regains the harmony of marriage. The novelist explains, through Rukmani, how marriage matters to an Indian woman.

Though Rukmani and Ira can be termed as subaltern, yet they have the strength to face the hardships of life with a strong mind. They know how to derive meaning in life and how to be happy. The profound concept of life provides them the energy to live their life in their own ways. They are the new women fitted with depth and rational thinking; they can modify themselves according to the changing circumstances and seek their own identity. They accept the true existence of life and never break down and welcome what life offers to them and

never try to run away from the hazards of life but always cherish hope for a better life.

An analysis of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* satisfactorily vindicates the point that the female subaltern is no more 'voiceless' as argued by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. Women as subaltern can speak and like Ira can drastically act to become a prostitute to sustain her brother under the backstroke of circumstances. To conclude the characters of both Rukmani and Ira undergo a trajectory of subalternity that progress from a voiceless subaltern to a 'situational subaltern' and then a 'new subaltern' by interrogating the traditional ethics of society with a spirit of protest and significance.

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