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## **Kamala Markandaya and her portrayal of submissive feminism: A review**

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### **Abstract**

The Indo-English novels, generally speaking, and, more so, in respect of the female characters therein, have moved steadily from the social to the political, and then on to the psychological-cultural levels in a manner that has evoked international acclaim. Kamala Markandaya, one of the notable female writers in India, has created some of the exemplary characters in her novels. In the case of female characters belonging to her novels, we have to keep this in mind that they have to be considered, perhaps, strictly in the context of socio-cultural or sociological frame of reference. Her characters belong to towns and cities, they are both educated and uneducated, conventional and unconventional figures, and while a majority of them are natives, some of them are outsiders too. As we find, while some of her female characters are individuals, such others are typical in nature. The novelist may be, as she is generally called, an insider-outsider but she considers the socio-economic and cultural problems of India through the sufferings of her female characters. It is in the background of such problems as poverty, unemployment, exploitation of human misery, ignorance and superstitions and the way that her female characters face all these challenges that this paper has undertaken a study of these characters in her novels. In fact, she presents them to us in such a manner as to compel our close attention towards them. And it is in this very light that we have to consider the topic in question.

**Keywords:** Poverty, society, rural, spiritual, female, profession, want, hunger, sorrow, superstitions

### **Introduction**

The Indo-English novels, written from 1950 onwards, have, as we find, acquired much wider and quite significant dimensions. Besides tackling severe social, political, economic and cultural problems of the country, they do also consider in depth such vital issues as the East-West encounter, man's alienation from his environs and the possible, if desirable, integration of conflicting values in all their ramifications. And, what is more, they deal with the Indian woman's anxious search for freedom, self-realization and self-fulfilment in a situation that is neither flattering nor propitious. Kamala Markandaya (Kamala Purnaiah Taylor), says M.K.Naik, is an 'insider-outsider' (Naik M.K., A History of Indian English Literature, Sahitya Akademi, 1982, p.-236) in the sense that she is an expatriate, has married a Britisher, and has been living in England for a considerable period of time. And comparing her with R.P.Jhabvala, Prof. Naik observes: 'Markandaya's fiction evinces a much broader range and offers a greater variety of setting, character and effect, though her quintessential themes are equally few as-the East-West encounter and Women in different life-roles'(Naik M.K., A History of Indian English Literature, Sahitya Akademi, 1982, p.-236). It is really interesting to see how an educated, expatriate Indian woman feels disposed towards the female characters in her novels. She has written quite a few novels, her first published novel Nectar in a Sieve (1954) is followed by such of her other novels as Some Inner Fury (1957), A Silence of Desire (1961), Possession (1963), A Handful of Rice (1966), The Coffee Dams (1969), The Nowhere Man (1973), Two Virgins (1974), The Golden Honeycomb (1977) and Pleasure City (1982). And the important female characters in these novels who deserve being considered at length are Rukmani, Mira and Premala, Sarojini, Caroline Bell, Nalini, Helen, Vasantha and few more. It is said about kamala Markandaya that her characters are usually stereotypes and only infrequently individuals, that some of her characters are completely rootless and that what informs her novels in the spirit of compromise between the East and the West. We have to try to see if these observations do really apply to some of Markandaya's female characters.

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## Exposition

### Nectar in a sieve

'Based on the traditional pattern of life in countless villages all over India', says M. P. Joseph, Nectar in a Sieve is 'a passionate cry of protest against social injustice, a portrayal of patience in the face of suffering, of labor even when there is no hope' (Joseph M.P., Kamala Markandaya, New Delhi, 1980, p.14). The principal female character in this novel is Rukmani who does also happen to be the narrator of the story in this book. Rukmani's life, as we find it, is a veritable spectacle of trouble after trouble, of crisis after crisis. She and her husband have to face eviction from the land they have been tilling for thirty long years so that it could be utilized for the tannery. As a result, her life is severely hit by poverty and want. Not only this, she has to endure her husband's illicit relationship with Kunthi and has to suffer the agony of the delayed birth of son. Later, when she and her husband, Nathan, go to the city in search of their son who has gone there, they lose whatever meagre possessions they have, and are forced to settle down as stone breakers. What is really worse that before she returns to her village, her husband dies of sickness and starvation in the city and she has to countenance the death of her son too. Rukmani bears all these hardships and calamities with the resignation of a stoic.

