

## Rural Feminine Sensibility in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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### Abstract

The paper scrutinizes rural feminine sensibility in the adage of Kamala Markandaya. She can be called a feminist scripter on the basis of her feminine perspective. She has depicted the woman from rural area who is struggling to find out her identity in the male dominated world. She portrays a realistic canvas of contemporary women through her characters i.e. - Rukmani, Nalini, Ira, Mira, Roshan, Lalitha, Mohini, Usha, Valli etc. Her heroines are in constant search for connotation and value of life. They move from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation. Kamala Markandaya has attempted a reassessment of what a woman in the rural Indian set up aspires to be post-Independence. There is definitely a prelude of fresh awakening as the seeds of women recognition shown in her novels. The present paper throws light on the awakened rural feminine sensibility in contemporary India in her novels.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Sensibility, Rural, Protagonist, Patriarchal, Self-Identity, Optimism

Feminism has been all along a constant talk with the litterateurs over the last sixty years or so. The strain has perceptibly or imperceptibly crept into the works of most of the writers of latter half of the twentieth century. Kamala Markandaya has not been an exception. Sensibility among the women of India as well as the women characters of Indian writers in English has cut across all directions, north as well as south, west as well as east. That is why we have become accustomed to talking about Indian urban and rural feminine sensibility. The present paper relates to Kamala Markandaya's novels, especially probing her attitude to rural Indian females. Her fiction reverberates with the echoes of feminine sensibility. Kamala Markandaya has come to be regarded as an undisputed spokeswoman or champion of feminism. She examines the status quo of her women and the way they

dare question this status quo and assert their individuality, say in quite unobtrusive ways. Sometimes they become obtrusive, but then it is the call of the context.

Coming to brasstacks, we find different traits in her female creations. Kamala Markandaya women characters protest in spite of all docility and submissiveness. Though most of her women are victims of social and economic pressures and disparities, they raise above all these and cross the barriers of discrimination only for the larger concepts of love and concord.

The purpose of our paper naturally is confined to treating feminine sensibility of Indian women in the rural side. Kamala Markandaya had an opportunity to soak herself in the culture of rural India before she was wedded to one Mr. Taylor of Britain and went to live there. Nectar in a Sieve was

her first novel which popularly is compared to Pearl S Buck's *The Good Earth*.

We find Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* as belonging to this class of rebellious woman. She like other rural women is a suppressed and muzzled woman. Commercialization thwarts her status and future. She suffers from the tyranny of many kinds forcing her to a quest for freedom. The present paper explores how Rukmani, woman protagonist in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* show her endurance in the rapidly changing face of nation and its urbanization. Rukmani attempts to retrieve and recuperate the elements of rural life presents an existential struggle of a woman who denies to flow along the current and refuses to submit her individual self. In fact Kamala Markandaya's heroines belong to both the worlds, to the rural as well as the urban one.

Rukmani is the protagonist in the novel. She receives shock after shock, for example, her husband Nathan's infidelity, her daughter entering into prostitution to save the family, the health of the child Kuti, the ejection from the house. Rukmani, however doesn't easily accept defeat. Nathan and Rukmani leave the village for the town to join their son but unfortunately find that he has disappeared leaving his wife behind. After that they become stone-breakers. After saving a little money they think of returning home but before doing so Nathan dies.

Kamala Markandaya's acquaintance with Indian life is as authentic as her understanding of the British milieu. Her Indian women are thrown into the whirlpool of a world along with the men and are burdened with a great many choices and

responsibilities. Markandaya's women characters are undeniably the forerunners of the doomed female of modern India. The woman fights alone silent protracted battle for her right to love and happiness as Rukmani does in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Rukmani's has been a story where her husband Nathan is only a sub-ordinate character. Do what she may; Rukmani is destined to be defeated. Hers is a struggle against the merciless whims of nature- for instance, the creeping of the tannery into the village. Hers is a struggle with the incurable poverty of the family. It is implied in the rules of the game that she be the loser. But what distinguishes her is the invincible optimism and the inflexibility of her purposes in the pursuit of the needs of the life in the face the worst odds. This is the moral victory of Rukmani. Markandaya proves that the plight of the women in rural India has a meaningful role in the changing scenario of Indian society.

Mira is the central character in *Some Inner Fury* though born in an orthodox family; she falls in love with the Governor's military aide, Richard Marlow. But as fate would have it she has to lose her lover in the Indian freedom struggle. Mira and Kit's wife Premala both are archetypal image of doomed Indian womanhood. Let us remember that it is not Hardy's element of chance that has played a part in the doom of Indian womanhood. Mira spurns her mother's belief that it is not right for a young woman to go among young man. She overrides all social taboos and inhibitions. She goes with her lover on a long pre-marital honeymoon in utter disregard of decorum and propriety.

