

Kamala Markandaya's Modern Woman

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the fictional forte of Kamala Markandaya. She holds a unique place among Indian women novelists in skillfully depicting woman and her problems. By such skillful portrayals, Kamala Markandaya has heralded the dawn of a new picture of the modern woman of the twenty-first century – a woman with vision of the enlightened, awakened modern India by neatly depicting the social and cultural moves of the male – dominated society.

Keywords: Kamala Markandaya, Modern women of India, Indo-Anglian novel, *Nectar in a sieve*, *A Handful of Rice*, *Possession*, *patriarchy*

Indo-Anglian Novel

Indo-Anglian novel has played a vital role in the development of Indo-Anglian literature. In the words of Meena Shirwadkar, “Indo-Anglian fiction was the inevitable outcome of the Indian exposure to western culture and art-forms like the novel”. Murlidas Malwani regards Indo-Anglian literature as “a wonderful new literature born of the marriage between an Indian sensibility and a world language. Unlike American and Canadian literature, which comes from English speaking people, Indo-Anglian literature is an expression of those people whose mother tongue is not English. The Indo-Anglian writers wrote primarily for the Indian readers. They portrayed poverty, hunger, disease and the East-West conflict in their novels.

“The Indo-Anglian novelist”, says R. K. Badal, “recognizes man in relation to society and as such his preoccupations are the portrayal of poverty, hunger and disease: the sufferings of the innumerable poor, tradition and modernity social evils and tensions, inter-racial relations, changing values of modern civilization, crisis of character, East-West cultural contact and a few like them. Indo-Anglian fiction had a start with the writings of R. C. Dutt,

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B. C. Chatterji and Rabindranath Tagore. R.C. Dutt's *The Lake of Palms* and *The Slave Girl of Agra*, Tagore's *Gora*, *The Wreck* and *The Home and the World*, Raj Lakshmi's *The Hindu Wife*, Rajam Iyer's *Vasudeva Sastri*, H. Dutt's *Bijoy Chand*, Mrs. Ghoshal's *Unfinished song* and *The Fatal Garland*, Balakrishnan's *The Love of Kusum* are some of novels in the development of Indo-Anglian literature worthy of mention at the beginning stage. Then the novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Ahmad Abbas, Ahmad Ali, started gaining grounds in the fiction writing in Indo-Anglian literature-all these writers deal with themes of social evils and subsequent reforms, social problems with a political bias, existing societal problems, emancipation of women, social injustice, struggle for freedom, everyday problems of rural community, East-West conflicts, place of women and their sufferings in the society, depths of human misery and exploitation, social and economic conditions and their effects on character, human follies and human relationships, tragic waste in life, despair and quest for self-realization. Falling in line with the men writers, the female writers also followed suit depicting above such issues in their writings using the novel as a profound medium of expression with a specific purpose for societal reform through literary compositions.

Kamala Markandaya

Kamala Markandaya is one such novelist operating within the framework of the traditional novelist so as to manifest the common issues and social problems in her fictional world. She was born in 1924 in an affluent and aristocratic Brahmin family of South India. Her original name was Kamala Purnaiya. As she was born into a rich family, she got a thoroughly western upbringing. She got her primary education casually and at intervals, educated in various schools. After high studies at Madras University, she started her literacy career as a journalist writing for a weekly newspaper in India, that too, after the achievement of India's Independence. She has to her credit publication of such notable novels as: 1. *Nectar in a sieve* (1954), 2. *Some Inner Fury* (1955), 3. *A Silence of Desire* (1960) 4. *A Handful of Rice* (1966), 5. *The Coffer Dams* (1969), 6. *The Nowhere Man* (1972) 7. *Two Virgins* (1973), 8. *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) and 9. *Pleasure City* (1982).

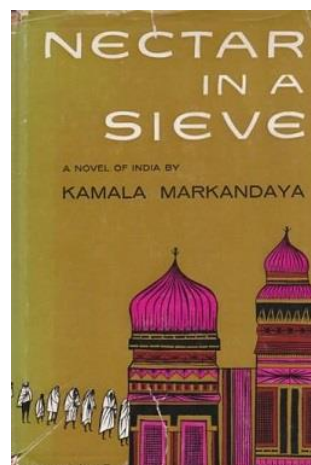
Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly one of the major novelists on the Commonwealth scene. A. V. Krishna Rao observes:

“Markandaya’s contribution to the Inglo-Anglian fiction lies essentially in her capacity to explore....Vital, formative areas of individual consciousness that project the images of cultural change, and in her uncanny gift of inhabiting the shifting landscapes of an outer reality with human beings whose sensibility becomes a sensitive measure of the inner reality as it responds to the stimulus of change” (p. 89).