Nectar in a Sieve depicts the tussle that has been going on in India between social and religious values on the one hand and the establishment of the industry and materialism on the other. Rukmani finds herself caught up in this very vortex. She refuses to go by her husband's advice, and behaves almost as a rebel, when he asks her to accept the presence of a tannery in her village. Though Rukmani has been very meek and gentle and subservient to her husband, and though she has suffered the torment of starvation with equanimity, she voices both the protest and despair of the dispossessed families in respect of their eviction. She is very unhappy when her daughter, Ira or Irawaddy, is sent back to her parents on the charge of her being a barron woman, but she is sorely hurt and her sense of moral propriety is violently shaken, when compromising her self-dignity and the prestige of the family. Ira takes to prostitution in the face of yawning hunger. And Yet, when Ira gives birth to an albino child, she accepts everything as a quirk of destiny.

Rukmani is a village woman steeped in tradition. When the British doctor, Kennington, suggests to her to face the ordeals of life with the fire of rebellion inside her, she pleads for patience and fortitude and chooses to wait. Rukmani's children may accuse her of accepting everything so sheepishly, so passively, and she may not, as she does not, understand the meaning of strikes and lock-outs, but then, unobtrusively, she very well understands the significance of man's spiritual salvation.

Written in the autobiographical mode, and certainly not as compact or tightly-structured as *Some Inner Fury*, it is Rukmani's character that shines through the whole of the novel. And though at the end of the novel she is only in her forties, yet, like a typical Indian village woman, she calls herself an old woman. As contrasted with Dr. Kenny who is interested only in the particular and the immediate, Rukmani shows her concern for the universal and the eternal. She is confused but still finds the necessary strength to carry on. Her suffering spiritualizes her and leads her to greater wisdom. All that we can say about her is that, whether as wife or as mother, the way her character has been delineated is so very realistic.

### Some inner fury

Kamala Markandaya's second novel, *Some Inner Fury*, deals with the theme of East-West encounter, with the political and cultural aspects of this encounter in particular. In this novel, the novelist projects the image of Mira and Premala in this very context. Premala is a girl who has been brought up in a traditional Hindu family. She plays on the Veena remarkably well, she has her own taste for Indian miniature paintings, but besides being cultivated in and sensitive to the delicacies of fine arts, she is so beautiful and tender-faced. Her marriage with Kitsamy, an I.C.S. officer, a person devoted to the Western life-style, turns out to be a disaster, and brings out the dangers inherent in cultural disparity. As and when Kit moves into a new house after marriage, he furnishes it exclusively on the British pattern. And it is quite understandable that Premala feels tortured in her husband's, supposedly her own, house. Mira is sorely touched whenever she looks at her sister-in-law. She takes to the village reconstruction work and starts teaching at a school, besides adopting a child, away from the liquor-soaked and smoke-laden atmosphere of her husband's drawing-room. It is absolutely no surprise that Kit's adopted brother, Govind, loves Premala and that she too reciprocates his gestures. Premala was not in the condition to accept his love and so, Govind moves away from Premala. However, the irony of the whole situation consists in the fact that Premala is trapped inside the building and dies of suffocation there when Govind and his people, in the course of their violent campaigns against the British rule, set fire in the school. We have nothing but pity and sympathy for Premala, for here is a character who has had to undergo unmitigated sufferings for no fault of her own.

