

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE NARRATORS IN *KANTHAPURA AND NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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### ABSTRACT

*The use of a narrator is quite old, tracing its roots back to Oral Literature. A study into women narrators employed by Raja Rao, a male author as well as by Kamala Markandaya, a female writer, brings out the gender perspective of narration and social concern in their articulation. Both the novels, Kanthapura and Nectar in a Sieve portray life in a village prior to independence but the strategies employed by the two narrators are different. For one, India's political freedom forms the core of the novel, for the other we get gleanings of political situation from the lives of women lived. The endeavour of this paper is to compare and contrast the female narrators used by male and female writers and their narrative techniques.*

**Key Words:** Narration, Narrator, Narrative Techniques, Male Writers, Female Writers

Ever since evolution, tales form the backbone of expression and an intrinsic part of oral culture. For conveying tales, the services of a minstrel were employed to keep the people entertained and informed. There was no difference between the writer and the narrator then. The writer came with the written form. The singer or teller of these tales depended upon tradition. He was not trained into making narratives and told the orally composed songs with no fixed plot or structure. Thus came into picture the narrator.

Rajul Bhargava describes narration as:

*'To tell', 'To describe', activities as pristine, as primordial as communication itself and as distinctly as speech...It is maintained that people do not see and understand the world before them until it is put in a narrative mode. Thus narratives are omnipresent and omnipotent. (Introduction)*

The argument, if there is a difference in the statements made by the narrators constructed by male and female writers lead us into the different worlds portrayed by the narrators Achakka and Rukmani in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) respectively.

Raja Rao's narrator Achakka in *Kanthapura*, talks about the history of events and the freedom movement and does not make women and their families her main focus. Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* on the other hand, does not speak explicitly about India's political situation in the novel but there is enough to glean from the changing economic and political situation of the country.

In *Kanthapura*, it is a grandmother narrating the tale of her village. The whole narrative is spread-out in the first person though not been individualised. The use of a woman narrator here makes this novel stand out as a text far ahead of its times. Achakka, the narrator stands for the feminine strength and the hopes and aspirations of all women of Kanthapura. She recites the history of India, while simultaneously rolling the cotton wicks or vermicelli or engaged in other religious activities. Like men's organizations, the women of Kanthapura come together and become 'Volunteers', form 'Sevika Sangh' and call themselves "Sevis". They prepare themselves mentally and morally to face 'the lathi' of the ruler. The seven months pregnant Radhamma has her baby in these adverse circumstances but the women manage and take care of themselves. Although Rao believed them to be the strength of the movement and the village, but they were to work from the folds of domesticity. When Moorthy visits the pariah quarters, and addresses the women, he wants them to vow that they will spin at least a hundred yards of yarn per day. They refuse, and Moorthy, feeling desperate, appeals to Rachanna's wife, who replies, "If my husband says 'Spin', I shall spin learned one" (79).

Achakka, is the voice of a community, her own voice being lost in the vast crowded canvas of the novel. She talks about a shared past, shared in political events, Achakka, a narrator created by a male writer reflects upon the larger good of the community rather than talking about the emotional issues of women.

The narrator Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is portrayed as an individual, evolving with the ups and downs in life. Markandaya excels in recording the inner workings of the mind of her narrator, her perplexities and social confrontations. She talks about individual, emotional, physical, and social experiences. Rukmani is a source of perennial love and succor to her family. Her narrative projects women as going through the trials of bread earning through hard physical labour or even prostitution to combat starvation. Rukmani portrays the detailed journey of hers from childhood to adolescence, the experience of marriage, widowhood and her passive acceptance in the scheme of things. She talks about the trials and tribulations of different generations and feels one with the characters.

Adriana Cavarero in her *Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* states that the female narrator entered into our narrative tradition at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Elucidating on plot structure, Lancer describes women's narratives as 'plotless', that is predominantly static as compared to men's narratives. Male narratives are termed "narratives of adventure, project, enterprise and conquest" (624). Lancer further describes women narratives as:

*The act of writing becomes the fulfillment of desires, telling becomes the single predicated act as if to tell were to resolve, to provide closure... a plot behind women's plotless narrative, the additional plot of sharing an experience so that the listener's life may complete the writer's tale. (624-625)*

The women narratives work towards providing a release to the stuffed up matters of the heart. The female voice accorded to the narrative provides them with an escape and offer us a peep into their world, their values and construction of their identities.

