

SHACKLES OF SOCIETAL PERCEPTION AGAINST FEMALE AUTONOMY IN KAMALA MARKANDEYA'S NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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ABSTRACT

Son preference is often framed as a cultural norm, it functions as a broader economic and social mechanism that marginalizes women. Kamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve* critically examines the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality, particularly through the cultural practice of son preference. This paper explores how societal perceptions, economic dependency, and systemic discrimination limit female autonomy in traditional Indian society. By analyzing the protagonist Rukmani's experiences, the study highlights how son preference restricts women's access to education, financial independence, and decision-making power, reinforcing their subordinate status. Through an intersectional feminist lens, the paper examines the complex interplay between gender, caste, class, and economic constraints in shaping women's lives. To move beyond critique, the paper proposes policy-driven feminist solutions to combat gender bias and promote female empowerment. Legal reforms must enforce equal inheritance rights and stricter regulations against sex-selective practices. By integrating feminist theory with policy recommendations, this study emphasizes the urgent need for structural reforms to dismantle gender-based discrimination. A future where women have equal autonomy and agency is possible through collective feminist action, legal frameworks, and economic empowerment initiatives. Markandeya's work serves as a crucial narrative that not only critiques societal oppression but also inspires forward-looking strategies for achieving gender justice.

Keywords: Son Preference, Gender Inequality, Female Autonomy, Patriarchal Structures, Economic Dependency, Intersectional Feminism

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist movements across different cultures often share common goals and narratives, despite their unique social, cultural and historical contexts. Through her narratives, Kamala Markandeya highlights the complexities of gender relations, societal expectations and various aspects of women's lives, addressing themes like inequality, and the quest for independence. Her narratives often center on the complexities of female relationships, the pursuit of personal fulfillment, and the resilience of women in the face of adversity. Imagination allows writers to explore different perspectives, delve into the depths of emotions, and present unique insights into the world. She is a realistic writer known for her artistic use of metaphors and appealing narrative style. Poverty, determination and struggle of the protagonists will be the revolving plot in most of her novels. Her works are significant in the way Indian culture and traditions are expressed in the literary works of 20th century. Her youth was in colonialized India full of protests and claims for Indian Independence.

Major issues in her novels are India's cultural resistance against western influence, poverty, love, marriage, sexuality and gender issues. The perception of society towards women is a significant barrier to feminine autonomy across various aspects of life. Bell Hooks states, "Feminist politics aims to end domination to free us to be who we are - to live lives where we love justice, where we can live in peace" (68). Women faced stereotypes, biases, and systemic inequalities that have limited their ability to fully participate in society on equal terms with men. These perceptions often manifest in various ways. Traditional gender roles assign specific duties and behaviors to women, often confining them to domestic roles such as caregiving and homemaking. This limits their opportunities for personal and professional development outside of the home.

Kamala Markandeya's unique historical perspective of New India and its evolving socio-political and cultural landscape distinguishes her from other writers of Indian English novels. Her works exhibit a rich diversity of themes, often delving into the intricacies of the human mind at a psychological level. Markandeya's keen observations of various facets of Indian cultural life, blending elements of both eastern and western influences, are evident throughout her novels. She critically examines cultural dynamics and gender divide during this transitional period being positioned at the intersection of the pre- and post-independence eras. Her nuanced exploration of these themes offers readers a deeper understanding of the complexities of Indian society and its evolution over time. Dr. A.V. Krishna Rao says in *The Novels of Kamala Markandeya: A Study*, "Studies in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English" Kamala Markandeya seems to be fully philosophical of the roused feminine receptivity in modern India as she attempts to project the image of the changing traditional society" (23). Markandeya's ability to navigate diverse themes and delve into the intricacies of the human psyche distinguishes her as a writer who not only captures the essence of New India but also encourages readers to question and confront the underlying power dynamics shaping their world.

2. SON PREFERENCE IN CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Son preference is regularly demonstrated to influence intra- household resource allocation rather than other factors of gender inequality and as a result, there is a strong preference for having male children. The gender discrimination is not attributed to the financial standards of a family but within a global setting, prosperity might worsen bias. Son preference is a patriarchal ideology that not only values male children over female children but also restricts women's autonomy by limiting their access to education, financial independence, and decision-making power. If a female foetus is discovered in sex determination, an abortion is performed.

