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The Novels of Kamala Markandaya: Reassessing the Feminine Identity with special reference to *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Silence of Desire*

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Abstract

In Indian Society woman finds herself in intolerable situations, a female child is supposed to be a liability rather than an asset. From the moment she takes birth, the only concern of her parents is to find a suitable husband to her and handover the responsibilities to him. And once the marriage is performed, the parents are relieved of their so called social responsibility. Now the bride has to make all adjustments to turn out to be a successful wife. She has to work like a puppet in order to make her so-called relatives or family members satisfied. In case she fails to do so, it is just her fault or fate. This problem is very realistically depicted by numerous writers in their writings. Woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. Indian writers in English have also come out of their cocoons of 'non-attachment' and 'non-involvement' and have started acknowledging the status of the Indian woman

in male dominated society. They have beautifully pictured the predicament of an Indian woman and their dilemmas. Among the eminent personalities and writers who have been fraught with compassionate feeling towards the Indian woman, Kamala Markandaya comes foremost. In Indian English literature, Kamala Markandaya has initiated the lead of woman's transformation from 'possession' to 'person' through her writings. Woman occupies the central place in her novels. Most of her writings are the true depiction of a woman's plight.

Keywords

Feminine Identity; Kamala Markandaya; Nectar in a Sieve; A Silence of Desire.



“Nobody knows the trouble I've seen”, these words appropriately reflect the condition of Indian women. The Indian women have struggled hard for their survival in this land of contradictions. According to Indian doctrines, women must be respected and worshipped as goddess. It is a land that believes in, “Yetra naryastu poojyente ramanti tatra devta” i.e. God himself resides in the place where women are worshipped. Thus, woman is the Earth, Air, Ether, Sound; woman is the microcosm of mind, the articulation of space, the knowing; woman is fire, movement, clear and rapid as the mountain stream; and woman is that which seeks against that which is sought.

But reality is very different from the above quoted views or remarks. In Indian Society woman finds herself in intolerable situations, a female child is supposed to be a liability rather than an asset. From the moment she takes birth, the only concern of her parents is to find a suitable husband to her and handover the responsibilities to him. And once the marriage is performed, the parents are relieved of their so called social responsibility. Now the bride has to make all adjustments to turn out to be a successful wife. She has to work like a puppet in order to make her so-called relatives or family members satisfied. In case she fails to do so, it is just her fault or fate.

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Among the eminent personalities and writers who have been fraught with compassionate feeling towards the Indian woman, Kamala Markandaya comes foremost. In Indian English literature, Kamala Markandaya has initiated the lead of woman's transformation from 'possession' to 'person' through her writings. Woman occupies the central place in her novels. Most of her writings are the true depiction of a woman's plight.

Markandaya's female characters are quite adept to the tradition ridden society and move in the same periphery. But here lies the feminine consciousness of the novelist that, while making her women perform their traditional roles, she shows them reflecting their individuality and identity most exquisitely.

Markandaya does not generate a new world. She projects the world as it is, raising serious questions about the attitude of men, women and marriage. She explores the actual social and emotional bond in which the Indian women are fettered. Indian women in her novels define themselves by set of relationships and modes of conduct within a created society. Willy-nilly they have to face a tradition bound society and learn to live under the twin whips of heritage and modernity. Shantha Krishnaswamy points out, "Markandaya picks up enough courage to raise her head and ask a few awkward but pertinent questions, her responses would determine the shift towards new development strategies in the Indian social polity (Krishnaswamy 85)

In each of her novels Kamala Markandaya has portrayed strong women characters who are prepared to meet the challenges of life come what may.

While playing their traditional roles they reflect gradual change in their attitude in a tradition bound society. The present paper explicitly addresses itself to this change in woman's attitude in so far as her awareness of her own position in a male dominated society in particular and of her position in the scheme of things in general is concerned.

In her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Kamala Markandaya presents the impact of industrialization on a peasant couple, Rukmani and Nathan. This novel presents a woman's point of view/ state of mind at the time of transformation of the society. Markandaya invests Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel, with such a sharp sensitivity, which enables her to understand her own position, and that of her fellow sufferers of the same sex in this male-made social set up.

Right from the beginning of the novel Rukmani has to face the common social problems of women folk. As the daughter of a once rich headman of a village, Rukmani grows up as a witness to the decline in family fortune, influence, prestige and power. At the age of twelve when she is going to get married, she is therefore, without dowry, has to face the trauma of having to be married into a class of society lower than her own. Her initiation into a new life, after her marriage to a poor peasant is fraught with unbearable pain. When she gives birth to a female child Ira, in her ignorance at first, she gives vent to her disappointment by saying; "What woman wants a girl for her first-born (Markandaya 14)"? But she is not at all a woman easily defeated by circumstances and this dissatisfaction is not the core of her personality. Later when she reflects retrospectively on this event of her life, she gives evidence of her actual thinking on the subject. She admits, "I am ashamed that I ever had such thoughts (Markandaya)".

If society does not look favorably at a woman who is unable to provide a male-heir; it is even harsher on those who are barren. Rukmani can very well identify herself with them because in her early life she had experienced this

gloomy situation too. Things became worst when she came to know that she would not be able to conceive any more. She was bound to live her fate. However, Rukmani asserted herself and her individuality; she went to consult the western doctor Kenny for medical aid. Her visits to the doctor can be treated as an assertion of her freedom in the face of patriarchal norms.

