International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-9, Issue-1; Jan-Feb, 2024

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Reimagining the Mother–Daughter Bond in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Received: 16 Jan 2024; Received in revised form: 19 Feb 2024; Accepted: 22 Feb 2024; Available online: 27 Feb 2024

Abstract— *This paper argues that Kamala Markandaya's novel Nectar in a Sieve (1954) reimagines the mother–daughter bond as a dynamic site of suffering, silent resistance, and generational evolution, articulated through the experiences of Rukmini and Ira. Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve has been approached as a novel of agrarian suffering, colonial modernity, and feminine endurance. While such readings remain central to its critical reception, they frequently overlook the intimate emotional relationships through which the novel articulates its ethical vision. This paper focuses on the mother–daughter relationship between Rukmani and Irawaddy (Ira), arguing that this bond constitutes a crucial feminist and moral centre of the text. Drawing on feminist ethics of care and postcolonial feminist thought, the study suggests that Markandaya reimagines motherhood not as a biological construction or social institution but as an ethical practice sustained through compassion, restraint, and relational responsibility. Through Rukmani's unwavering acceptance of Ira in moments marked by infertility, abandonment, and sexual stigma, the novel resists patriarchal frameworks that evaluate women primarily through reproductive capacity and sexual purity. The paper explores that the mother–daughter bond operates as a quiet yet enduring form of feminist resistance within conditions of material scarcity and social judgment.*

Keywords— ***mother-daughter bond, resistance, feminine endurance, abandonment, sexual stigma, social judgement***

I. INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* occupies a central position in Indian English fiction for its poignant portrayal of rural poverty, colonial disruption, and feminine resilience. Rukmani's narrative voice has often been interpreted as emblematic of stoic endurance, a quality that critics frequently associate with Indian womanhood. However, such readings undermine the emotional and relational complexities embedded in the novel—particularly the intergenerational female relationships that sustain and challenge this endurance.This paper proposes that the mother–daughter bond in Nectar in a Sieve is not merely sentimental or biological but deeply political and evolutionary. Markandaya uses this bond to explore how women inherit suffering, negotiate agency, and adapt to socio-economic upheavals. Through the figures of Rukmani and her daughter Ira, the novel reveals motherhood as both a responsibility and a transformative force, shaped by caste, sexuality, and survival.

Feminist criticism has long emphasized that womanhood is not a stable or natural category, but one shaped by social expectation and moral regulation. Simone de Beauvoir's observation that one "becomes" a woman rather than being born one remains particularly relevant to *Nectar in a Sieve*, where marriage and fertility function as primary measures of female worth. Women who fail to meet these expectations are not merely marginalized; they are quietly

disciplined through abandonment, shame, and social erasure.

Postcolonial feminist critics have further noted that gendered oppression in economically marginal spaces is inseparable from material deprivation. In Markandaya's rural setting, women absorb the emotional consequences of famine, displacement, and moral scrutiny. Within this context, the mother–daughter relationship emerges as a survival structure that offers ethical continuity where institutional protections fail.

This paper also draws on feminist ethics of care, particularly Carol Gilligan's argument that moral reasoning grounded in responsibility and relationship challenges abstract, rule-based ethical systems. Rukmani's maternal responses repeatedly reflect this alternative ethical orientation, prioritising care over judgment and understanding over regulation. The mother–daughter relationship, in particular, exposes fractures within patriarchal expectations of womanhood. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya resists idealized motherhood by portraying maternal love as strained by hunger, shame, and moral compromise.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Maternal affection under patriarchal pressure

Rukmani's motherhood is shaped by deeply internalized patriarchal values. Married young and migrated from relative comfort into agrarian poverty, she learns that survival depends on obedience, restraint, and emotional self-containment. Rukmani's motherhood is marked by a deep emotional contradiction shaped by patriarchy, as Markandaya narrates, "I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?" (Markandaya, 2009' P: 16). Rukmani's tears after the birth of her first child register not an instinctive rejection of the girl child, but the internalization of patriarchal values in a society where a woman's worth is measured through male offspring. The rhetorical question "for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?" stands crucial here. It does not voice an individual desire, it reproduces a collective patriarchal assumption, exposing how deeply gender hierarchy has been normalized. She loves Ira with unquestioning tenderness, doting on her as her firstborn, yet this affection coexists with an acute sense of anxiety and self-blame when she remains childless for years afterward. Her prolonged barrenness is experienced not merely as personal sorrow but as a social curse, since her inability to produce sons threatens her value as a woman within a male-centred agrarian society:

"'I have no sons,' I said at last, heavily. 'Only one child, a girl.'

