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EPITOME OF WOMEN IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S "NECTAR IN A SIEVE" AND SHASHI
DESHPANDE'S "SMALL REMEDIES"

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ABSTRACT

Indian novels have a high-flying fame in the diaspora of international novels, owing to their rather usually dissimilar shades, varied dialects and traditional flavour. It continues to change and grow and adapt itself to the changing Indian environment. Social, ethical, political, technological and industrial changes have brought a new way of life, as a new perspective came into existence in India with the feminine psyche trying to redefine woman's role in the society. Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande are one of the greatest women-novelists in Indian English Literature occupies a prominent position. Kamala Markandaya is a great novelist of Indian rural life. Her novels reflect poverty, hunger, superstitions, customs and traditions, and so on. Her women characters are the products of their respective environments. Her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* touches an account of the life of an Indian peasant woman, Rukmani, her struggle for survival and her abiding love for her husband. They also reflect the changing times and society. On the other hand, Shashi Deshpande, the living dynamic women writer effectively portrays the Indian women courageously and sensitively and minutely handling the significant and intractable themes affecting the lives of women. Her novel *Small Remedies* brings out the novelists professional endeavors, articulated woman's aspirations and her relationships. Madhu, the protagonist in the novel, free themselves from the stultifying traditional constraints to cherish a spontaneous surge towards life. In the novel, her woman characters displaying determination to face the riddles of life boldly.

Keywords: Indian rural life, struggle for survival, intractable themes, stultifying traditional constraints

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Indian novels have a high-flying infamy in the diaspora of global novels, owing to their rather usually divergent canopies, assorted parlances and traditional tangs. It persists to alter and escalate and acclimatize itself to the varying Indian milieu. Communal, ethical, political, technological and industrial alterations have brought a new-fangled approach of vivacity, as a new perception came into existence in India with the feminine psyche endeavoring to re-delineate woman's role in the society.

Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande are one of the greatest women-novelists in Indian English Literature engross a prominent position. Kamala Markandaya is a great novelist of Indian bucolic life. Her novels reflect poverty, hunger, superstitions, customs and traditions, occupations and professions, nobility and simplicity which characterize village life in India. Her women dispositions are the upshots of their respective milieus. Her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* converge a version of the life of an Indian peasant woman, Rukmani, her tussle for endurance and her abiding love for her husband. They also reflect the altering times and society. On the other hand, Shashi Deshpande, the living dynamic women writer effectively portrays the Indian women audaciously and perceptively and minutely handling the significant and intractable themes affecting the lives of women. Her novel *Small Remedies* brings out the novelists professional endeavors, articulated woman's aspirations and her relationships. Madhu, the protagonist in the novel, free themselves from the stultifying traditional constraints to cherish a spontaneous surge towards life. In the novel, her woman characters displaying determination to face the riddles of life impudently.

Kamala Markandaya is one of the Indo-Anglican novelists who portrays the discords and apprehensions flanked by the two divergent tactics of life. Her characters exemplify idiosyncratic aspects of Western mores and reacting in distinctive ways to Indian ways and Indian culture. She stabs to project the image of the traditional society and its change. Her novel projects the national image on many levels of aesthetic awareness and also appears to be uniquely reflective of the national consciousness in its assorted forms. Her art of characterization is traditional and are built step by step and the readers acquire a sense of having lived with them most intimately. This reflects in the characters of Rukmani and Nathan who acquire larger than life dimensions and become symbolic of the faceless Indian peasantry, suffering and oppressed. Her characters are living and breathing realities which will reflect in the characters of Rukmani, Ira, Old Granny and Kali.

Indians are extremely conservative and orthodox. The process of social change is a slow one, particularly in rural India. The old customs are meticulously observed, and any deviations from them are frowned upon. If any deviations occurred it would be treated as a sin, sure to bring catastrophe and debacles. Marriages are orchestrated by the parents, and the prominence of the bride groom depends upon the enormity of the dowry which the bride's father is able to bestow. In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, the protagonist Rukmini's elder sisters were well-married because their father could provide them with suitable dowries; but when her turn came her father's influence and kudos had deteriorated, and the Collector became the unfeigned authority of that village.

