

KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S SKILL IN DEPICTING INDIAN WOMAN AS A MULTI-FACETED PERSONALITY PLAYING SEVERAL ROLES : AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the writing skill of Kamala Markandaya's who depicting Indian woman as a multi-faceted personality and projecting woman-centred approach and experiences of women suffering, which has been a central theme in her novels. Markandaya's novels explore the close ties between members of the family and emotional support, which represents perennial qualities of woman. Markandaya's theme emerges and explicit the societal sufferings like poverty, women suffering, emotional isolation and psychological predicaments.

Key words : *Self-sacrificing, Docile, Struggle, Individuality, Isolation.*

INTRODUCTION

A major development in Indian fiction has been the growth of a feminist or woman-centred approach, an approach which seeks to project and interpret experience from the viewpoint of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. Simon de Beauvoir observes:

*"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" (The Second Sex)*

Feminism assumes that women experience the world differently from men and they write out their different perspectives. "There seems" according to Patricia Mayer Spacks, "to be

R. SANTHINI DEVIKA

1P a g e

something that we might call a woman's point of view ... an outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the centuries" (PP 4-5). Having appeared on the Indian literary scene in recent years, feminism has grown slowly and steadily, some of its features having been anticipated by earlier writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali and Jainendra Kumar in Hindi. Likewise, Saratchandra Chatterji created perhaps the most memorable portraits of women in Indian literature; he was something of a feminist by conviction, as were some of his heroines such as Kamal and Kiranmoyee. In Urdu, Ismat Chughtai had almost scandalised many by her daring unconventional portrayal of the problems of woman, especially Muslim woman. In Marathi, Vasumathi Dharkar published a number of stories from 1930's to 1950's in which she created "strong women characters ... and the ideas about women ... are far ahead of her time" (Dharker, 79). As R.K.Gupta puts it, "what may be called the joint foreshadowing and premonitions of feminism become visible in Indian fiction as early as in the 1920's and 1930's" (World Literature Today 299). However, only during the post-Independence period, particularly since 1960's the Indian novelists started questioning and rejecting the traditional interpretations of women's role and status in society.

One of the dominant ever-present theme in Indian fiction has been the oppression and exploitation women in an essentially patriarchal society. The portrayal of woman's suffering, which has been a central and eternal theme in Indian literature goes as far back as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. What has changed is that no longer is a woman's suffering glorified as a noble sacrifice and enveloped in an aura of romanticism, writers with weak realism now project women's suffering as evolving from factors like male egotism, selfishness and heartlessness. In brief, the Indian woman represents perennial qualities like love, charity, compassion, kindness, altruism and preference for emotional ties. They face all the difficulties with a stoic fortitude and stalwart resignation. The intricate web of family relationships, especially in a joint or extended family has perceptually interested Indian writers. Kamala Markandaya's novels explore the close ties between members of the family, the emotional support and sustenance they lend to one another in times of crisis, the close – mother relationships, the relation between sisters, brothers, fathers and sons.

The principal theme that emerges from Kamala Markandaya's is how poverty, want and starvation drive women to unimaginative ends. In modern environment, women suffer untold miseries to hold the family together as well as to provide for it. They have to suffer physical assaults, emotional isolation and a number of psychological predicaments. They become victims of fear, fear of all kinds. Besides, the woman have to cope with personal disasters mostly man-made and man-devised. The Hindu society being a patriarchal one, where no one questions a man's prerogatives to be catered to and attended on from dawn to dusk, woman is assigned to the role of a passive, docile, demure, self-sacrificing being. There are numerous common images usually associated with the woman; especially in an Indian culture. She is primarily seen as a mother and thus a protector, She is viewed as an inspirer

and cherisher, she is most frequently envisioned as a motivating primal force – a sakthi who protects the good and destroys the evil, at other times she is the chaste, suffering wife and then a charmer, or lurer. “In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in growth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent” (Buhler 195). Man want to “exploit woman as a possession or property which is basically an instinct to hold fast and blindly to tradition” (Sahgal 34).

The phenomenon of the emergence of woman was reflected in the literatures in Indian languages. The works of women writers like Kamala Markandaya have given a distinct dimension to the total picture of woman in family and society. The early Indo-Anglian novels show the operation of the forces of famine, orthodoxy and conservatism in the lives of these woman. Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya in their novels have brought out the sufferings women usually had to face in such circumstances. Kamala Markandaya explores the problem of the growth of a girl’s awareness, the change in her as she gets caught up in the swirling events around her and returns to the family fold and code of conduct but with her childhood innocence for ever gone. In India, the beginning of the awakening about the autonomy of the feminine gender can be traced to Gandhi’s influence. It was after their active participation in the freedom struggle that woman began to figure prominently in the field of literature too.

