
FEMINIST VOICES IN THE NOVELS OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA

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Abstract:

Indian women novelists in English have been presenting woman as the center 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 Indian novelists in English of the post-colonial era who is internationally recognized for her masterpiece 'Nectar in a Sieve' published in 1954. Rukmani struggles hard to survive the relentless strokes of Nature and society. However, 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. 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. In her third novel, A Silence of Desire (1960) Kamala Markandaya portrays the assault of the views of western skepticism on the oriental faith of Sarojini, the female protagonist. The novel unfolds a family drama by studying the husband-wife relationship. She wants to sow the seeds of revolt in the hearts of Indians against the inhumanity of the Britishers because she only thinks of them as human beings. Helen seems to be the mouthpiece of the author in voicing her views against the injustice of the English people. She takes so much side of Indians who are filled with human feelings that she feels perhaps she was born in India in her previous life. 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 a solid foundation to the edifice of the family which is impossible without their active participation.

Keywords: women novelists, post-colonial, English, human virtues, etc

Indian women novelists in English have been presenting woman as the center 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 Indian novelists in English of the post-colonial era who is internationally recognized for her masterpiece 'Nectar in a Sieve' published in 1954. She has achieved a world-wide distinction by winning Asian Prize for her literary achievement in 1974. Endowed with strong Indian sensibility, she depicts women's issues and problems very deeply in her novels. She explores and interprets the emotional reactions and spiritual responses of women and their predicament with sympathetic understanding.

The chief protagonists in most of her novels are female characters who are in constant search for meaning and value of life. 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 enduring values. In her novels, 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. and the problems of rural folk and therefore this novel is mainly a product of her personal experience in rural living.

Rukmani struggles hard to survive the relentless strokes of Nature and society. However, 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. The loss not only of natural beauty but also of human virtues and values is the natural outcome of the industry. The sweet peace and tranquility of the village fade away giving rise to the urban squalor and vice.

. 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. In a village, human beings are easily recognized and respected by each other. This small rural world gave an identity and recognition to all its inhabitants. Villagers did not feel lost and abandoned. But the onset of the process of industrialization effaced their identities and distorted their personalities.

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. While working in the tannery her sons experience the impact of new values. They actively participate in protests and strike not relished and digested by Rukmani because it eventually leads to the disintegration of their family and their village.

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. All the family members have got some recognition in that place. Their identity is not lost.

If in a village people live in peace of harmony, recognizing their selves and their identities, that life is better for them than that of so-called urban life. Peace and harmony, unity and integration provide the solid foundation on which the life of human beings rests. Kamala Markandaya highlights the stoic patience of its heroine in the face of suffering. Arundhati Chatterjee aptly remarks;

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. The 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 the 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.

In the so-called modern society, humanity and human values are dead and people prey on each other like vultures. The erosion of human values continues and so the voice of Kamala Markandaya heard in the novel is still relevant, for we have to protect the eternal human values from decay. In her second novel, *Some Inner Fury* (1955) Kamala Markandaya gives a very vivid and graphic account of the East-West clash in the backdrop of national struggle for freedom, by projecting three wonderful female figures- Mirabai, Roshan, and Premala who exhibit rare and unique virtues of love and loyalty, friendship and understanding. We notice a great difference among the female characters of *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Some Inner Fury*... For example, Mira loves Richard, an Englishman against Govind's and her parents' wishes and Premala adopts a child against Kit's wishes.

In fact, like the author, her woman character Roshan has a cosmopolitan outlook and seems to be the truly liberated woman of modern India. Mira and Roshan, like Markandaya, have close affinity and sympathy with the individual westerners and like the author again they

participate, a least by heart, in the political struggle against Britain. Both of them love the Western values, yet they have a deep love for their motherland. Roshan sacrifices her parents, her husband and aristocratic life at the altar of national loyalty and does not hesitate to go to jail. To Mira's query about her life in prison, she exclaims enthusiastically: What do you think? Of course, I'm not sorry! I'd rather go to the devil my own way than being led to heaven by anyone else.... (161) Roshan stands as a symbol of new awakening among Indian women during the period of national struggle for freedom, who do not mind giving up the comforts of their life for some noble cause.