Once I had started the words flowed, I could not stop myself.

'Why should it be? I cried. What have we done that we must be punished?

'Am I not clean and healthy? Have I not borne a girl so fair, people turn to gaze when she passes?'" (Markandaya, 2009 P:22)

At the same time, it should be noted that's for a prolonged period, Ira remains Rukmani's only child, and this exclusivity profoundly shapes the emotional intensity. Ira grows up within a relationship marked by attentiveness and mutual vulnerability. Feminist psychoanalytic critic Chodorow observes that in societies where women lack public power, motherhood often becomes the primary site of emotional investment. This early dyadic relationship establishes a non-coercive maternal ethic. Rukmani does not mould Ira through rigid moral instruction; she raises her through care and presence. This ethical foundation later enables the bond to survive abandonment, stigma, and separation.

Ira's failed marriage and reinforcement of mother-daugher bond

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ira's abandonment by her husband following her infertility serves as a significant narrative moment that reveals the social expectations governing marriage and womanhood. Infertility is not treated as a shared marital concern but as a condition that disrupts the legitimacy of the wife within the domestic structure. The episode unravels how marital stability in the novel is closely tied to reproductive capability. From a social and cultural perspective, Ira's rejection reflects prevailing norms in which a woman's role within marriage is strongly associated with childbearing: " 'Mother-in-law,' he said, ' I intend no dicourtesy, but this is no ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought he back to you. She is a barren woman.'"

(Markandaya, 2009 P:52).

Ira's abandonment exposes what Simone de Beauvoir identifies as the social production of woman as "Other", a being whose worth is measured in relation to biological function rather than individual subjectivity. The husband's rejection runs as a form of symbolic violence, normalised by custom and left unquestioned by the community. Ira's exclusion from marriage demonstrates how women who fail to conform to reproductive expectations are considered disposable. In the context of postcolonial feminism, this abandonment also reveals how material deprivation intensifies patriarchal cruelty. As Chandra Talpade

Mohanty argues that gender oppression in colonized or impoverished societies cannot be detached from economic vulnerability. Ira's rejection is not merely personal but structural, shaped by poverty, caste hierarchy, and survival anxiety. Crucially, the feminist significance of this episode lies in its impact on the mother–daughter bond. Ira's suffering mirrors Rukmani's earlier anxieties over fertility, transforming motherhood into an intergenerational site of shared vulnerability. Yet Ira's later choices also mark a divergence from maternal endurance, suggesting a feminist evolution from silent suffering to ethically complex agency. Markandaya refrains from overt authorial condemnation, instead allowing the incident to speak through its emotional and practical consequences. The episode also deepens the novel's exploration of maternal relationships. Ira's return to her mother following abandonment reinforces the mother–daughter bond as she has been taken into Rukmini's emotional refuge without any judgement: " Did you think we would blame you for what is not your fault?" (Markandaya,2009, P:52). Rukmini absorbs her daughter's suffering in her recognition of the same helplessness she had known before . Rukmini recalls, " All this I had gone through –the torment, the anxiety. Now the whole dreadful story was repeating itself, and it was my daughter this time." (Markandaya 2009, P: 52). Thus, she extends her maternal protection further towards Ira as a mother and as a woman who had endured the same before. However, fearing the limits of maternal protection in a socio-economic system that affords women little security beyond marriage, the mother attempts to intervene in the situation by taking her daughter to Kenny, she seeks medical help recalling her own treatment. She tried to restore Ira to her husband. It is revealed that Ira has been permanently abandoned by her husband as he took another wife. This encounter caused an irreparable fracture in Ira's sense of self, pushing her into emotional withdrawal and confinement.