"Once when I repeated this, my eldest brother overheard me, and he said sharply, 'Don't speak like a fool, the headman is no longer of consequence. There is the Collector, who comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, and to those he appoints; not to the headman.'" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 4)

Moreover giving dowries for three daughters had strained his possessions and not much was left for Rukmani. So, Rukmini's father could not arrange for a suitable dowry and so at the age of twelve she was married to a tenant – farmer, Nathan who had no land of his own and it was considered a poor match. It was a simple marriage and there was neither any feasting nor any carousing. But Rukmini feel repentant for this match but could not dare to say anything to her parents and of course seeing the circumstance of her parents also.

"Our relatives, I know, murmured that the match was below me; my mother herself was not happy, but I was without beauty and without dowry and it was the best she could do. 'A poor match', they said, and not always quietly." (4)

It was with a heavy heart that she left her father's home in a bullock-cart with her husband Nathan. When Rukmini was leaving, her mother in the doorway, no tears in her eyes but her face distended with their weight.

The same was continued in the second generation in case of Ira or Irrawaddy who is the loving and first child of Rukmini and Nathan. She was a sweet, gorgeous, alluring, fragile and good-natured who grew up into a beautiful maiden akin to a flower. She assists to her mother during her intricate days of pregnancy and incarceration. She is married at the age of fourteen and she taciturnly acknowledges the choice of her parents. "She nodded slightly, making no comment" (38)

Shashi Deshpande goes a step further and creates extremely strong protagonists, rebellious, hidden first, finds out a way. Her work fortifies that her women squirm to acquire self-hood by dissolving their cynicism and by inculcating the strength to survive with dignity and analyzing their problems rationally. Her woman character repudiates to surrender before apprehensions, indoctrination communal breaking in and ensuing oppression. They never stop to the level of neurotic protest. Her woman characters displaying determination to face the riddles of life audaciously.

Deshpande portrays the character of Madhu, the protagonist in the novel who is free themselves from the stultifying traditional constraints to cherish a spontaneous surge towards life. Madhu being a motherless child had a secured life for the love and affection poured by her father and Babu, a man servant. She never ever bothered of not having a mother. Her father's death when she was fifteen years shatters the adolescent girl innocent dreams. Her father, before dying has left Madhu in the care of her aunt Leela, there she finds herself in a new town, new home and new people. Her lonely childhood and her stay with aunt's family, which was rather intolerant, made her exceptionally sensitive. The initial confusion subsides when she marries Som and has a son. After her graduation, Madhu covets to be monetarily self-sufficient; she decides to take up a job in the magazine "City Views" with the help of her Cousin Joe's friend, Hamid Bai which was really a welcoming opportunity for her. Her job and the small room that Hamid Bai rented for her become the symbols of her independent identity. She gets an appreciation and self-fulfillment which gives her pride and a sense of self-satisfaction that makes her aware of her needs and aspires to achieve them.

Kamala Markandaya characters are all plausible individuals which are tinted with a little strokes, hither to living and breathing veracities. Being an Indian novelist, she studies the fatalism of the Indians, especially ancestral relationship, husband and wife relationship, causes of maladjustment leading to disintegration of the family. This we can see in the characters of Rukmini, Ira, Kali and Old Granny.

Rukmini is a woman rooted in tradition, and so from the beginning she does not like the construction of the tannery and later this tannery is the root cause of the tragedy of Nathan and Rukmini. Rukmini endures blow after blow from life such as poverty, famine, divorce of her barren daughter, death of her sons, her daughter's prostitution, and finally her husband's death. She accepts the continuation of blow and moves on in life.

Ira also has the continuous blows in her life like her mother. After five years of her marriage, her husband returns her to her parents, for she was barren and had failed to bear him any sons. She does not gripe and quietly accepts her lot. She accepts that she must pass the rest of her life as a deserted wife in the home of her parents, but she calmly accepts this hard lot, even though she was not in way to impugn. It was not the cruel fate, but she has to pay for it most dearly. Later, she is cured of her barrenness and can conceive, but by that time her husband has taken in another woman, and so he cannot take her back. She does not complain or revolt, but accepts her lot for it was to be. To her adversity, the child that is born to her is different from the other children; the child is a sickly Ablino Child. As a devoted mother, she nurses the child most affectionately. Even, she gives a part of the food that is her share, to her younger brother who is hungry and ill and later she takes to prostitution to save his life as an act of self-sacrifice. Her parents try to persuade her against this sinful way of earning money, but she clings to it, for she must do her duty towards her starving brother and as well as poor and hungry parents. She remains a sympathetic character although she violates traditional mores because of poverty. She is an embodiment of the spirit of self-sacrifice, self-effacement, patience, acceptance, silent suffering and a spirit.