Mira and Richard dream of solemnizing their love in the form of marriage, but they are alluded to enjoy the consummation of the romantic love and then comes the tragic end of it. Richard is mercilessly killed by Indian revolutionaries giving a shock to Mira. The liberation movement may annihilate a few individuals, but it is immaterial in the larger national interest. Mira reflects at the end of the novel, But what matters to the universe, I said to myself, if now and then a world is born or a star should die? or what matters to the world if here and there a man should fall or a head or a heart should break. (285-86)

Mira ruminates that individual fall or suffering is irrelevant in the event of a great cause. Through the character of Mira, a mentally liberated woman, Kamala Markandaya emphasizes that personal losses do not count for a noble cause. Mira sacrifices her love at the altar of national loyalty. In the beginning, the ardent love of Mira for Richard seems to cut across boundaries of hatred, but it ultimately fails because they belong to two different cultures or races of the ruler and the ruled.

Premala, another female protagonist leads a different kind of life. She is an idealized stereotyped girl who symbolizes Indian traditions and culture. She is deprived of love even within married life. She exhibits great patience, the spirit of sacrifice and love. Kit, her husband who is an Anglophile does not reciprocate her feelings of love. Her love is subdued and is ultimately sublimated to the social cause; when she becomes a helping partner of an English Missionary Hicky in maintaining a school in a village. Govind, a great Indian revolutionary develops intense love for her. Despite her responding to it from the core of the heart, this love does not flower and she is burnt up within the school by the Indians. Hereafter we discern the transformation of Kit, her husband, who repents but all in vain. He is also engulfed by the fire of revolution.

When Govind is tried in court on the charge of murdering Kit, Mira decides to leave Richard who belongs to the community of rulers. The final parting between Mira and Richard is symbolic of the parting between India and England. The internal conflict of Mira reveals her spiritual agony: Go? They were my people - those were his. (285)

The strong communal forces separate them and thus Mira's efforts to meet an Englishman on the emotional and romantic level for bridging the gulf between the two cultures fail miserably.

In her third novel, *A Silence of Desire* (1960) Kamala Markandaya portrays the assault of the views of western skepticism on the oriental faith of Sarojini, the female protagonist. The novel unfolds a family drama by studying the husband-wife relationship. It reveals how men and women torment themselves and each other by silence on many occasions when they actually require to unburden their hearts by giving vent to their feelings. Thus Kamala Markandaya focuses on the psychological torments of Sarojini, the heroine who is a God-fearing and religious and a very caring wife. Dandekar, her husband, a government servant with his modern and western attitude to life opposes her deep faith in a Swamy who, she believes, will cure her of a tumor in her womb. She has no faith in medical treatment of her malady. She undergoes great spiritual crisis when her westernized husband asks her to give up her faith in the spiritual powers of the Swamy. She clearly tells him, I have beliefs that you cannot share. because faith and reason don't go together and without faith, I shall not be healed. Do you understand that? (87)

She ridicules him for his ignorance of the efficacy of faith and prayer: "Yes, you can call it healing by faith, or healing by the grace of God if you understand what that means. But I do not expect you to understand - you with your Western notions, your superior talk of ignorance and superstition. When all it means is that you don't know what lies beyond reason and you prefer not to find out." (P. 87)

Thus Sarojini asserts herself by expressing her personal views on faith – healing, which gives her a kind of identity and distinct personality. She strongly believes in spiritual faith and sticks to it and does not even hesitate in defying her husband. The deaths of her mother and brother in the hospital have strengthened her faith in God. In his poem, *Morte De Arthur*, the great Victorian poet Tennyson also expresses his faith in the efficacy of faith and prayer when he says, 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of'. The strong character of Sarojini with firm faith in spiritualism saves many a time her husband, with his so-called modern, progressive and scientific outlook, from moral degradation when he is reminded of her loyalty and fidelity. Thus being a perfect housewife and embodying the ideal and traditional feminine virtues, Sarojini becomes an integral part of Dandekar's life and a pivot of the family. The author shows that Dandekar with his scientific views is filled with doubt and skepticism, while Sarojini with her spiritual faith is firm and stable in her principles and thus she emerges a stronger person than her husband. The author belongs to the westernized upper-middle-class society of India. This impact of western upbringing is discernible in *Mira* and *Roshan* in *Some Inner Fury* and in *Anasuya* in *Possession*. These female figures may be identified with the author to a great extent. *Anasuya*, the narrator in 'Possession' is a typical Indian girl loving and self-sacrificing and possesses all the feminine virtues. Still, like her creator, she is a kind of liberated women of modern India and like her again, she writes novels and often moves between India and England for the publication of her novels.