Depiction of Women and Their Problems

Kamala Markandaya holds a unique place among women novelists in the art of depicting woman and her problems. As a novelist, she portrays the various roles of a woman from the rustic to the modern Indian woman. As K. R. S. Iyengar has put it, “women are natural storytellers. It is, however, only after the second World War that women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian fiction in English of these writers. Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabuvala..... are outstanding” (438). The women in the fictional world of Kamala Markandaya are on a quest for autonomy. The hindrances that stem from nature, from irregularities in the social system confine her to the time-honored and taboo-ridden mores. In a developing country, progress is definable by the law of accumulation, change in social class, the synopsis of investment and return, sowing and reaping, manufacturing and the mechanics of labour and marketing. The plight of the average man or woman being tossed about in such a context is evident in Kamala Markandaya’s novels. The woman is, constantly bracketed with ‘the poorest of the poor’ in the earlier novels like *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*.

Nectar in a Sieve



Markandaya's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is a first person narrative. Rukmani, the narrator heroine, describes the pathetic plight of villagers in a nameless south Indian village in colonial India. She is also "a mother of sorrows" (Iyengar 438). She has to endure shock after shock, her husband Nathan's infidelity, her daughter taking to the streets to save the family from sheer starvation, the death of the child Kuti and the final disaster of being evicted from their house. On the one hand, the villagers are subjected to the varying moods of nature; on the other hand, modern technology invades the simple village folks in the form of tannery and generates exploitation and misery. Intermittent collision with hunger and starvation gives rise to fear, "fear of the dark future, fear of sharpness of hunger, fear of the blackness of death". The trauma of privation exists in the disintegration of Rukmani's family. She wins our sympathy by the dint of her sheer will-power that endures a life without hope like "Nectar in a sieve".

Women are generally treated or depicted as one with multi-faceted roles-as a daughter, as a wife as a lover and as a mother. In Indian families, girl babies are largely unwelcome, and Kamala Markandaya's fiction does explore the unfortunate circumstances when the child who happens to be born as a female, is forced from childhood to motherhood, to be dependent on her family members. She is to be fully equipped only in household duties. "Girls in the family worked hard and were useful like the rivers whose names often given to them ---- "girls were trained from babyhood to serve others and do manual work" (Baig 24).

This picture of Ira in *Nectar in a Sieve* shows her as a sweet, obedient and hardworking daughter of Rukmani and Nathan. Rukmani, mother of Ira born to a rich heritage and culture suffers a setback by being the last daughter in the family. A last daughter in the family means a loss of everything. As the dowry problem poses a threat to every Indian family, she also endures the same and finally married to a tenant farmer who is much below her own class. "The new bride does not enjoy the emotional side of her marriage and her urges, emotions, aspirations and dreams of a happy married life find an early burial" (Kapur 43).

Traditionally, the Indian woman is said to have accepted the framework of the family with a blind faith and rarely showed a rebellious bent of mind. She was found to be docile, self-sacrificing, patient, loving and capable of suffering. Rukmani's struggle to survive is,

however, a more spirited one. She enters to her husband's house as a very modest wife and at first shows disappointment with the half-built hut and thus hurts her husband's pride. But soon she learns from the neighboring women that Nathan, her husband, had built it with his own hands. Soon she becomes proud of her husband and helps him to raise a kitchen garden. The image of woman as wife occupies a central position in Indo-Anglian fiction. Significantly recognizing this phenomenon, Dorothy Spencer remarks:

“It seems clear that in the case of woman as wife, we are dealing with a literary tradition Sita, Savitri, Shakuntala ... at any rate, they exemplify the ideal and thus express the society's values. Further, they serve as models and as such exert an influence on living men and women” (pp. 17-18).