Kamala Markandaya, born in 1924 in South India, is regarded as one of the major Indian novelists on the commonwealth scene laying focus on feminist issues in literature. The modern critic A.V.Krishna Rao observes:

“Markandaya’s contribution to the Indo-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 inhibiting the shifting landscapes of an outer reality with human beings whose sensibility becomes a sensitive measures of the inner reality as it responds to the stimulus of change” (P 89)

As a novelist, Kamala Markandaya portrays the various roles from the rustic to the modern Indian woman. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar rightly comments:

“Women are natural story tellers. 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 Jabvala ... are outstanding" (P 438).*

The women in Kamala Markandaya's fictional world are on a quest for autonomy. The hindrances that stem from nature, from irregularities in the social system confine her to the time-honoured and taboo-ridden mores. The plight of the women is constantly bracketed with the "poorest of the poor" in the earlier novels like *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*. Her very 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's 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, modern technology invades the simple village folks in the form of the tannery and generates exploitation and misery. Intermittent collision with hunger and starvation gives rise to fear, "fear of the dark future, fear of the 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". In *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Markandaya repeats the theme of hunger, dramatic in the *Nectar in a Sieve*. But this time hunger rises its head in an urban perspective. The novel portrays the disastrous consequences of poverty and shows that while honest artisans clamour for a handful of rice, dishonest toughs and big capitalists thrive on corruption and evil. Representing the new proletariat of India, Ravi migrates the city of Madras to escape rural poverty and hunger but is confronted by hostile forces and economic hardships force him to suppress his inner urge for freedom. Ravi's wife Nalini epitomizes the astonishing power of patient endurance displayed by her literary predecessor Rukmani in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*.

As a multi-faceted personality, woman plays several roles exhibiting many facets of her character. All these roles reveal her traits. In the words of Bettelheim, as a woman she can be a loving daughter or she can be an affectionate sinter; she can be a responsible wife and a sacrificial mother as a woman's greatest fulfillment is motherhood; as much as women want to be good scientist or engineer they want first and foremost to be womanly companions of men and to be mothers" (P 15). This again reveals a deeply entrenched patriarchal image of women. It is how men expect and want women to be in the society. If a woman does not fit into the code of societal norms formulated by the male – she is looked upon as a deviant and either ostracized from the society or isolated as an individual. She is said to possess a dark side to her personality and is dismissed as an ugly, arrogant, quarrelsome and immortal woman who is not worth her name. In short, she can lead an evil life if she so desires. Thus, if a woman unresistingly conforms to the cultural and social moves of a male dominated

society, she is beautiful, virtuous and good, if not, then she is a pervert and possesses a deformed psyche.

When an Indian woman marries into a family, she literally marries into a community. Once married, she is expected to eschew all her personal ambitions and goals. She has to find her fulfillment in the family, not outside it. She is generally segregated from men and her social life is confined to the home, the temple and the company of woman relatives. The true woman, a Victorian adaptation of earlier models of the virtuous woman with strong puritan and moralistic overtones has four virtues, namely, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. In Indian families, girl babies are largely unwelcome, and Kamala Markandaya's fiction explores 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. Tara Ali Baig remarks.

"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" (P 24).

This picture dramatizes Ira in *Nectar in a Sieve* as a sweet, obedient and hard working 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 gets 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 finds an early burial" (43). Traditionally, the Indian woman accepted the framework of the family with a blind faith and rarely showed a rebellious trend. She continued 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 girl-wife and at first shows disappointment with the half-built hut and thus hurts her husband's pride. But soon she learns from the neighbouring women that Nathan, her husband, had built it with his own hands. She soon becomes proud of him and helps him to raise a kitchen garden.

The image of woman as wife occupies a central position in Indo-Anglian fiction. Dorothy Spencer recognises this phenomenon and comments:

"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, an influence on living man and woman" (PP 17-18).

Here, Kamala Markandaya amply illustrates the traditional image of the 'Pativrata' in her women characters who silently suffer in their sacrificial role though the cause of her suffering springs mainly from poverty and natural calamity. They are the daughters of the soil and have inherited age old traditions which they do not dare to question. Their courage lies in meeting the challenges of poverty or calamity with a cheerful fortitude and a stubborn determination. Such is Rukmani's position too. The reason for the woman's submissive role is as Dr. Radhakrishnan points out that "centuries of traditions have made the India women, the most patient women in the world, whose pride is suffering" (Kapur 3). In the novel, *A Handful of Rice*, one finds contrary traits of Nalini and Thangam as daughters. Their background is the same. They belong to middle-class family. Both are unwelcome at birth. Nalini is an obedient daughter and nurses Apu in his sickness with patience and devotion. Ravi does persuade her to go out during Apu's illness. She refuses bluntly. She tells him that it is her duty to look after her sick father. B.K.Das points out that as "a daughter, Nalini can be likened to Cordelia who looks after her sick father, when Lear gets mad" (P 177). On the other hand, her sister Thangam who is drawn as her foil is selfish. Anyone that thwarts her is lacerated by her sharp tongue. Lady Caroline in *Possession* presents a different picture of a daughter. True of her culture and tradition, she is a rich, well-placed woman descended from a long line of man, who had ruled in the days of British Raj. An air of superiority that possesses her marks her race. She is a contrast to the traditional Indian women. The divine portraits of Nalini and Thangam are like the fingers of a hand. They are interesting creations of the novelist.

To conclude, it may be said that Rukmani is a mother of circumstances. She faces the various adverse circumstances with courage, determination, and with inexhaustible endurance. Nalini, is a protective mother. What is outstanding about these characters is that they are in our midst and exhibit traits similar to our own traits. We admire, frown, glorify, rejoice, worry and suffer along with them.

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R. SANTHINI DEVIKA

6P a g e

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