Sarojini and Rajan represent the role of conflicting polarities of tradition and modernity, society and the individual in *Silence of Desire*. Sarojini displays a trace of feminism when against tradition and public opinion. She visits a Swamy in her best clothes but she is guilty of neglecting her home which she doesn't care about.

*A Handful of Rice* displays Kamala Markandaya's theory that Nalini the heroine is a sort that can redeem even an errant husband like Ravi. This attitude of Nalini towards Ravi shows the former's tolerance that divorce is not the real solution to resolve family disloyalty. Ravi had become the head of the family but could not manage it properly. Damodar his old friend succeeded in luring him to a life of dishonesty. So Ravi is torn between two values. Nalini is noble, strong-willed and judicious. She is a source of strength to Ravi, especially in the latter's crumbling state. When natural disasters occur, she seems to have a sweep, depth and conviction. Despite going to her sister Thangam, she easily compromises and returns home when Ravi comes to take her. The author seems to reconnect compromise in all her novels. The character of Nalini is beautifully drawn. *A Handful of Rice*, according to John Masters is "an overwhelmingly real book". Nalini emerges as the protagonist of the novel because she surmounts everything that is aimed at weakening her integrity. She knows people of their kind cannot hope to be rich.

"You've been corrupted," she said, "You go into all these big houses, see all these things, it gives you impossible ideas."

"They're not impossible ideas."

"They are. How can people like us ever be like them?"

"They're not made of different clay, are they? There is nothing lays down they should always have the best and trample over us and do us down, and we should always come off worst?"

"They're different class, that's all."

She said with a catch in her voice. Thus, *A Handful of Rice* portrays through her women characters the socio-cultural economic clash quite vividly. Kamala Markandaya emphasizes the fact that a woman's tolerance for things can go to any length, including her husband's philandering and trespassing into his incestuous relationship.

*The Nowhere Man* is the story of the cultural ties of the East which cannot be sundered easily by the expatriate Srinivas and his wife Vasantha. Vasantha always identifies herself with Indian culture and way of life; despite her long residence in London she could not separate herself from her deep-rooted native traditions and culture. Her wish that Ganges water should be sprinkled over her ashes reflects her attachment for the Indian milieu. The tragedy of racial hatred and senseless violence is much more impressive and absorbing here than in *Some Inner Fury*. The main stay of the novel is a contrast between the Indians who were instinctive, traditional and emotional and the English who are rational and materialistic.

Kamala's fiction serves as an authentic mirror of the socio-cultural reality of the

time. In the present day Indian context, when the impact of western feminism is being felt strongly, the response to feminist discourse has been varied, literature produced of late by Indian women novelists has been trying to probe the problem of self-definition faced by women in the traditional, patriarchal society, and in doing so, they have created the new woman who does not negate her womanhood by imitating or rejecting the male but it endeavoring to resolve the issue by reclaiming and redefining the positive aspects of womanhood. Feminism, which gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, tried to raise women's consciousness against their victimization. It can be considered a reaction of woman to life, their status at home and in society that has shaped and defined the lives of men and women all over the world. Simon De Beauvoir's main argument in *The Second Sex* is that women have never shared the world equally with men for they are dependent on men, which is not a natural or biological characteristic but forced upon them by social traditions through their conditioning. The feminine traits like empathy, care, nurturing, tolerance, sensitivity to the needs of the others are not only considered inferior to the masculine traits like autonomy, individuation, success, power, careerism but are also devalued. Kamala's novels reflect the awakened feminine sensibility in contemporary India. In her novels, she traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation. She proves that the plight of the woman in rural India has a meaningful role in the changing scenario of

Indian society. She portrays the woman who struggles against those forces which are beyond her control as Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*. But it does not mean they rebel. In *A Handful of Rice*, Nalini is shown as an ideal sufferer and nurturer. The tolerance of these women is born out of their faith. Their strength lies eventually in their innate capacity for sacrifice. Love and compassion are inherent qualities in them and are not blunted by the passage of time or social oppression. Even in novels like *A Handful of Rice*, where male characters are the protagonists, the women are shown calm and soothing as if to counterbalance the ambitious nature of male characters. She has shown her awareness of female sensibility through her characterization.

Kamala Markandaya has presented the great tradition of women novelists established by Jane Austen. She has broken the monopoly of Big three- Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K Narayan and secured a permanent place in Indian fiction. By the study of Kamala Markandaya's fiction we can sum up that the feminine sensibility is reflected 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. 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. Kamala Markandaya has shown in her novels that women are not lesser human beings; rather they are sometimes more dignified than men because of their greater human virtues and qualities.

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