Mirabai is an educated member of a well to do family. Though she gets drawn to and falls in love with her brother, Kit's British friend, Richard Marlowe, it is on the advice of Roshan Merchant that she takes up the job of a journalist. In the natural course of events Mira and Richard should have got married and settled in life as wife and husband, however, their liaison is cut short quite abruptly by the political turmoil that erupts in India in the wake of the Quit India Movement of 1942 for the sake of freedom from alien rule. In spite of themselves, they are pushed into their own national grooves. Moreover, Mira finds it difficult to believe on the basis of an Englishman, Hickey's testimony that her adopted brother, Govind, has been mainly responsible for burning down Premala's school, and as such for her death on account of suffocation. In this situation of tension and turmoil, the Indians and the Britishers find themselves utterly alienated from each other because of suspicion and jealousy, and naturally enough Mira parts company with Richard. She is indeed very, very suitable as the narrator of the story in this novel. Mira, observes Prof. Iyengar, 'is a creature of imagination and memory, and in her, naturalness and sophistication are in uneasy partnership' (Iyengar K.R.S., *Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi, 1984, p.439). Mira's lot is perhaps patently unenviable. She loses not only Richard because of political and racial compulsions, she does also lose her brother, Kit, who is killed by the violent mob, her adopted brother, Govind, who becomes a fugitive, and her sister-in-law, Premala, who dies of suffocation. That is why, at the end of the novel we find her crying out in despair. Mira's character, unlike Rukmani's, does attain the dignity of a tragic figure, and Markandaya does succeed in making quite an impressive character out of her.

### **A silence of desire**

In *A Silence of Desire*, a novel cast in the mould of third-person narrative and dealing with a middle-class Indian family, it is the problem of faith versus rationalism that is being tackled through the character of Sarojini and of her husband, Dandekar. 'Perhaps her (Markandaya's) most ambitious novel', comments Prof. Iyengar, 'A Silence of Desire dares the invisible and the writing is competent enough to forge here and there coils of intricate suggestion that almost seem to bridge the chasm between matter and spirit, doubt and faith' (Iyengar K.R.S., *Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 442-443). She suffers from a tumour, but instead of undergoing modern medical treatment, as her husband desires, she seeks a cure or faith-cure from a Swamy. No doubt, this conflict between Sarojini and Dandekar has its own importance, however, what is really more important is the fact that Sarojini's behavior, her hush-hush approach to the problem, causes a lot of suspicions and complications.

Sarojini is an excellent house-wife and manages the home very efficiently. In her own turn, her life flows peacefully and placidly, and she looks after her household, her husband and her children with satisfaction in her heart, and obviously without any grievances or bitterness to consume her. But as and when a tumour is detected in her womb, and she is advised surgery, she moves away from her husband who insists on surgery, and starts going to a Swamy for spiritual solace and a faith-cure. And it is these secret goings-on that cause alarm to Dandekar. It is only natural that because of Sarojini's frequent visits to the Swamy, her household gets into disorder and her children are left uncared-for, but what is far worse is that her secret visits arouse suspicion in her husband's mind. And in a fit of rage he calls her a whore, irrespective of the fact that he himself is a prostitute-hunter. And finally though Sarojini does undergo surgery, chiefly at the instance of the Swamy himself as he is about to leave the place, and gets cured of her ailment, her faith in spiritual grace remains undiminished. She accepts her separation from the savior with a feeling of calm resignation.

It is true that in a silence of desire we see Sarojini mostly through Dandekar's eyes, but for that reason it would not be proper to look upon her as a non-entity or a nondescript woman. She is a normal woman but when her fidelity is challenged and her feelings are hurt, she ceases to be just a tame worshipper and expresses the courage of her conviction with passion and vehemence. She has proved the spiritual purity of a wife and her capacity to attain the eternity.