In fact, Kamala Markandaya has presented a variety of female figures in 'Possession'. A young divorcee Caroline Bell constitutes the central figure of the novel. The search for sensuous pleasures brings her to India where she comes across a young fourteen-year-old rustic poor boy Valmiki, a talented painter who requires patronage and economic help. She escorts him to London where his talents are flourished. She exploits him physically and provides him with all comforts and luxury. Suddenly, Val is tortured from within and feels that his talents are being wasted. However, unable to tolerate his intimate relation with Ellie, his housekeeper, Caroline brings about a separation between them very cleverly. It is Anasuya, the enlightened and liberated Indian woman who saves him from the crisis by arranging his return journey to India where he is deeply rooted. He returns to his old ambiance and to Swamy, his mentor. He decides never to return to Caroline who had acquired and possessed his soul. Srivastava, becomes "an active victimizer of an adolescent male". (Srivastav: 126). In her effort to imprison the soul of Val, she is herself imprisoned in her own ego.

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. He contrasts the little he can offer his wife, with the luxury of the houses he visits in the course of his work." (Joseph:59)

She develops a great feeling of love and compassion for the poor Indian workers and takes great interest in Indian values and customs, culture and tradition. More specifically, she is fascinated by an Indian tribesman named Bashiam for his honesty and integrity, sincerity and devotion to work. To her, human beings are superior to inanimate machines and to inhuman Clinton and other English officials.

However, another female character Millie, the wife of Rawlings, a British officer, arrogantly remarks: She perceives the vastness and depth in the soulful East and in the tradition-sustaining tribal people. To her, they are not 'black apes' but alive and feeling men and women. What is for me, is for them, there's no other kind of yardstick that's worth anything" (49).

In fact, Helen, the English lady belongs, by heart, more to the mysterious and humane East than to the West and therefore she does not keep away from the Indians. She is overwhelmed by their overflowing warmth, courtesy, and hospitality. However, she is infuriated by their docility in leaving their land without protest. She asks Bashiam. "Without protest, just got up and walked away, like animals". (48)

She wants to sow the seeds of revolt in the hearts of Indians against the inhumanity of the Britishers because she only thinks of them as human beings. Helen seems to be the mouthpiece of the author in voicing her views against the injustice of the English people. She takes so much side of Indians who are filled with human feelings that she feels perhaps she

was born in India in her previous life. Once later in the novel, during the shattering noise of blasting, the English sit comfortably in their solid houses and the tribals suffer in their flimsy huts. Clinton callously remarks that they will get used to it'. But like her creator, Helen does not believe that one gets used to suffering. Out of despair, she cries out to her husband.

"Can't you care? Don't human beings matter anything to you? Do they have to be a special kind of flesh before they do? (105) In fact, humanity at the very core of her heart distinguishes Helen from other self-conceited Britishers who embody the modern civilization and progressive outlook. She shares with her creator the bitterness of insulted human dignity of the native inhabitants. She bitterly criticizes modern European civilization in her outburst before Bashiam: Our world..... the one in which I live. Things are battened down in it. Under concrete and mortar, all sorts of things. The land, our instincts. The people who work in our factories, they've forgotten what fresh air is like. Our animals - we could learn from them, but we're Christians you know, an arrogant people, so we deprive them of their rights ... (138)

Helen drifts away from her husband farther and farther each day because he sees himself only as a 'builder'. For him, concrete and steel are more important than human beings. Helen is obviously the mouthpiece of the author and gives free expression to her indignation at the insensitivity and the inhumanity of the British people who think themselves superior to other races in the world, but who, in fact, are subhuman. It seems that in her views, Helen belongs more to India than to the west. In fact, the author depicts Helen as a white woman in quest of harmony in an alien culture which suits her temperament. A. V. Krishna Rao truly opines, "Helen represents the new generation of young men and women of the west for whom India is not a contemptible colony of Macaulay's and Mirtos and Montagues but a cultural commonwealth of Huxleys and forsters and Haldane." (Rao : 84: 17)

In her next novel *The Nowhere Man* (1972) Kamala Markandaya delineates the problem of identity of elderly Indian immigrants. 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's 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, apologizes to Srinivas,

You don't want to pay any attention to FredHe 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 a woman is shown in a better light than their counterparts. The novelist makes us hear the distinct voice of a woman for the cause of mankind.

