

## **Feminism in the Select Novels of Kamala Markandaya**

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*Any world is to be explored, whether real or fictional:  
What is worthy to be explored, is worthy to be exposed.  
About literature and society*

Rene Wellek

Literature is a social institution, using its medium language, a social creation. . . But furthermore, Literature represents 'Life', and 'Life' is in a large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or the subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary "imitation". As a member of society, Rene Wellek says

*"A writer inevitably expresses his experience and total conception of life". (95)*

A creative artist is not merely a member of the society as others are, but a representative of the society. He cannot shut his eyes to the happenings of the society, become numb to the sufferings of his fellow beings and be a passive listener or an indifferent observer of what is happening around him and become immune to the degradation of values in society.

The creative artists are deeply concerned about the sufferings and shortcomings of the society. Greatly moved by the misery of the common people, they react in different ways:

Some of them simply expose the pitiable state of the people, some others voice against the causes of the problems, and yet others, boldly fight against the evils in the society, and to remove them, if not abolish them from society.

A novelist is first and foremost an individual with a personal vision. But he is a personality living in a specific period of time, in a specific place, in a specific social environment. He is an individual and a

member of the society and society will inevitably play its part in his or her fiction. The novelists may in sympathy with his social environment, or in rebellion against it, try to reject it, but its picture will be there.

Indian English novel has a late beginning. It began to appear in the nineteen twenties and gathered momentum in the following two decades. When India became free, Indian English novel had already established itself as a branch of literature. The ideals of Indian struggle for freedom are reflected in many novels. Nineteen sixties and seventies are remarkable for a huge output of Indian English novel. The growth of Indian English novel is not regular. V. A. Shahane opines: It is among these prominent writers that Kamala Markandaya had established herself a place of prominence and fame. A brief look into her life in the real world and a short sojourn through her fictional world would be but a fitting effort for the good, before endeavoring to analyse her art and genius in the field of fiction.

It is to her credit that A.V. Krishna Rao comments,

"Kamala Markandaya's novels, in comparison with those of her contemporary women writers, seem to be more fully reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India."(55)

Stephen Ignatius Hemenway praises her highly: "she is

definitely one of the most productive, popular and skilled Indo-Anglian novelists and a superb representative of the growing number of Indian women writing serious literature in English" (52).

Kamala Markandaya was born in a well-to-do Brahmin family of Mysore in 1924. Her father was a transport officer. Owing to her father's transfers, Kamala's education was not steady. At the same time, her lot of travelling was a good training for her. Going to England and Europe she acquired considerable knowledge of Western civilization. Her travelling proved to be very useful to her for her writings. In an interview she herself has stated,

*"the role of observer which every traveller assumes is good training for any writer it makes a good starting point."*

After a short schooling in Mysore, Kamala entered Madras University at the age of sixteen. She left the university without achieving a degree and began to write. She completed her graduation later. Markandaya is the author's pen name. Before her marriage she was Kamala Purnaiya, but she started writing with the pen name Kamala Markandaya. After leaving university, Kamala Markandaya worked as a journalist for a short-lived weekly news paper and after that she worked as an army liaison officer. Soon she quit this job and began to work as a freelance journalist in Madras and Bombay. She went to England in 1948, but she could not succeed in getting a job as a journalist. For some time she worked as a proof reader and as a secretary in some private firm. Kamala Markandaya married John Taylor and she had one daughter. On 16 May 2004, she died at her peaceful home in suburban London at the ripe age of eighty.

Kamala Markandaya was awarded the National Association of Independent Schools Award (USA) in 1967 and the Asian Prize in 1974. Joseph Hitric had called her one of the crispest and most warmly persons of Indian writers. It is easy to find in her work intensity and depth exceptional even among her highly talented contemporary novelists.