Markandaya presents Ira's abandonment less as a singular act of cruelty than as an injustice of the social structures, contributing to the novel's larger meditation on endurance, vulnerability, and adaptation within rural life. What transforms this episode into a feminist moment is Rukmani's response. She refuses to internalize social blame or reinterpret infertility as failure. By offering unconditional refuge, she creates a space of moral shelter in a society that has expelled her daughter. Rukmani quietly unsettles the patriarchal logic that equates womanhood with reproduction. Motherhood, in this moment, becomes an act of ethical containment and a willingness to bear pain without converting it into judgment. Ira's rejection mirrors Rukmani's own earlier fear when she was unable to bear sons, creating a powerful emotional continuity between mother and daughter. Rukmani does not merely sympathise with Ira; she recognises her own past suffering in her daughter's silence and self-blame. The narrative takes another shift at this moment and does not end in despair. Whem Rukmini gave birth to Kuti, her last son, she fears that Ira who is denied motherhood may resent the child. Instead, Ira steps into an alternative form of motherhood, adoring Kuti with the maternal love she has been denied. Through this unexpected rejuvenation, the novel reframes motherhood from a biological function to an effective and ethical practice. Ira's care for Kuti becomes an act of quiet resistance, suggesting that while patriarchy may control women's reproductive bodies, it cannot fully extinguish their capacity for nurture, love.

Ira's transformation and Rukmini's awakening

Famine in Nectar in a Sieve functions as a backdrop of suffering and as a force that restructures relationships and priorities within the household. As material scarcity intensifies, familial bonds are tested and redefined, leading to shifts in responsibility that challenge established roles. Ira's assumption of responsibility for Kuti becomes an alternative form of motherhood, one shaped by care, sacrifice, and moral urgency. Her actions foreground caregiving as a practical response to crisis rather than an idealized maternal role. In the absence of social or institutional support, motherhood emerges as a relational and situational practice, grounded in survival. The famine also facilitates a reconfiguration of familial and gendered bonds. Rukmani's maternal role, while central, becomes insufficient on its own, necessitating cooperation. The shared effort between mother and daughter highlights solidarity as a mode of endurance, where survival depends not on individual resilience but on collective care. Importantly, the novel presents this solidarity without romanticisation. Suffering does not dissolve ethical complexity; instead, it forces difficult choices that blur conventional moral boundaries. Through the intertwined themes of famine, caregiving, and solidarity, *Nectar in a Sieve* extends its exploration of endurance beyond individual motherhood to a shared feminine ethic rooted in responsibility and mutual dependence. The mother–daughter bond thus evolves into a collaborative framework for survival, shaped by circumstance rather than sentiment. The birth of Kuti, Rukmani's last child, introduces a significant shift in the mother–daughter dynamic. Ira's devotion to Kuti is intense. She feeds him, watches over him, and organizes her life around his survival. Feminist theory has long argued that motherhood need not be biologically determined but can arise through sustained responsibility. Through Kuti, Ira becomes a mother in every ethical sense. Ira's decision to prostitute herself during the famine in order to save Kuti represents the novel's most

ethically unsettling moment. The act appears to confirm patriarchal narratives of moral fall. A feminist ethical reading reframes it as sacrificial resistance under coercive conditions. Ira's body becomes a means of survival rather than desire. Rukmani's response is crucial:

"Well we let her go. We had tried everything in our power, there was nothing more we could do. She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination." (Markandaya, 2009 P:103).

Rukmini and Ira: mirroring motherhood

Ira's eventual pregnancy unfolds her as a single mother, a status socially illegitimate within the novel's patriarchal framework. Markandaya pointedly refuses to frame this motherhood as moral redemption. Ira's suffering is neither erased nor compensated. She has already experienced motherhood through care, sacrifice, and responsibility long before giving birth. Her biological motherhood thus represents ethical continuity rather than reward.