Rukmani's relationship with Kenny is based on friendship, intimacy and understanding. It is after the treatment of Kenny that Rukmani is able to bear many more children and all males except Era. Though Kenny is a White man but to Rukmani he is only a friend with whom she can discuss her problems and share her thoughts in a manner she cannot do even with her husband. In fact, it does not even occur to her that there is anything to conceal. She introduces Kenny to her family in a quiet natural way without any feeling of embarrassment.

Rukmani's reactions to the world around her are motivated by recognition that life is for living, and when the going gets tough the human mind must draw strength from an unambiguous acceptance of the inescapable. Not to breakup or destroy, but to persist with and to rebuild is what life is about to set here. Rukmani is endowed with an awareness of the possibilities of life. For her living is important, life is important. And therefore the question of a woman's search for identity, meaning, alienation in marriage within and without, must be a part of the larger question of life and living.

Ira, the daughter of Rukmani, represents the modern progressive woman in the novel. She is deprived of a normal married life. She is turned out of her husband's house because she is barren. The misery of starvation makes her rebel against the conventional codes of morality out of an ironical sense of responsibility to her family. For her, "preservation of life is a matter of greater sanctity than the observance of false morality (Gupta 106)". In times of acute feminine she prostitutes in order to assuage the bangs of hunger especially of her brother Kutti. Her father Nathan rages with fury when he comes to know

about it and checks Ira from going nightly rounds. But she says, “Tonight, tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need. I will not hunger any more. (Markandaya 99)”.

Ira discards the obsolete customs of society and sticks to her way of life. In a strict tradition ridden society she shows her remarkable will power and mental strength to bring forth the albino child she conceives outside her wedlock. About Ira P. Geeta remarks, “She is simply being herself in choosing her own life. That is a move of the Indian woman towards liberation (Geeta 133)”.

Thus, both Rukmani and Ira face a number of turmoil and tribulations in their lives with remarkable strength. On one hand they attract us by their silent rebellion and on the other they impress us with their amazing capacity to compromise with the harsh realities.

Markandaya’s another novel *A Silence of Desire* (1960) explores the theme of the clash between traditionalism and modernism and between faith and reason represented by Sarojini and Dandekar, a married couple in the novel. Sarojini is another woman of Markandaya, who fights against male force or society at large while maintaining her role as wife and mother.

Dandekar, her husband belongs to an urban middle class family, whereas Sarojini is a traditional house wife. Dandekar is more inclined towards the Western culture rather than Eastern traditional way of life. His contact with the Europeans gives him a pragmatic outlook on life. But at heart he remains an Indian and prefers to sit on a mat and is convention bound. As a husband he is typically traditional and expects his wife to follow the role of an obedient wife. Any deviation from the duties of a wife in Sarojini makes Dandekar uneasy. Things are all right with him as long as the wife is there in the house waiting for him with a steaming hot meal. He is utterly blind to her feelings and problems. Dandekar forgets the fact that a woman is more than a

mother, wife or housekeeper. Over and above her children, her husband or the house she has a soul.

But the problem originates with Sarojini's frequent visits to the Swami. When Dandekar asks her, she tells him that she had developed an ulcer in her uterus and is going to the Swami for treatment as he is endowed with miraculous healing powers. Their domestic harmony is threatened by her secret visits to the Swami. Sarojini had always accepted the duties at home. She was there in times of trouble and in times of joy. That is why the jolt, when it becomes too much for Dandekar to bear. He does not even think it possible that Sarojini might exercise personal choice. So, when she assumes the freedom to choose, her husband becomes shocked.

No doubt, Sarojini is typically a tradition oriented woman but her quest for identity and autonomy cannot be separated from her desire. She exercises freedom in three ways. First when she takes the decision to go to the Swami, secondly when she hides this fact from her husband and thirdly when she finally consents to get scientific treatment but it is also on the instruction from the Swami. Sarojini's regular visit to the Swami inculcates in her a sense of freedom and independent thinking.

Sarojini feels relaxed in the company of the Swami. She is aware the pain is there but it does not touch her in the Swami's presence. Her neurotic need for love and self-importance are amply attended to by him. It produces a temporary euphoria which neutralizes the physical pain for the time being. Dandekar never tried to fulfill the needs and desires of his wife.

On the other hand Swami teaches her lesson on freedom from all bonds. He instructs her that freedom is to remain free through the total activity of the self. Rao and Menon maintain, "This freedom corresponds to the ideal of positive freedom of Fromm's concept where the total, integrated personality should function effectively through love and work as creation (Rao and Menon 55)". Swami elaborates the Hindu ideal of freedom. Though he leaves suddenly,

Sarojini remembers his words and says: “If the Swami chooses to go it was his decision (Markandaya 217)”. One is free to make one’s decision and one cannot influence another’s.

Thus, like Rukmani, Sarojini is also anchored firmly in the Indian way of life, suffering patiently and silently. Though Sarojini does not seem as active as Rukmani yet she cannot be dubbed as being totally submissive like Nalini in *A Handful of Rice* or painfully sensitive like Premala in *Some Inner Fury*

Hence, Markandaya’s fictional canvas portrays women from varied age and social background. They are victims of age old conventions and attitudes in male dominated society, yet neither the struggle for survival nor the social inequalities can defeat them completely.

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