Kamala Markandaya has written ten novels:

1. Nectar in a Sieve (1954)
2. Some Inner Fury (1956)
3. A Silence of Desire (1960)
4. Possession (1963)
5. A Handful of Rice (1966)
6. The Coffin Dams (1969)
7. The Nowhere Man (1972)
8. Two Virgins (1973)
9. The Golden Honeycomb (1977)
10. Pleasure City (1982)

Shortly after her death her daughter found a typewritten copy of her novel and it was published posthumously with the title *The Catalyst: Alias Bombay Tiger*.

To understand Kamala Markandaya's concept of life and concern for society, evolution of genius, and art and technique, one must have a bird's eye-view of all her novels. The main themes of her novels are hunger, poverty, love and sex and East-West cultural encounter, through which the personality and the attitude of the author are revealed.

H. M. Williams points out, "She treats the themes of tragic waste, despair of unfulfilled or ruined love, the agony of artistic ambition, the quest for self- realization and truth by the young, all themes popular with European and American novelists of recent decades, (Camus, Saul Bellow, Updike)" (54).

Among Indian women novelists, Kamala Markandaya painted woman as the centre of concern in their novels. A woman's search for identity is a recurrent theme in their fiction. Kamala Markandaya is one of the finest and most distinguished woman novelists in Indian literature of the post colonial era. She recognized for her masterpiece work 'Nectar in a Sieve' published in 1954. For her literary achievement in 1974 she has achieved a world-wide distinction by winning Asian Prize award. As an Indian woman novelist, she depicts Indian women issues and problems very deeply in her novels. A woman's quest for identity and redefining herself finds reflection in her novels and constitutes a significant motif of the female characters in her fiction. She explores the emotional reactions and spiritual responses of women and their predicament with sympathetic understanding.

In most of her novels Kamala Markandaya shows the female characters as a constant search for meaning and value of life. In her novels she presents an existential struggle of a woman who refuses to flow along the current and refuses to submit her individual self. Such characters exhibit a sense of insecurity due to their traumatic psychic experiences and also due to the collapse of one value system and the absence of any enduing values. Kamala Markandaya traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation. The feminist voice plays a vital role in all her novels. In her first epoch-making novel, 'Nectar in a Sieve' (1954) the narrator-heroine, Rukmani emerges a greater and stronger character than her husband. The author displays Rukmani's life which is full of hopes and frustrations, pleasures and pains, triumph and defeat, rise and fall. Before writing this novel Kamala Markandaya went to live in a village, which gives her an opportunity of getting the first-hand experience of village life and the problems of rural folk and therefore this novel is mainly a product of her personal experience in rural living.

Kamala Markandaya shows that before the advent of tannery the life of Rukmani with her family was simply peaceful with her simple joys and sorrows. She was proud of the love and care of her husband. She needed nothing else, no wealth, no luxury, and no material pleasure. Her calm and placid life suddenly begins to change under the impact of the industrialization i.e. the establishment of a tannery by an Englishman. The building of tannery brings about a change in the life of Rukmani and her village. From the very beginning Rukmani opposes the advent of tannery, the symbol of modernity and industrialization which spoils the natural calm and beauty of the countryside. Rukmani feels great pain in her heart when her tranquil and serene life is spoilt by the din and bustle, the filth and dirt. The loss not only of natural beauty but also of human virtues and values is the natural outcome of industry. The sweet peace and tranquility of the village fade away giving rise to the urban squalor and vice. Rukmani stands for the traditional values of life and so she revolts emphatically against the encroachment of the western industrial values on rural life. The simple rural human values are replaced by those of materialism. Rukmani becomes a mute spectator to this horrible scene, while the tannery flourishes and creates havoc in her life.

She says, somehow, I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition (133-34).