Rukmani and Ira ultimately come to mirror each other's motherhood through shared patterns of sacrifice and resistance. Rukmani repeatedly deprives herself of food to keep her children alive; Ira sacrifices bodily autonomy to save Kuti. The acts differ in form but not in ethical structure. As Gilligan's ethics of care suggest, moral action under conditions of survival cannot be judged by abstract standards divorced from relational responsibility. Rukmani recognizes this mirroring instinctively, refusing judgment because she sees herself reflected in her daughter. Silence becomes an intergenerational ethical language. In *Nectar in a Sieve,* the motherhood of Rukmani and Ira unfolds in parallel patterns that invite a reading of mirrored maternal roles. Rukmani's narrative repeatedly associates motherhood with watchfulness, restraint, and quiet labour. Her care is expressed through acts such as rationing food, suppressing fear, and keeping hope despite recurring loss. This mode of motherhood is characterized less by emotional articulation than by sustained presence in the face of adversity. This shift marks a transition from daughterhood to caregiving that closely mirrors Rukmani's long-standing maternal function within the household. The language surrounding both women reinforces this mirroring. Rukmani often describes motherhood through endurance—bearing, waiting, continuing. Ira's actions during the famine reflect the same ethic, though enacted under more extreme conditions. While Rukmani's motherhood develops over time, Ira's is destined into a moment of crisis, yet both are framed as responses to necessity rather than choice. The novel thus aligns motherhood with responsibility born of circumstance rather than biological status alone. At the same time, the mirroring is not exact. Rukmani's care is marked by emotional containment, whereas Ira's is driven by immediacy and desperation. This difference suggests evolution rather than repetition. Ira inherits the maternal impulse but adapts it to a context in which endurance alone proves insufficient. The text subtly contrasts Rukmani's faith in patience with Ira's reliance on action, highlighting generational variation within shared suffering. Through this parallel structuring, the novel presents motherhood as a relational and situational role, reproduced across generations yet reshaped by changing conditions. The mirrored experiences of Rukmani and Ira underscore continuity in caregiving while also revealing how maternal responsibility evolves in response to intensifying hardship.

Mother-Daughter reunion and evolution

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the separation and eventual reunion of Rukmani and Ira mark a significant phase in the evolution of their relationship. Their separation occurs gradually rather than abruptly, emerging from the pressures of poverty, displacement, and changing familial roles. As circumstances force each woman into distinct paths of survival, the mother–daughter relationship is temporarily suspended but not severed. Rukmani's journey after Nathan's death represents a crucial transformation in her maternal identity. Widowed and dispossessed, she moves beyond the domestic space that had long defined her role as wife and mother. Her adoption of Puli during this period is particularly significant. Puli, marginalized by illness and poverty, becomes the object of Rukmani's care at a moment when her traditional maternal duties appear to have ended. This act extends her motherhood beyond biological and familial boundaries, suggesting an evolved form of caregiving grounded in empathy and shared vulnerability. The reunion with Ira and Selvam signals not a return to an earlier familial structure but the formation of a reconfigured household. Ira, who has herself undergone profound transformation through abandonment, famine, and caregiving, now occupies a position of relative stability. Rukmani's return is marked by humility rather than authority; she rejoins the family not as the central provider but as a participant in a collective framework of survival. The text emphasizes adjustment rather than restoration, indicating that the bond between mother and daughter has matured and evolved through time and experiences as Ira welcomes Puli in the house : " 'You look tired and hungry,' Ira said, taking his arm. 'Come with me and rest, I will prepare the rice.' "(Markandaya, 2009 P:192). This reunion signifies a reversal of roles. Ira, once dependent, now offers shelter and continuity, while Rukmani adapts to a reduced yet meaningful presence within the household. The acceptance of Puli by Ira and Selvam further reinforces the novel's emphasis on inclusion and solidarity born of shared

suffering. Motherhood, in this final phase, becomes less hierarchical and more communal.

III. CONCLUSION

This study addresses the relationship between Rukmani and Ira that evolves through separation,loss and reunion from dependence to mutual support and recognition. The novel closes this arc not with resolution in material terms but with an ethical continuity rooted in care. Through Rukmani and Ira, Markandaya exposes the quiet violence of social systems that reduce women to their reproductive and sexual functions, while simultaneously imagining an alternative moral order sustained through maternal and feminine care. Rukmani does not challenge patriarchy through rebellion or ideological critique. Her resistance is smaller, and for that reason more enduring. She refuses to participate in the shaming of her daughter; she refuses to convert suffering into judgment and passes down her value and resilience to her daughter Irawaddy quietly yet meaningfully. In doing so, she preserves a space of dignity within a world that is inherently structured to deny it. The novel suggests that when institutional ethics fail, maternal compassion may remain the last and most human form of moral survival by portraying the mother-daughter bond through Rukimini and Ira.

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