### **Possession**

Kamala Markandaya's fourth novel *Possession*, presents to us the story of Caroline Bell's victory and defeat, even if only temporary. And though in this book we encounter such female characters as Anasuya who is the narrator of the story and possibly the novelist herself, Ellie, a Jewish war-refugee whom Caroline has engaged as housekeeper, and Annabel, a girl with whom Valmiki has come to live for some time in a state of poverty and misery, it is Caroline who dominates the scene of action from the beginning to the end. The canvas of this novel is not limited to India alone, the scene shifts from India to England, and then to America, and again back to India. And as Prof. Iyengar puts it, while 'the deeper insights in the novel are about the secret informing and sustaining power of Art, the folly and futility

of the average human desire for "possession" is overtly underlined again and again' (Iyengar K.R.S., *Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi, 1984, p.444). Caroline Bell is a British lady, well-born, rich and divorced. Her character, we may say, has its own simplicities as well as complexities, and we may be able to make a comprehensive assessment of her character, if we examine it first, in relation to Valmiki or Val and his Guru, the Swamy, secondly, in relation to Ellie, Annabel and Anasuya, and lastly on the symbolic plane. It is indeed extraordinary that the moment Caroline discovers artistic genius in a rustic boy, Valmiki, she decides to turn him into a successful artist, to take complete possession of him, and to exploit him to her fullest advantage. And she succeeds in her diabolical design. Caroline buys Val for five thousand rupees, whisks him off first to Madras, and then to Switzerland, and gets back to England only when the boy is sixteen, so that he may not have to undergo formal schooling according to the law of the land. No doubt, Val achieves tremendous success as an artist, but his soul is twisted in the process. He desperately seeks release from Caroline's stranglehold, and manages to return to his village, to his country, to his Guru, the Swamy. And in the tussle between the Guru and Caroline, this time it is the Swamy who wins and Val does not return to the lady.

Despite all her negativity, Caroline is a sharply-drawn and highly-individualized character, while, in spite of all his goodness or supposed goodness, the Swamy is an unimpressive character, a charlatan, a globe-trotter, who enjoys material comfort. Caroline's craving for Valmiki is psychopathological. This determined and ruthless lady just cannot do without him, and as and when Ellie, the war-refugee, the nowhere woman, and Annabel, a young girl, seem to intervene in or disturb their relationship, she drives the former to suicide, and knocks the latter out of Val's love. Her relation with Anasuya belong to an altogether different level, they love and hate, admire and ridicule, each other by turns. They meet for the first time at Jumbo's party, and Caroline speaks to Anasuya without any formal introduction. Lady Caroline is an autocrat, and she is as authoritarian and demanding as the British Raj in India. She symbolizes British Imperialism, and she subjugates Val for her personal aggrandizement as much as Britain subjugated India, Valmiki is India, and Caroline tries to reduce him as much to a spiritual captive as Britain tried to reduce India to a spiritual slave country. No doubt, on all the planes, whether physical, spiritual or symbolical, Caroline has her own image, her own identity.

### **Conclusion**

In the Indo-English novels written between 1870 and 1920 we come across such female characters as undergo enormous miseries and tortures and humiliations in a predominantly conservative and male-dominated society, in those written between 1920 and 1950 we encounter a number of female characters who are tortured and insulted, but who are also, in their own ways, conscious of changing social, political and ethical attitudes and orientations. Quite a few female characters that figure in the Indo-English novels written after 1950, seek freedom, self-realization and self-fulfilment all by themselves. Kamala Markandaya has created a number of female characters in her novels and portrays them sometimes aggressive or sometimes submissive. As we find, while such of Kamala Markandaya's characters Premala and Mira from *Some*

Inner Fury, Caroline Bell from Possession are individuals, having their own opinions and stand in life, such other characters Rukmani from Nectar In A Sieve and Sarojini from A Silence of Desire are typical Indian female characters. Kamala Markandaya seems to be believing in a compromise between the East and the West, in racial fusion; however, she does not very much insist on her thesis. Finally, we can say that almost all of her female characters seek freedom, self-realization and self-fulfillment all by themselves and in their own ways.

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