Tannery had effaced the identity of the village and its inhabitants. Till now Rukmani along with other rural folk was living in a world which had got a name and habitation, which had got an identity of its own. The urban culture is encroaching upon their simple and peaceful life, leading the two elder sons of Rukmani, Arjun and Thambi to join the tannery. Another son Murugan goes to the city in search of a job. When a woman is married in India whether in a city or a village, she gradually finds a name and recognition, though this name is invariably associated with her husband, for she is generally called the wife of such and such a person, still she is known by her distinct virtues. If the inmates of the house live in peace and harmony, she finds a kind of fulfillment, sharing the joys and sorrows of the family. She has got a name and a habitation. Kamala Markandaya highlights the stoic patience of its heroine in the face of suffering.

Rukmani has imbibed the spirit of acceptance and endurance. This helps her to put up with the adversity that follows the period of drought. (Chatterjee: 87)

Harrowing poverty and terrible drought lead to the death of her younger son Raja. Her daughter Ira revolts against the false norms of traditional society because she is unable to bear the starvation of her family any more. She is forced to take recourse to prostitution to save her younger brother. Under the impact of modernity and industrialism, she thinks the preservation of life more pious than the observation of so-called moral values which fail to feed her family. Tannery is indeed the root cause of tragedy in the life of Rukmani and her family. The author suggests here that the spirit of resignation and stoicism strengthens one like Rukmani in times of suffering. The advent of tannery has resulted in the loss of the traditional values, in social degradation and moral debasement and ultimately it leads to the disintegration of Rukmani's family. Thus, the encroachment of industry causes the decay of human values and creates havoc in village economy. Industrialization pollutes completely the serene atmosphere of the village with its smells and clamors and corrupts the values of people (as in the case of Ira) and dehumanizes them completely. However, Rukmani, unstrung by the bug of industrialism, displays her faith in human dignity by assimilating the destitute leper boy Puli into the nectar of her love and warmth (a natural feminine virtue) and gets him cured of his disease. Thus, by infusing meaning into his life, she finds a new meaning in her own life.

Kamala Markandaya's fifth novel *A Handful of Rice* (1966) concerns itself like the first novel with the theme of conflict between oriental stoicism and western revolt. Like the first novel, this novel also gives vent to Markandaya's anguish over social injustice. In the first novel she has treated it in a village, now she shows its effect in a town. In the first novel Rukmani's son Murugan leaves the village hoping to make a better living in town. Ravi, the protagonist in *A Handful of Rice*, follows the same pattern. The first novel has a female protagonist Rukmani, the narrator heroine. The fifth novel has a male protagonist Ravi. Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* and Ravi in *A Handful of Rice*, in village and town respectively, represent starvation, social injustice and exploitation of poor people. The first novel shows the hard struggle for existence in a rural society, the fifth one displays the same in a modern city. The former novel depicts this struggle in the life of Rukmani, and the latter novel shows it in the life of Ravi. Here Markandaya probes deeper into the misery of human predicament and sows the seeds of revolt in the heart to fit her hero.

Poverty pollutes the characters of Markandaya's fiction. She shows that extreme poverty is a gateway to all kinds of crime. In the first novel poverty leads to the exploitation of Rukmani's sons and to the immoral life of her daughter. Ravi becomes the victim of the same poverty and exploitation in this novel. Once while caught drunk by a policeman; but going scot-free, he forces his way into the house of Apu, a tailor and father of Nalini, the heroine. Due to his infatuation for Nalini and at the suggestion of Apu he decides to stay there and give up his marauding life for an industrious career. By marrying her he starts life afresh under her love and inspiration. Nalini's pure love inspires him to abandon his immoral ways. For her sake, Ravi decides to reform himself completely. Extreme poverty leads him to violence again. Once he joins a mob with a stone in his hand, but he drops it soon because of Nalini's influence on him. Like Rukmani and Sarojini she stands for the sweetness of home and hearth and a healthy traditional life. Nalini

exercises a very powerful influence on the life of Ravi turning him into a respectable and honorable person. Thus, she sustains him through all his struggles as a wife, guide, friend and philosopher. Though not very strong, Nalini still works as a force, to be reckoned with, to check him from straying. Sometimes even her voice was a source of consolation and solace to the wounded Ravi. To sum up, we can say that by the force of her character she emerges stronger than Ravi while Ravi avoids the vicissitudes of life; she faces them boldly and proves to be a blessing in disguise in Ravi's life.