Here, Kamala Markandaya is found amply illustrating the image of the *Pativrata* in her women characters who silently suffer in their sacrificial role, inspite of the cause of their suffering springing mainly from poverty and natural calamity. They are pictured as the daughters of the soil who have inherited age old traditions which they do not dare to question. Their courage lies in facing the challenges of poverty or calamity with a cheerful fortitude and a stubborn determination. Such is the position of Rukmani too here in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The very reason for the submissive role of woman is that “centuries of traditions have made the Indian woman the most patient women in the world, whose pride is suffering” (Radhakrishnan 3). Rukmani closes her eyes in sorrow when she hears she has given birth to a girl. The first thought that disturbs her mind is ‘who would want a daughter for the first born? This attitude arises partly because of the rigorous dowry system. She herself had suffered from it and partly she had inherited for herself, the traditional view that “a son is the father's prop and where a son is an asset, a daughter is a liability” (Mukherjee 1).

Rukmani has to face shock aftershock from nature, from her husband, from economic conditions, from ironal fate. Under Rukmani's lovingly watchful eyes, her lovely daughter grows up. In the meantime, she has also given birth to six sons. On top of it all, she has to see her lovely daughter Ira marry exactly the way she had earlier married. Ira is married to a farmer and returned back because she is barren. Swami Vivekananda once said, “In the west the woman is only a wife, but the ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood that is

marvelous, unselfish, all suffering ever forgiving mother” (P 10). By the time medical treatment is given to her, her son-in-law has already taken a second wife. Ira, always silent, loving, hardworking pours all her affection on her starving younger brother and for his sake, goes out and sells her body. Rukmani has to sorrowfully accept the situation.

The rebellion that rises in a woman’s heart against working conditions is many a time smothered by the pressure of circumstances. Rukmani works hard and is proud of the way of her life. She is at first happy and satisfied to work in the peaceful South Indian village. But the starting of the tannery disturbs the rhythm of her life and she is unhappy to see her sons drawn to the tannery but her voice is of no avail, for it is the father who takes the decision. Later, natural calamity like flood and famine drive them out of their home and all rebellion is crushed into a profound sorrow, though she remains behind her husband in all the dull painful period of her stone cutting work in the city. It is her stoical way of facing calamities that itself impresses on our minds. She is the only working woman in the entire novel who has rebellious thoughts which she was forced to suppress.

Rukmani’s rebellion is not against natural calamities but against man-made conditions. She faces the flooded field with a stoic sorrow but she gets upset by the evil pollution caused by the tannery and by the immoral commercial greed of the city men. However, in spite of her being spiritedly vocal on several matters at the beginning, she frequently surrenders to the male dominated traditions. The mother-daughter relationship is beautifully interwoven even though Ira was forced to prostitution, her mother sorrowfully accepts the situation, thus a new vista opened up by this sensitive portrayal of a mother-daughter relationship. R. K. Badal comments thus:

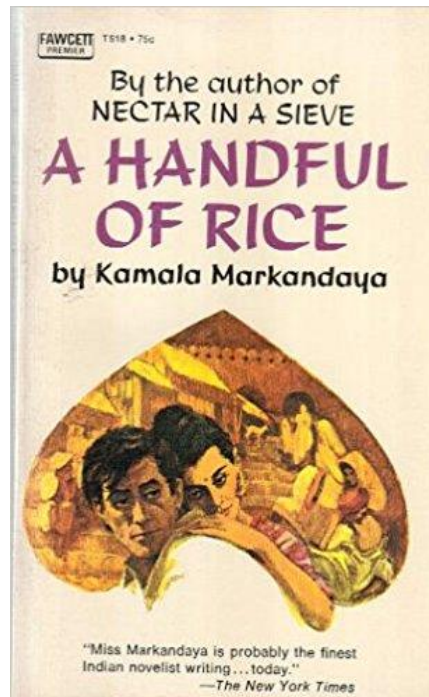
“Of all the women novelists of India writing in English, Kamala Markandaya is the most appealing and outstanding. *Nectar in a Sieve* tells us of the people whom life has nothing to offer but misery, misfortune and suffering. The effects of poverty on the character of rural folk engage the sympathetic attention of Kamala Markandaya. The sad recourse of Ira in *Nectar in a Sieve* to prostitution in a desperate attempt to save her dying little brother is a revelation of how immorality is born out of sheer poverty. Kamala Markandaya’s love, hunger, lust, passion, ambition, sacrifice and death in the modern Indian cities” (p. 48).