The idea that girls are less desirable than boys is the base for son preference mentality. It is a serious form of bias against women and leads to a variety of negative acts. Esther Duflo says "Throughout their lives, even before birth, women in developing countries are treated differently than their brothers" (1051). Denying girls access to opportunities for health care, education, and employment while also limiting their access to food and other necessities is consistent with the conservative mindset of the society. The tradition that girls must accept money, jewelry, and other goods as dowries when they get married is also a reason for son preference.

Kamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve* addresses the problem of son preference, which inhibits Indian culture from recognizing a girl child. Rukmani, the protagonist, cried hysterically for having a girl child as the first born. She witnesses the most dreadful rural circumstances representing the issues of women in Indian culture. Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of the local headman married Nathan at the age of twelve. She is educated than Nathan, who is just a tenant peasant. She values their marriage greatly despite her husband's limited earnings during a drought.

She thinks that having a female child in her first pregnancy brings dishonor to the family. Kali, her neighbour assists her during labor, and comforts her by mentioning the possibility of having sons in her following turns. The typical social construct of the rural circumstances does not support them in being happy with a girl child. Rukmani struggles mightily to comprehend Kali's consoling words, which, despite making her feel jealous of her for having had three sons, persuade her not to linger on her misfortune.

I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born? They took the child from me. Kali said: 'Never mind. There will be many later on. You have plenty of time'. It is easy to be comforting when your own wishes have come true. Kali had three sons already, she could afford to sympathize. (16)

Nathan, Rukmani's spouse, cannot control his dissatisfaction and displays his discontent at the lack of a male successor to handle his property. He pays little attention to her and seeks out his own ways. They name the baby

Irawaddy. She will take a dowry with her when she gets married and leave nothing but her memories, so cannot fulfill Nathan's heritage of keeping a traditional agricultural community. Rukmani gets a little stone lingam as a fertility symbol from her mother, who also struggled to conceive male heirs. She also wishes that her daughter would give birth to sons soon so that she could see them before she passes away. Rukmani's mother helps her daughter get to know Dr. Kennington. Rukmani gives birth to her first son when Ira is seven years old.

The dream of being a mother to a boy comes true after her treatment with Kenny, which she conceals from her husband. Through Rukmani's experiences, the novel delves into the deep-rooted patriarchal norms that devalue female children and place immense importance on producing male heirs. Rukmani's initial reaction to giving birth to a daughter reflects the internalized misogyny prevalent in her society. Despite her joy at becoming a mother, she is overwhelmed with disappointment and a sense of failure because her firstborn is not a son. It speaks volumes about the societal expectations placed on women to produce male offspring, as well as the shame and stigma associated with giving birth to daughters. The character Kali provides insight into the complex dynamics surrounding son preference. While she attempts to console Rukmani, her words also reveal her own privilege as a mother of sons.

Kali's ability to sympathize with Rukmani is tempered by the fact that her own desires for male heirs have been fulfilled, highlighting the hierarchical nature of gender within the community. Rukmani's husband Nathan's reaction further emphasizes the pressure placed on women to bear sons. His dissatisfaction and neglect towards Rukmani due to the absence of a male successor demonstrate the extent to which patriarchal norms dictate familial dynamics and expectations. Despite these challenges, Rukmani remains resilient, clinging to hope for a son and ultimately achieving her dream through clandestine means. Her journey reflects the sacrifices and struggles faced by women in patriarchal societies, as well as their ability to navigate and subvert oppressive systems in pursuit of their own desires and aspirations.

3. KAMALA MARKANDEYA'S FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Perceptions differ on how India's increasing affluence impacts gender prejudice. The difference among the perceptions is to be deeply examined, separating those that depend on shifting resource restrictions from those that relate to one's financial status. Sociological and political views about gender differences are significant in the feminist movement. A perfect correlation between son preference and the manifestation of prejudice is always concealed. Families that prioritize their sons may continue to treat their daughters the same as their sons, while daughter-preferring homes may still be biased against females in terms of health and education. It is however difficult to generalize measurements of revealed bias in one area to overall prejudice for instance, detecting gender bias in education does not imply bias in health decisions. Son preference can be a good indicator of gender bias across the board because, unequivocally, girls in son-preferring households are more likely to face discrimination than girls in neutral or girl-preferring houses.