In the words of Makarand Paranjape:

*Whereas mens' narratives tend to be large, social, picaresque, flamboyant, historical, political and basically exterior, those of women are interior, personal, more modest, domestic, subtle, and sensitive... never before has the experience of women been mapped in such variety. (402)*

Going by example, Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*- uses a first person narrator, a man who recollects his journey into a research scholar and recalls and narrates the memories of his personal in the content of historical facts- partition of India, riots, the Second World War, the partition of Pakistan, India's war with China and Pakistan, communal riots in India, and other incidents which happened between 1939 and 1980.

Female writers too use a male narrator but with a difference. Anita Desai in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, uses a male narrator. Here the larger political events of the post world war are relegated to the margin of the narrative. These loud events only lurk in the background, hushed voices, broken glass panes, looted shops, sound of the marching boots which Baumgartner keeps at a bay. In male narratives the events and violence ensuing thereof are dramatized whereas the letters in Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* transcend all contradictions of the real world, torn by violence and betrayal and enter into an orbit of their own.

It is believed that the shades and colours of narration depend upon the perspective of the person narrating a tale. It is a question worth pondering upon if gender intrudes in the narration of tales and do these differences change substantially the narrative technique. Raja Rao, a male writer, his main concern is thus “social, historical, political and basically exterior” and Kamala Markandaya’s is “interior, personal, domestic and sensitive”, besides being social. There is a lot of diversity seen in the narrations of female narrators created by female writers, displaying a variety of emotions, experiences and attitudes. Some male writers attempt at administering some justice to some issues affecting women, but at the end surrender to the tradition which seems inevitable. For eg., in *Kanthapura*, Achakka joins the chorus and reflects on the circumstances she has witnessed and participated in, but in the making of which she has played no significant role. Raja Rao holds a woman in high esteem and cannot think of projecting them in flesh and blood with all her vices and vicissitudes. He portrays her as proving helpful to man in every trial and tribulation. Achakka too despite being a simple old village woman, has a deep knowledge of the life of Kanthapura in all its aspects. In Kanthapura, women rise to the occasion and release their inherent potential but they do not do it independently. They work in harmony with their husbands. Raja Rao has distanced her in such a way that in her narration we cease to hear her and she never obtrudes in the course of action.

Although both men and women novelists attempt at projecting woman as a pivotal figure, assigning her a central voice but the narrators created by women seem to corroborate a concern with the marginalized and peripheral voices, which are muffled somewhere in the dark recesses. They traverse through the internal world of their observations, situations, responses, and struggles, reflect a consciousness and lay bare the threads which bind them in the frameworks of kinship, marriage and procreation.

Rukmani’s beautiful description of harvests and her sensitive description of motherhood, makes *Nectar in a Sieve* an enchanting study in productiveness, balancing female fecundity with male futility. The productive forces of Mother Nature, the yielding of trees, blossoming of flowers appear to be the major concern in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Kamala Markandaya in *Nectar in a Sieve* shows the deepest and the most noble aspect- a woman’s happy state of mind in pregnancy. Kunthi, Rukmani’s friend and neighbor moves gracefully, the careful, slow, sensuous and graceful movements of her hips shows a deep sense of pride and delight which all women claim in being pregnant.

Virginia Woolf in *Women and Fiction* writes, “Women are beginning to explore their own sex, to write of women as women have never been written of before.” She says:

*For the first time this dark country is beginning to be explored in fiction; and at the same moment a woman has also to record the change in women’s minds and habits which the opening of the professions has introduced; she has to*

*discover what new colours and shadows are showing in them now that they are exposed to the outer world. (36)*

Women, instead of turning outward for events, writing about the thickly inhabited world, turn inwards, write about their selves and bodies, “shadows which alone a woman can see and the anguish which alone a woman can feel ...” (Jasbir Jain 54) There are certain life experiences, biological attributes of a woman’s body which are denied to her male counterparts and are best described by her from an insider’s point of view, lending it a subjective tone.