Kamala Markandaya's Indian sensibility enables her to grasp the traits displayed by Indian women. Her art of characterization is highly commended by the fellow woman novelist of repute Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal who says,

“Kamala Markandaya develops her characters very well. Her characters seem to be made of flesh and blood. They are life size, realistic and more convincing-Rukmani, Ira, and Nalini. English women who step into her novels do so as representatives of one aspect or other of the British cultural and social attitudes” (P 161).

One can see Markandaya's women exhibiting multifaceted traits in family role as daughter, sister, wife and mother. There is no rigid framework for any of the role. “They vary with their oddities and uniqueness, vagaries and variety, faith and foolishness” (P 161) Here in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani is portrayed as an obedient and gentle daughter, dynamic as a wife, sublime as a mother, yet insipid as a sister. Her daughter Ira presents a different picture. She is a paradox. In the early part of the novel, she is a gentle and obedient daughter and later way ward and self-willed. She is forlorn and pathetic as a wife and noble as a mother.

A Handful of Rice



In *A Handful of Rice*, one can find contrary traits of Nalini and Thangam as daughters. Their background is the same. Nalini here in this novel is modest and soft spoken. She is beautiful and a tower of strength to Ravi. But unlike Rukmani, she is also a meek, passive and silent sufferer who will not do things boldly on her own. She radiates purity, happiness, contentment and sympathy. Ravi feels himself cleansed and enriched by her purity life is light and laughter comes to her easily. She is modest and she does not appreciate the display of female anatomy. When Ravi says that the memsahibs come with scant dress for measurements, she immediately calls them “shameless”. Looking at her, he thinks, ‘what a girl, take a girl like that, and half a man’s troubles would be over’ (AHR 24). Likewise, Nalini’s mother, Jayamma presents a picture of a sexually starved and frustrated wife. Apu, her husband has great fear of her emotions. She is like a moth to her own flame, being carried away by her emotions. His fears come true, as she enjoys the forced sexual act between Ravi and herself. When Ravi apologises, she says,

“What for, last night, who cares what goes on between four walls”, we could only voice Ravi’s opinion, of how such mothers could have such daughters” (P 24).

Kamala Markandaya mirrors a section of women who are emotionally on a base level. They seek to satisfy their basic instincts regardless of the circumstances, thereby wreaking havoc not only in their lives but also in those around them. Thangam too, is like her mother in certain traits. With Jayamma, it is her excessive emotions that create havoc, with Thangam, it is her tongue that brings disaster. She exploits her father and later Ravi. Without a sense of direction, she recklessly pursues fleeting pleasures. Unlike Nalini who nurses her sick father with devotion, Thangam forces him to accompany them to watch the fire walkers. Their absence provides Puttanna an opportunity to steal Apu’s savings. When the theft is disclosed and Apu accuses Puttanna, she swallows in self-pity. She is turned out of the house. Later, when Puttanna is comfortably settled and sends for her, she walks out from the house heartlessly. She does not care for her father who has helped her family so long in dire circumstances. She never cares about her father’s sickness and the future of the family. No wonder, B. K. Das compares Thangam to Nalini and says;

“Thangam is like Regan or Goneril in that she sucks her father’s wealth, but does not give anything in return” (AHR 8).

The ancient scriptures enjoin upon woman the strictest identification with her husband. The dominant quality of the epic heroines is a blind stubborn following the substance”? (*The Dark Room* 141). The wife is pictured as a living embodiment of suffering, a monument of patience and epitome of implicit obedience and total identification with her husband. It may be said of a wife,

“Her strength may not be a match for man’s physical might. Yet, her influence on man is great. He seeks in her love, peace, comfort and solace” (Chatterjee 85).