Intersectional feminism addresses son preference as a multifaceted issue intertwined with various forms of oppression. By acknowledging the complexity of son preference and its intersectionality with patriarchal systems, socioeconomic factors, and cultural norms, intersectional feminism offers a holistic approach to combating gender inequality and advocating for the rights and dignity of all individuals. This framework emphasizes the importance of addressing underlying power dynamics, promoting economic empowerment and access to resources for women and girls, and advocating for gender equality, human rights, and social justice for all. It has become a standard assertion within feminist theory that women's lives are shaped by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression. This insight – that oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation but is constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems – originates from antiracist feminist critiques, which argue that women's oppression cannot be fully understood through an analysis of gender alone. Intersectionality represents a transdisciplinary theory aimed at capturing the complexity of social identities and inequalities through an integrated approach. It rejects the compartmentalization and hierarchical categorization of major axes of social differentiation, such as gender/sex, class, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. The intersectional approach moves beyond merely recognizing the multiplicity of oppression systems within these categories and postulates their interaction in producing and reproducing social inequalities.

In many cultures, sons are perceived as the primary carriers of the family name, the main providers in old age, and more capable of contributing economically. This preference is reinforced by patriarchal structures that value men over

women and by economic systems that limit women's access to resources and opportunities. For example, in agrarian societies where land and property inheritance are crucial, sons are preferred because they are perceived as more capable of managing these assets. Intersectional feminism highlights that this bias is further complicated by other social categories such as class and caste. In poorer families or lower castes, the economic pressure to have male children who can provide labor or dowries is even more pronounced, exacerbating the suppression of women and girls. Additionally, this bias intersects with healthcare access, where women and girls in marginalized communities may face worse health outcomes due to neglect and lack of resources.

The societal stigmatization of illegitimacy disproportionately affects women. In many cultures, children born out of wedlock are stigmatized, but the burden of this stigma falls predominantly on women. Men often enjoy relative freedom and comfort, facing fewer societal restrictions and less moral condemnation for their role in such situations. From an intersectional feminist viewpoint, the stigma of illegitimacy is not only about gender but also intersects with other dimensions like race, class, and ethnicity. For example, a single mother in a lower socio-economic status might face harsher judgment and fewer resources than a single mother in a more affluent position. Similarly, racial and ethnic biases can amplify the stigmatization, with women from minority groups often subjected to more severe societal scrutiny and discrimination.

Son Preference in India is a well-known thing that has attracted social considerations because of its implications for uneven sex ratios, female foeticide, and greater rates of child mortality for girls. The underlying causes of son choice as an ideology and its effects on existing girls have received less attention. When parents are under financial strain and their sons must leave home to go for the job rather than complete their education, the ideal of the nuclear family is compromised.

Sons tend to fulfill the traditional role of caregiving for their parents in societies where son preference is prevalent. It begins by acknowledging the uncertainty regarding whether sons actually provide care for their aging parents. This perception is influenced by societal expectations and norms surrounding filial duty, particularly the belief that sons are responsible for supporting their parents as they age. The complex interplay between societal expectations, gender roles, and caregiving practices within the context of son preference suggest that while there may be a cultural preference for sons to support their parents, the actual extent to which this occurs is subject to debate and may vary based on individual circumstances and cultural contexts.

Female foeticide, obligations placed on girl children, the dwindling sex ratio, the high rate of illiteracy among women as second-class citizens, the various other forms of exploitation, and gender violence all reflect the low status of women in Indian society and the gender divide. These issues are directly related to attitudes toward women. Indian women authors make a significant contribution to Indian English novels, making them stand out in the area of Indian English novelists like their male counterparts. Sudhir K. Arora speaks of Kamala Markandeya,

Kamala Markandeya uses novel as a befitting medium to reveal different facets of the image of woman and has shown her own self-definition and her emphatic identification with her characters... Her women characters like Rukmani, Mirabai, Sarojini, Anasuya, Helen, Vasantha, Saroja seem to have been fashioned after the various facets of her crystal-clear personality. (5)