The other character Kali is the friend and neighbour of Rukmani. She helps Rukmani and Nathan to build their cottage. She is a typical village woman, garrulous and illiterate. She has no love for reading and writing and does not approve of Rukmini's teaching her sons to read and write. She accepts the tannery, while Rukmani opposed to it. In the early of Rukmani marriage life she extends a helping hand and teaches and shows her how to milk the goat, how to plant seed, how to churn butter from milk and how to cook rice. She also helped Rukmani during the period of Rukmani pregnancy like sweeping, washing and cooking. This generous help reveals her essential humanity. Even though she is a minor character in the novel she is essentially good at heart and she stands for the backward and illiterate masses of rural India. She is simple soul lacking the sensitivity of Rukmani.

Old Granny is the most moving and pathetic figure in the novel. She is all alone in the world with no one to care for or look after her in her old age. She sits hours together in the village street to sell vegetables, peanuts and guavas. In the beginning Rukmani sells vegetables to her but later she stops going to Old Granny and starts selling to Biswas, a Village Banya for higher prices. But Old Granny does not complain or bear any grudge. She realises that one must sell one's goods to the highest bidder, that Rukmani was poor and could not afford to lose any money. She suffers and starves but never grumbles or harbours any ill or will against any one. She is inextricably intertwined with the story of Rukmani. She is old and experienced and so serves the villages as a match-maker. She is not at fault but feels sorry and blames herself for the tragedy marriage of Ira as she arranges Ira's marriage. She is also connected with the theme of hunger and starvation as she dies of starvation. Even though she is also a minor character like Kali but she lingers long in the memory.

"They found her body on the path that led to the well, an empty mud pot beside her and the gunny sacking tied around her waist. She had died of starvation." (125)

In *Small Remedies*, Madhu dares to write the biography of Doyen of Hindustani music, belonging to the Gwalior Gharana, Smt.Savitri Bai Indorekar is brought out in selected pieces. Bai, in her interviews very carefully gives a self satisfying version of her successful life stories. Madhu, as a young girl had seen the beautiful Bai, and was even a good friend of Bai's daughter Munni. Bai had a melodious voice but was limited to sing only devotional songs as she comes from an affluent Brahmin family. She gave her the basic lessons in music. But, tradition treated as notch girl who is pondered below the dignity of high class Brahmin family and therefore she left it. It is after her marriage, she learns her father-in-law's love for music. His encouragement gives her confidence and requests him to let her learn music. Breaking away many shackles of tradition, a female trainer was arranged for Bai; very soon a Muslim tabla accompanist joined the group. The family was furious but Bai's determination is to achieve her goal, gave her enough courage to face the wrath of her family members and the society. Once again, she revolts against the tradition, in search of her identity and walks out of the house with her tabla player—Ghulam Saab. In order to realize her dreams, she faces a numbers of hardships and ignominy and even gives birth to a daughter out of wedlock. She undergoes a number of hardships, gradually all her efforts start to bear the fruits, ultimately making her into a professional singer and then became the great artist in classical vocal world of music. There was a strong rumor that she had other lovers too that helped in progress of her career. One of them was the station director of the radio station in Neemgaon.

The other character is Munni, the illegitimate child of Savitri Bai and Ghulam Saab, is alienated right from her childhood, because of her parent's unusual relationship. The fact was her mother was a Brahmin married woman was living with a Muslim man made an eccentric in the society. Somehow, Munni denies Ghulam Saab as her father and says that her real father, Savitri Bai's husband, is in Pune, Munni grows up denying that Ghulam Saab was her father. Munni strongly tries to detach herself from the illegitimacy of her parent's relationship. She dislikes Ghulam Saab openly. Her assertion was "My name is Meenakshi" or "He's not my father" My father is in Pune, He's not here (31-32) (15) these futile attempts to disown her own father.

She tells Madhu that her father is in Pune, in Shukurwar Path, that he is a lawyer, a very famous one and earns a lot of money. She tells her that Ghulam Saab was only a tabla player for her mother. Creating her own imaginary relations, Munni strives to attain the life and identity of a respectable family, which Bai had rejected. Munni starts living in a life of illusion and creates stories to convince others of her life separate from

Bai and her lover. The illegitimacy of her birth catches up with her. Finally, her death in the bomb blast, she recognized as Shailaja Joshi.