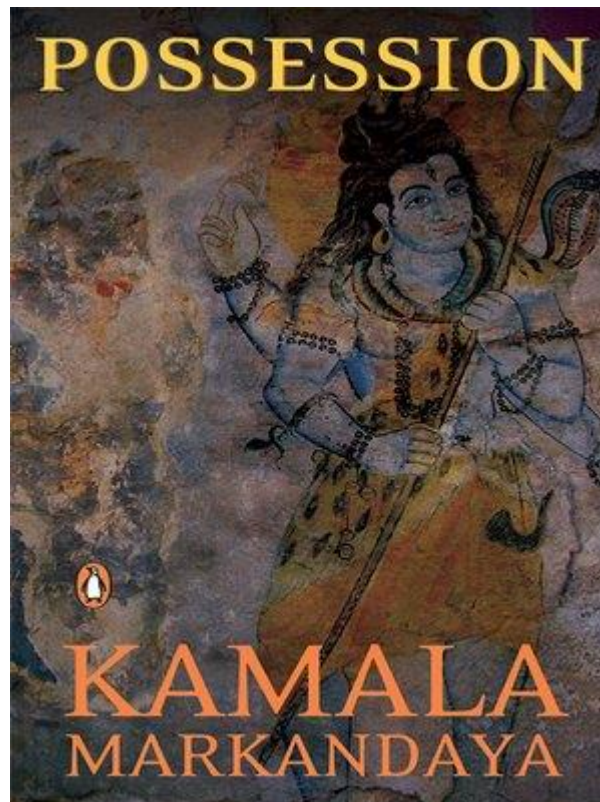
Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is portrayed as a typical Indian wife. Being faithfully devoted to her husband according to Indian tradition, she does not call him by his name, but addresses him as husband. Though married beneath her, she is stepped in tradition and regards her husband as her God. Hence, Hemingway calls Rukmani “as a living replica of the stereotyped Indian Wife”. Like Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, in *A Handful of Rice* one comes across Nalini being pictured as the rock on which “her husband becoming violent” (p. 35).

The novelist Markandaya here highlights the theme of long suffering of Indian wife through the character of Nalini. Nalini regardless of herself, does what is expected of her as a dutiful Indian wife. No wonder B. K. Das compares Nalini to “the epic character Sita, “while Thangam is pictured as a traditional Indian wife, a bundle of good and evil traits. She is loyal to her husband for she is imbued with the code, “the place of a woman is with her husband”.

Possession

In *Possession*, Lady Caroline Bell displays diverse traits. She is lustful to possess a boy of fourteen to satisfy her carnal pleasures. But her society does not make much about it as it would mar our Indian society. Her wealth and social pattern camouflage her behavior. Lady Caroline presents a different picture of a daughter. True to her culture and tradition, she is a rich, well-placed woman descended from a long line of men, who had ruled in the days of British Raj. An air of superiority possesses her, and marks her race. She is a flesh and blood embodiment of her society, culture and country. She is wealthy, beautiful, a divorcee. In the words of M.K. Naik, “she is emblematic of the old empire.... beneath an exterior of aristocratic charm and physical beauty, Caroline is presented as a monster of possessiveness” (223). She is a woman with clever thinking and determination and ruthless loss in her

intentions to achieve her ends. For Caroline, people, things and circumstances are weapons used with precision and ruthlessness to achieve her ends. These characteristics infuse fear, leading to hatred in people around her, as they deal with a person gifted with superior intellect. Even Anusuya, her Indian friend admires her forcefulness, forthrightness and individuality. Her final challenge to the Swamy that Valmiki will come back to her, For indeed, “Caroline came of the breed that never admitted defeat”.



Diverse Traits

Thus, one can see the diverse traits exhibited by the traditional Indian women. Kamala Markandaya is extremely sympathetic towards her women characters. She does not alienate from them, nor does she try to escape the issues confronting her. Writing about the background of her age, she has created woman characters who, despite their weakness, win our admiration and who are forever etched in the consciousness of our memory. Her women characters may be wallowing in self-pity, unable to control the course of their lives. Yet that is the pragmatic realistic portraits of these women of the soil, foiling and sweating, grieving and suffering, pathetic and full of apathy. Though they conform mutely to the social and cultural mores of their male dominated society, still they are individualistic, for in times of stress, crisis and difficulties, they dare to break social shackles that chain them to redeem

others. Rukmani, Ira, Nalini are depicted as exemplary women in the fictional world of Kamala Markandaya. Though succumbing to the pressures of their society, still they all emerge victorious through death, destruction, decay and despondency, picking up once again the strings of their lives to push ahead in their journey towards survival of self by all means. Though their lives get involved in wrecks, they are survivors, if not entirely.

Like in a Shakespearean comedy, “Markandaya’s fiction is essentially a woman’s world: A fine feminine sensibility pervades her world of fiction” (p. 161). Her characters, though slightly idolized, will survive among the most memorable creations of Indian fiction in English. No doubt, Kamala Markandaya has heralded the dawn of a new twenty-first century - a woman with the vision of the enlightened, awakened modern India.

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