The bulk of Indian society is patriarchal and patrilineal, which refers to the fact that men are normally the family's leader and that women are assimilated into their husbands' houses after marriage. Female foeticide is one of these impulses caused by gender inequality. Gender inequality manifests itself in many different ways because of patriarchal beliefs and practices. These injustices still exist today despite several sociocultural and legal reforms. Recent improvements in gender disparity among the educated urban middle class have resulted in discrimination against girls being practiced before birth rather than later. This little improvement reveals a shift in the urban middle class's way of thinking. "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Beauvoir 283).

The long-standing disparity between how men and women are treated in households has drawn the attention of economists. It has been demonstrated, more precisely, that a child's gender affects family structure, potential fertility, sex-selective abortion, sex disparities in parental time inputs, access to health care, and nutrition. The strongest justifications for preferring a son are prevalent in developing countries.

4. CHANGING SOCIAL NORMS: THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN ADVOCACY

Markandeya critiques cultural norms and the gender divide, particularly addressing son preference, a patriarchal ideology that prioritizes male children over females. Rukmani's initial disappointment at giving birth to a daughter reflects the deeply ingrained notion that sons carry economic and social value, while daughters are seen as financial burdens due to dowry and their expected departure from the household after marriage. This mentality discourages investment in girls' education and skills, reinforcing economic dependence on male figures. Consequently, women are often excluded from decision-making, employment opportunities, and land inheritance, further entrenching their subordinate status in society. Intersectional feminism provides a comprehensive framework for understanding these issues, emphasizing how son preference intersects with economic, cultural, and social factors to reinforce gender biases. It illuminates how biases against women manifest differently based on factors such as class, caste, and ethnicity, exacerbating inequalities faced by marginalized women. This son-centric ideology extends beyond individual families and manifests in broader economic structures. In patriarchal societies like Rukmani's, land and property are passed down to sons, leaving women economically vulnerable. Without financial independence or ownership, women are more likely to remain dependent on their husbands, limiting their ability to make autonomous decisions about their lives and futures. As a result, son preference not only perpetuates gender inequality but also sustains a cycle where women are denied economic agency, reinforcing their secondary status. From an intersectional feminist perspective, the economic marginalization of women due to son preference is compounded by factors like caste, class, and rural-urban divides. Economic policies should focus on education, employment opportunities, and financial inclusion for women, breaking the cycle of dependency. Social and cultural interventions, including gender-sensitive education, media representation, and community engagement, are essential to shifting patriarchal mindsets. An intersectional approach is necessary to address the compounded disadvantages faced by women from marginalized backgrounds.

5. SUMMARY

Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds face even harsher limitations, as they are often denied education and employment opportunities, making them even more dependent on male family members. Thus, son preference is not just a cultural bias but an economic and social tool of oppression that systematically excludes women from autonomy. One of the most effective ways to counter son preference is through stronger legal frameworks that promote gender equality. Governments must strictly enforce laws against sex-selective abortions and strengthen inheritance laws to ensure equal property rights for women. Although legal provisions exist in many countries, implementation remains weak due to deep-rooted patriarchal mindsets. Economic independence is key to dismantling son preference. When women have access to education, employment, and financial literacy, they gain decision-making power within their families and societies. Governments and NGOs must invest in policies that provide women with job opportunities, vocational training, and access to microfinance to reduce financial dependence on male family members. Legal and economic policies alone are insufficient without changing societal attitudes toward daughters.

Governments and feminist movements must launch mass awareness campaigns to challenge the cultural belief that sons are inherently more valuable than daughters. Addressing son preference requires a multi-pronged approach—legal enforcement, economic policies, cultural shifts, and intersectional feminist advocacy. While Kamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve* captures the deep-seated gender inequalities in Indian society, feminist movements today offer tangible pathways for change. By challenging discriminatory traditions, ensuring economic opportunities for women, and implementing legal protections, societies can shift away from patriarchal values and toward a future where daughters are valued equally to sons. Feminism, when backed by policy and collective action, becomes not just a theory but a transformative force for gender justice.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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