Raja Rao does not let Achakka take up the issue of marriage from a woman’s point of view, it is rather a community affair, whereas Rukmani delves into the intricacies of marriage and the roles she is expected to fulfil. She contemplates over man woman relationship and the birth of a child:

*There had been hope and expectation, perhaps some anxiety, before each birth; they were natural feelings... A child conceived in an encounter fares no worse than a child born in wedlock... a man takes his wife with passion... yet he is gentle with her... But the man who finds a woman in the street, raises an eyebrow and snaps his fingers so that she follows him... What cares such a man for the woman. (116)*

It is the intensity of experience which makes the male narrators use women narrators as a medium for articulating a range of concerns, drawing from the world around them and offering glimpses of culture, but never forget to prescribe a code of conduct for each one of us.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* states the ironical paradox of a woman’s life: “Men need women, love them and write about them but this is all done in the context of and in relation to their own selves.”

She further writes:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant, she pervades poetry from cover to cover; She is all but absent from history. (41)

Raja Rao gives in to the male psyche and does not conceptualize women as being primary to the national movement. Achakka in *Kanthapura*, shows women to be actively participating in the freedom struggle, launched by Moorthy but not at the cost of their family.

Rumina Sethi states:



*In the domain of gender, nationalism has not proved to be a progressive ideology, nationalism has not proved to be a progressive ideology, which revolutionizes sexuality. On the contrary, women participating in the national movement are seldom empowered by the liberation struggle. (21)*

Rangamma who organizes women into 'Sevika Sangha' and 'Sevis', on Suryanarayan's complaint that his wife does not look after his comforts, says:

*Of course, Satamma has to look after your comforts. If we are to help others, we must begin with our husbands. When Rangamma tells the women to look after their husbands, in turn the women reply: 'we should do our duty. If not, it is no use belonging to the Gandhi group.' (110-111)*

Women are thus represented as comrades to their men folk, with no space allotted for carving any identity of their own in *Kanthapura*. Raja Rao's heroines believe, "to be wife is to worship your man". (*The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of Modern India*). Markandaya's narrator on the other hand does not adore or worships her husband, but loves him.

The common thread which binds these women narrators is their faith in religion and hope which sustains them through thick and thin. Religion is an indistinguishable way of life for women, providing them a faith and hope that things would be better. Achakka gives an extensive view of the community, people related to each other through emotions and feelings. She keeping in tune with a woman's habit of gossiping, extends her household to the whole village. She talks about the religious beliefs, social norms, false orthodoxy of people like Bhatta and also the honesty epitomized by people like Range Gowda. As the story proceeds, it transforms itself into a political narrative. The temple also is converted into a secular space, with Jayaramachar relating Harikathas, in order to awake people from their slumber and initiate them into action. The grandmother links the gods and goddesses with historic figures and juxtaposes them with real figures of the present.

It is their faith in God and religion which served as the magic wand for all their tribulations. The freedom struggle in *Kanthapura* becomes more of a religious struggle as narrated in the sing song voice of the old granny, living next door. For every problem they fall back on religion which is passed on to them over generations and defines them. While performing their daily religious rites, like blowing the conch, lighting camphor, breaking coconuts and singing 'Satya Narayan Maharaj ki Jai', they suddenly shout 'Vande Mataram' (168-169). Religion is the most persuasive element in the novel and the action in the novel begins with the unearthing of a half sunken 'linga' by Moorthy and its consecration. Starting from an invocation to Kenchamma goddess, to the end of the novel, religion seems to sustain the spirits of the people of *Kanthapura*. Achakka well versed in religious lores, passes down the history to a younger generation by unfolding only the religious sensibility of Indian villagers,

who ascribe some or the other religious angle and mythicises events. For the old woman, “Jawaharlal is like a Bharata to the Mahatma” (183) who she says will slay Ravana so that Sita may be freed. Gandhi for her has attained the status of God and Moorthy is regarded as his avtar in Kanthapura.

