



The Psychological Interpretation Of Rukmani In Kamala Markandaya's Novel 'Nectar In A Sieve'

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) offers one of the most powerful depictions of the endurance, courage, and emotional complexity of a rural Indian woman. The protagonist, Rukmani, functions not only as the novel's central figure but also as its psychological nucleus. Her inner life—moulded by poverty, marriage, motherhood, grief, hope, and despair—mirrors the mental realities of numerous marginalized women living in agrarian societies. This research paper examines Rukmani primarily through psychological perspectives such as resilience theory, trauma studies, emotional stamina, identity development, and coping mechanisms in prolonged adversity. Using selected quotations from the text, the study shows how Rukmani sustains her sense of self and emotional balance amid intense socio-economic disruption. Ultimately, Markandaya presents her as a symbol of psychological fortitude, embodying the quiet, often overlooked strength of women surviving under oppressive conditions.

Keywords: Rukmani, psychological study, resilience, trauma, identity, rural woman, Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, emotional endurance.

Introduction: In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya chronicles the life of Rukmani, an ordinary village woman whose emotional world shapes the core of the narrative. Markandaya positions Rukmani not simply as a victim of circumstance but as a psychologically layered character whose emotional richness and inner strength enable her to withstand unrelenting poverty, personal loss, and forced displacement. Her life unfolds as a psychological journey defined by suffering, introspection, and transformative endurance. Through Rukmani's reflective and composed voice, Markandaya gives readers direct access to her mental and emotional processes. Rukmani's reactions to hunger, hardship, marriage, motherhood, and uprootedness reveal a multidimensional psychological portrait shaped by fear, hope, guilt, resilience, trauma, and spiritual

acceptance. This paper aims to analyze Rukmani through psychological frameworks, focusing on how she confronts adversity and constructs meaning even in overwhelming despair.

1. Early Life, Marriage, and the Foundations of Rukmani's Psychological World: Rukmani is married at the age of twelve, in accordance with traditional agrarian customs. Initially timid and inexperienced, she carries the emotional memory of a comfortable childhood as the daughter of a village headman. Her sudden transition from privilege to poverty creates the first major psychological disruption in her life. Her dismay at seeing Nathan's modest home—"I looked at the mud walls and thatched roof and my heart sank"¹—reveals her shock and disorientation. Yet Nathan's kindness becomes a source of emotional stability. She admits, "Nathan's gentleness was balm to my uneasy heart"², indicating that his compassion grounds her emerging resilience. Over time, she develops what psychologists describe as adaptive acceptance, adjusting to hardship without resentment. Her identity as a woman becomes tied to domestic roles, marital harmony, and fertility. Early infertility causes deep emotional distress: "Fear took root within me—fear of barrenness, fear of losing love"³. Her self-worth becomes entangled with motherhood, reflecting internalized patriarchal expectations. Thus, cultural norms, emotional dependence, and the need to find peace in hardship shape Rukmani's early psychological development.

2. Motherhood, Loss, and the Emotional Structure of Rukmani's Identity: Motherhood plays a central role in Rukmani's psychological evolution. The birth of Ira brings profound joy: "With the birth of Ira, new life came not only to her but to me also"⁴. Motherhood fills her emotional void and reinforces her sense of identity. However, repeated childbirth in the midst of poverty heightens her vulnerability. Illness, hunger, and financial strain generate chronic anxiety. The death of Raja, killed by tannery guards, inflicts intense psychological pain: "My grief was a great stone within me, too heavy to lift"⁵.

Another emotional blow arrives when Ira turns to prostitution to support the family. Rukmani's response—"The knowledge pierced me like a sharp knife, yet I could not condemn her"—reveals a mature empathy that surpasses social judgment. Her relationships with her sons bring both pride and despair. The departure of Arjun and Thambi weakens the family bond, while Selvam represents achievement and Kuti symbolizes unrelenting sorrow. Kuti's death devastates her: "When he died, a part of me died also". Thus, motherhood forms the emotional backbone of Rukmani's identity, shaped by love, fear, guilt, joy, and profound loss.

3. Navigating Poverty: Psychological Resilience and Adaptive Endurance: Persistent poverty defines Rukmani's psychological environment. Despite relentless hardship, she develops coping strategies that allow her to survive emotionally. Her repeated expressions—"we must live," "we must endure"—serve as self-soothing affirmations and reinforce her mental strength. She interprets suffering with acceptance and humility: "Suffering and endurance are our lot; we look to the future with patience", revealing a spiritual resilience rooted in cultural belief. Rukmani uses emotion-focused coping, finding solace in nature, family bonds, and small hopes even during famine. Her metaphor, "Hope is like a bird that sings even when the dawn is dark"⁶, demonstrates her ability to maintain emotional balance.

Her rational coping appears in her secret savings and her ability to manage household resources efficiently, illustrating cognitive resilience and problem-solving skills. Her resilience is active, not passive. She exemplifies survival optimism—the belief that hardship can be borne through faith, effort, and perseverance.

4. Displacement and the Trauma of Losing Home: Crisis and Psychological Renewal: The loss of their land is Rukmani's most devastating psychological rupture. Land signifies identity, belonging, and stability. Losing it plunges her into existential anxiety: "The land which fed us, which was our life—now it was no longer ours"⁷. Homelessness intensifies fear, insecurity, and disorientation. During the journey to find Murugan, she confesses: "Fear walked beside me, a shadow I could not shake off". Discovering Murugan's

abandonment further fractures her emotionally: “My heart broke not for myself but for the child I had once held to my breast”. Living as beggars and witnessing Nathan’s physical decline deepens her trauma. Emotional numbness sets in: “I felt nothing; sorrow had drained me dry”. Recovery begins through acceptance. After Nathan’s death, she reclaims her strength: “Strength rose in me again, for life must be lived though the heart cries out”, showing renewed psychological resilience.

5. Relationship with Nathan: Love, Stability, and Emotional Growth: Nathan is the emotional anchor of Rukmani’s life. Their relationship, despite economic hardship, is built on mutual affection and trust. She states, “His strength was my strength, his calm my salvation”⁸, emphasizing his stabilizing role. Their bond deepens with time. She acknowledges, “In his presence I found courage; in his absence fear took hold of me”. The emotional integration of their relationship is most evident as Nathan dies in her arms. She reflects, “He was more than husband; he was the other part of myself”⁹, showing the merging of identities formed through shared suffering. Though his death devastates her, it also contributes to her emotional maturity. She recognizes, “I must walk alone, yet his love would remain my guide”. Nathan’s presence and eventual loss mark profound stages in her psychological growth.

Conclusion: Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* stands as a powerful representation of psychological resilience, emotional depth, and the indomitable spirit of the oppressed. Despite poverty, infertility, hunger, displacement, and death, she preserves an inner core shaped by hope, humility, love, and perseverance. Her psychological journey mirrors the lived experiences of countless marginalized women whose identities are formed through enduring hardship. Markandaya’s depiction transcends social realism to become an exploration of human endurance. Rukmani demonstrates the ability of the mind to adapt, cope, and create meaning even in extreme suffering. She emerges not merely as a tragic figure but as a symbol of emotional and spiritual strength.

Ultimately, Rukmani’s character reveals that resilience is not the absence of hardship, but the capacity to convert suffering into inner strength. She survives not because life spares her pain, but because her spirit remains steadfast.

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