Analyzing the other character, Leela, Madhu's aunt, was a confident woman, well aware of her needs. Right from her childhood days, she did not show any interest in the domestic chores, she had a great inclination towards studies and was considered to be a rebel, and as a punishment, was married to a man of low income group. But unfortunately, her husband suffered from T.B, he suffered a lot and died at an early age. Her husband's death strengthened her resolve to be independent and answer her callings. It gave her a definite direction and purpose, as she has to support her young brother-in-law and her suffering mother-in-law. She feels them as her responsibility, and hence refuses to return to her parent's house. Her decision of staying in her husband's house cuts her relations with her own family, it is only her determination and strength wakes her successfully, she takes up a teaching career and supports her-in-laws. Leela's awareness of her responsibility towards her in-laws and her desire to fulfill it and not run away from it, but, turns her revolt into affirmation. Leela, was a strong personality, she was aware of her needs and the goals, she had been aspiring for. She fought against all odds and restrictions to achieve them. She was a social worker and nursed T.B Patients. She even plugged into the **Quit India movement** during the freedom struggle and went to jail several times. After independence she protested against the price hikes. All her life Leela fulfills the desires of her true self irrespective of the limitations of traditions. If this was her social life, in her personal life too she was a rebel. Being a Brahmin widow revolted against tradition, she loves a Christian and married him after fifteen years. In spite of the barriers of caste, religion, tradition, language, lifestyle and a hostile child, they found fulfillment in each other. However, Leela strives to attain various demands of self and her persistent pursuit eventually earns her happiness and contentment. The novelist Deshpande gives a new dimension or ambition, which leads to revolt against tradition. She stresses that affirmation means not shrinking ones duties and responsibilities; rather, it is fulfilling these with courage.

CONCLUSION

Markandaya's 'Nectar in a Sieve' caught a tragedy between two worlds i.e., the rural and the urban, the agricultural and industrial which impacts one another. She dramatizes the tragedy of the disruption of a Hindu joint family of a farmer owing to heavy industrialization – a typically modern aspect of national economics. Rukmani is a poor and down-trodden, but her life story is a saga of epic grandeur and magnificence. She is an archetypal figure symbolic of the suffering soul of India through the ages. Her life is a story of the traditional life of an Indian village in transition. She is symbolized as the spirit of tradition. Even though Ira is a minor character, but she plays an effective role in the novel. Her supreme self-sacrifice ennobles her and imparts to her a heroic grandeur. Her character testifies to the fact that even minor personages get into life in Kamala Markandaya's hands. In the novel, Rukmani and Ira find in their way of life not only suffering but also a sureness and inner peace. They find themselves trapped between the traditional and modern requirements for women. Earlier images of calm, enduring women alter to new ones, of aggravated women struck flanked by the Sita-Savitri figure and the modern, westernized woman. Hunger, starvation, destitution, desertion, eviction, prostitution, industrialization and death all combine to make Nectar in a Sieve a tragedy of rural India.

Shashi Deshpande's 'Small Remedies' evolves a balance between traditional demands and modern compulsions and renegotiate the power relations in an attempt to resolve the crisis. Bai's bold and rebellious act to run away from her family, her love for music is not an isolated, whimsical and individual decision. Madhu, the protagonist—biographer is a very strong character, exercises her choices, rejects her husband's ideology of essentialist approach and rebuilds her emotional, creative, imaginative and realistic 'self'. By writing the biography of Bai as a challenge, she exerts her artistic and intellectual capacities. Leela, who was also a rebel and dared to dream and achieved freedom, Art is beyond caste, class or religion; Bai comes from an orthodox Brahmin family; Ghulam Saab and Hasina are Muslims, Hasina sings Akka Mahadevi's Vachana's at the musical concerts. In the novel, the novelist questions the adequacy of the accepted social norms and the concept of woman in terms of recognizable images, models and markers; she criticizes the socio-cultural determinants against women. She brings out clearly that women, right from the ages down, have suffered a

lot, today; she wants to breathe a new breath of fresh life. Her characters emerge as individuals in their own right. They achieve this by a gradual process of introspection and self-analysis. They are neither rebels nor conformists but faced with the dilemmas of life. They seek a path that allows them individual freedom and succeed in being individuals.

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