In her eighth novel 'Two Virgins, (1977) Kamala Markandaya portrays the encroachment by the modern Western values on the traditional beliefs and old established relationships within the family and the village. Markandaya has presented the story of two virgins or girls, Lalitha and Saroja, in this novel. The need for individual freedom is the central concern of this novel. The female characters so deeply rooted in the Indian culture, struggle to be free and pure human beings.

Mr. Gupta who allures her enjoys with her and ultimately leaves her when she is pregnant. She had gone to the city in search of her identity, a name and fame by becoming a film star. Her quest proves hollow. She loses completely whatever she had in her village. She had some identity, a home, a name and fame for her beauty which was appreciated by all as long as she belonged to the village. However, to her utter disgust and shock, all that is lost now, devoured by city monsters or devils in the disguise. Out of frustration she even tries to commit suicide but is prevented from doing so by her younger sister Saroja. She is so much shocked that she leaves her house and village which fail to restore her lost name and identity. In fact, she has nowhere to go now. The author seems to suggest in the novel that a woman can experience safety and security in her home where she is deeply rooted. Once she becomes a victim to the lust of a male like Mr. Gupta, she is uprooted from her home and village and becomes a nowhere woman, losing her identity A.K. Bhatnagar aptly observes:

Lalitha's life is a living example of the tragedy of the modern woman particularly in India (Bhatnagar: 89) The modern western values of urban life destroy Lalitha's self and annihilate her personality completely. In this novel, Markandaya has presented the existential struggle of a girl who refuses to flow along the wave and denies to surrender herself. However, her effort to find a new self and identity, she gets completely lost. She undergoes much pain and agony and displays a kind of insecurity on account of her traumatic experience and due to the collapse of one value system and the dearth of any sustaining values.

However, all these traumatic experiences teach a lesson to Saroja, the younger sister who returns to her village to be secure there and not to be led astray like her sister. Rukmani, Val, Ravi, and Srinivas are uprooted by natural and worldly forces which are beyond their control. But Lalitha is uprooted by her own weakness, her ambition to become a film star and thereby get a new name, fame, and identity. Her ambition displays the uprooting of human values and culture in Indian society.

Kamala Markandaya's ninth novel, *The Golden Honeycomb*, (1977) a saga of princely life in India, portrays the life of a Maharajah who is merely a puppet in the hands of the British. The novel is written in a political background and is fully charged with the feelings of patriotism and nationalism. However, Rabi the illegitimate son of Maharajah becomes a revolutionary since his education is supervised by his mother Mohini and by his grandmother who instills in him the patriotic feelings. Under their influence from head to toe, Rabi can't tolerate his father bowing to the English Viceroy. In this novel also, as in some earlier novels, Kamala Markandaya has glorified the life of a woman Mohini who is presented in a light better than that of other female figures in the novel. Mohini is very clever and wise, full of love and romance and has all the feminine charms and qualities of Shakespeare's Cleopatra. A paramour of the Maharajah she exercises a greater control over him and her son Rabi. She is a kind of liberated woman who is not confined to the four walls of Maharajah's palace. Unbound by the familial or homely ties, she enjoys complete freedom of movement, and though living in colonial days, she appears to be a liberated woman of modern India.

As Dr. Kenny, the missionary in *Nectar in a Sieve* establishes a hospital where the poor Indians may get the treatment for their ailments, Mrs. Bridie in *The Pleasure City* is running a school for educating the fisherman's children. She is a kind of female missionary ever extending her helping hand to the people of the fishing colony and always sharing their joys and sorrows. Like some great persons, this English lady is a person of simple living and high thinking. Her noble and sublime thoughts associate her not to a particular community, but to the entire humanity. Her character reminds us of Helen in *The Coffin Dams* for her respect for human beings. She lives and dies for the sake of mankind. Kamala Markandaya has enhanced the dignity of human life by creating such elevated female figures in her fiction.

By the study of Kamala Markandaya's fiction, we can sum up that the feminine voice 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)

By exercising their own free will, exhibiting their own self, they get fulfillment and recognition in life.

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 a solid foundation to the edifice of the 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.

She is really the glory of India and pride of the world. By creating such female figures in her fiction, who leave an indelible imprint on our hearts, Kamala Markandaya has immortalized herself in English literature.

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