Ancient myths and mythological figures, of Ram, Ravana, Sita, Savitri, etc. everlasting contemporaries for the Indians, are reinterpreted from a feminine context. Achakka in *Kanthapura* mythicises the whole freedom struggle and leaves an indelible mark on the readers. She employs the figures of Rama and Ravana to delineate good from evil, central to the character of the novel.

With the use of female narrators in these novels, religion becomes a character in itself and an intrinsic whole. Whether or not the prayers of Rukmani are listened by the deities, her faith never deters.

*That year the rain failed... I took a pumpkin and few grains of rice to my goddess, and I wept at her feet. I thought she looked at me with compassion and I went away comforted, but no rain came. (101)*

“For her everything is in God’s hand.” Although forsaken in the village, Nathan and Rukmani find shelter and food at the temple in the city where they find themselves destitute. Their worldly belongings are stolen but they find a friend in Puli and kind strangers feed them. The narrators never for once questions God for the injustice met out to them or their people, rather it is their basic and underlying faith in the Almighty which sustains them in the hours of adversity and exalts one in good times. Their undaunting faith in God gives them hope to survive, to fight not only for themselves but for their families and community at large.

Rukmani is an embodiment of compassion, who when assaulted by a perpetual state of misfortunes, makes conscientious effort to survive. Struggling from famine to flood to factory-closings, there was no end to Rukmani’s struggle and a time came when she had to sell her utensils and everything else in her possession to pay to the landlord. The incessant rain was followed by the drought and not enough drinking water was available. To quench thirst, scanty water had to be brought from a distance. Nothing makes her give up in the name of adversities. She feels that the situation is not all bad:

*We owned our own ploughing bullocks: we kept a milk goat. From each harvest we saved, and had gunny sacks full of the husked rice for morning and evening meals; dhal; sometimes a coconut grated fine and cooked in milk and sugar; sometimes a wheatcake fried in butter and melting in the mouth. (7)*

Rukmani in her old age, reflects over the past without any bitterness. “Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together” (1). At this point of time she has no fears and is self-contained. Since Rukmani, the narrator-heroine tells her own story, the narration is subjective but gains poignancy and also makes the readers emotionally involved. A poor peasant woman, she is far ahead of her rural counterpart Achakka. When she finds herself barren, she submits to a physical examination by the English doctor, Kenny, even though she knows that her husband would be upset with her if he found out about it. Later without letting her husband know, he on behalf of her daughter Ira consults Kenny. She also teaches her sons to read and write a little, enabling them to make educated career choices. In difficult times she although reluctantly, sells her vegetables to the moneylender Biswas instead of going to the old granny. The narrator Rukmani epitomizes the invincible human spirit that rises above the problems and challenges.

Jasbir Jain with special reference to the Indian novel gives different reasons for the popularity of the woman-centered novel. She says:

*There might be something inherent in the form of the novel, which indeed to be brought within the fold of domesticity... Women played a vital role in the structure of novel just as they did in the plot of Shakespearean comedy, for they conveyed a feeling of continuity and creativity. They were down to earth and affirmative in their assessment of life. In India society was conventional and tradition conscious, there was a strict religious code and an almost inflexible caste system. In such a scenario the centrality of women characters is evidently symptomatic of other concerns. Not only literary statements but even political ones were being made by writers of those times... Women being a subjugated category were appropriate representatives of a colonial society. (10)*

A new generation of writers like Anita Desai, Manju Kapur however present their narrators such as Ida of *Difficult Daughters*, breaking free of the patriarchal authority and creating their own identity. As compared to the male narrators, the female narrators use a different set of language to depict the inner crises and tensions in the lives of the characters. Their language is that of silence and in their silence lies their strength. Rukmani, comes across as a woman who does not speak much in the novel but we the readers get a complete picture of her being and becoming. Achakka on the other hand is effusive about the community concerns but taciturn about her own life.

The women narrators have set themselves seriously to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of women. The subdued voice has found expression in the passionate narratives written by women, committed to the cause of equality and cultural transformation. In this way they unravel their subconscious and write about their agony, anger, depression, struggle and acceptance and in some cases rebellion against their circumstances.



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