In her novel *The Nowhere Man* (1972) Kamala Markandaya delineates the problem of identity of elderly Indian immigrants. The protagonists, Vasantha and her husband Srinivas find it not only difficult but impossible to create their own identity in England, the land of their adoption. The theme of racial rancor, social reality and feminism more prominently in *The Nowhere Man* than in any other novel of Markandaya. Vasantha, who embodies the Indian traditional values and virtues of patience, tolerance, love and fellow feeling, dies of despair and frustration in this atmosphere of racial antagonism, leaving her husband in a state of shock. The novel depicts mainly the tragedy of Srinivas, the lonely man in an alien land. Old and alone, Srinivas is befriended by an English widow, Mrs. Pickering who looks after him and protects him and develops intimacy with him still she can never replace Vasantha, Srinivas Indian wife, in her calm and intense spiritual love. Kamala Markandaya observes: But she cannot fill the gap left by Vasantha because the affection between Srinivas and Vasantha is the product of India marriage, the union of two souls. (196). When Fred Fletcher, an arrogant Englishman, tells Srinivas that he has got no right to live in England and torments him by abusing and slandering him, Srinivas accepts all this humiliation stoically because he has nowhere to go now. At this moment, Mrs. Fletcher, the good and kindly mother of Fred, apologises to Srinivas, you don't want to pay any attention to Fred ... He doesn't know what he's talking about, you've got as much right to live here as what he has. More... (165)

Mrs. Fletcher, though a white woman, is full of love and understanding and tries to right a wrong caused by her son to a good and gentle - hearted Indian, Srinivas. In this novel also women are shown in a better light than their counterparts. The novelist makes us hear the distinct voice of a woman for the cause of mankind.

By the study of Kamala Markandaya fiction we can sum up that the feminine voice with social reality is heard in nearly all her novels. The one persistent theme that underlies all the novels of Kamala Markandaya is a constant search for identity mainly by the female protagonists. We witness an internal and external conflict in them in their process of discerning and affirming their self identity. A. V. Krishna Rao observes that in her novels Kamala Markandaya has shown "the creative release of the feminine sensibility in India." (Rao: 84:50)

Her female characters such as Rukmani, Mira, Premala, Roshan, Sarojini, Caroline, Anasuya, Nalini, Helen, Vasantha, Lalitha and Mohini all have asserted their identity in their own way. They have been in quest to locate their acceptable place and identity. Nearly all of Markandaya's women characters exhibit a positive and optimistic outlook on life and emerge much stronger than their male counterparts. Each one of them responds in her unique way to her dreams for a better and meaningful life. By exercising

their own free will, exhibiting their own self, they get fulfillment and recognition in life. In this way they are able to establish their true identity.

In her novels Kamala Markandaya has shown that women are not lesser human beings, rather they are sometimes more dignified than men because of their greater human virtues and qualities. It is they who enhance the beauty and charm of life and provide grace and dignity to it. They provide the solid foundation to the edifice of family which is impossible without their active participation. They need to be given their rightful place and dignity in the family and society for their well-being. Markandaya has made us hear the pronounced voice of women in her fiction, as it may lead to the welfare of entire mankind. The suppression of the feminist voice may cause havoc in our life. In her fiction Kamala Markandaya has shown a woman's gradual journey from self-effacement to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-sacrifice to self-fulfillment. She has traced a woman's transformation from self-sacrificing Rukmani in her first novel to self-asserting Mohini in her ninth novel, kindling her son Rabi with the flame of revolution.

Read with keen interest her novels have elicited wide critical acclaim from both the Indian and foreign critics of repute. She is really the glory of India and pride of the world. By creating such female figures in her fiction, which leave an indelible imprint on our hearts, Kamala Markandaya has immortalized herself in English literature.

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