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Feminine sensibilities in Kamala Markandaya's novels

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya, an outstanding women novelist, portrays an authentic position of women in the society. Her female protagonists reveal how economic and social distortions affect women more adversely. Her novels evolve universal concept of love, caring and concord and ensure the endurance and vitality of Indian womanhood. They are reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India. The novelist skillfully presents the pathetic condition of women because of the conservative and dominant patriarchal culture. Nalini of 'A Handful of Rice' and Rukmani of 'Nectar in a Sieve' suffer due to economic strains while 'Some Inner Fury' of Kamala Markandaya shows that only money can't ensure happiness. The novelist focuses on the shared humanity of man. She emphasizes that harmonious concern between human beings is essential to solve the social problems. Her characters overcome the inequalities, the invisible barriers against the fair sex in the existing social system. She protests against allotting rights according to wealth, power and sex rather than plain humanity. The orthodox concept of women as a patient sufferer is changing gradually to be perceived as having the same needs, ambition and humanism as men.

Keywords: Social distortions, endurance, sensibilities, pathetic condition, patriarchal culture, harmonious, humanity

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly one of the outstanding Indian women novelists. She is known for an authentic portrayal of Indian social milieu and the women's position in the Indian society. A study of her female protagonists reveals how the distortions in the economic and social order affect women more adversely than men. Her women emerge out of darkness, throwing off their legacy of humiliation, dependence and resignation and reaching out for an equitable share of man's worldly and spiritual goods. Her output includes remarkable novels like 'Nectar in a Sieve', 'Some Inner Fury', 'A Handful of Rice', 'The Nowhere Man' and 'A Pleasure City'. In her novels, Markandaya evolves towards a larger concept of universal love, caring and concord which by its very extension ensure the endurance and vitality of Indian womanhood.

A remarkable aspect of the modern Indian Renaissance has been the creative release of the feminine sensibility. Women in modern India have excitedly shared the dangerous roles in the struggle for Independence and have also voiced the national aspirations and the consciousness of cultural changes in the realm of literature. In the development of the Indian English novel, the feminine sensibility has assuredly achieved a certain degree. Kamala Markandaya's novels are reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India through her efforts of the projection of the image of a changing traditional society. Indian women have symbolized themselves through the ages as ideal mothers and a perpetual life force. These women are worshipped in different forms of goddesses in literature, history and society. Contrastingly, Manu, the famous codifier of Hindu laws, advocates (as Qtd. in the "Status of Women in India") that "In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. The women never be independent" (Lakshmi, 79). The dichotomy lies in the fact that women have been described as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power and respected as divine beings on the one hand while viewed as being essentially weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man in one way or the other. In the recent times, "women have thought more in terms of nationalism than men, and they have a great sense of service to their country" (Krishnaswamy, 5)

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Almost all the novels of Kamala Markandaya raise the constant issues of suffering, hurdles, exploitation, agonies, seduction, sacrifice of women etc. The condition of women has been so pathetic because of the conservative social order and the dominant patriarchal culture. 'Nectar in a Sieve', The first novel of the novelist, deals with the struggles and travails of Rukmani, a peasant woman. She wages a constant battle amidst the odds like famine, death, infidelity and prostitution propelled by bone-chilling poverty. The feminine instinct of Rukmani overpowers her and she thinks of her youngest brother as her own son. Even if, she was ever a quite religious girl, strays from the straight path just to feed her little brother Kuti. The haunting statistics about women reveal the bare truth that "women constitute half of the world population and one third of the official labour force, perform nearly two thirds of the hours worked out according to some estimates (based on UN, ILO Statistics), receive only one tenth of the world property." (Shimer, 258-59).

The life of Nalini in 'A Handful of Rice' is a living death. She is denied all freedom, human rights. For a brief moment, we get a glimpse of a fun loving girl and it vanishes with the courtship and marriage. While Rukmani and Nalini suffer due to acute economic strains, 'Some Inner Fury' of Kamala Markandaya shows that only money can't ensure happiness, the well being of women concerned. Here, Premala, Mira and Roshan are well brought and enjoy all comforts, yet they are equally victims of circumstances beyond control. Shanta Krishnaswamy says, "They prove Kamala Markandaya's theory that the women's suffering stem not because of her but because of inherent imbalance in the social order." (180). In 'A Silence of Desire', Sarojini and Dandekar, the wife and the husband are in clash on the grounds of faith and rational thinking. Sarojini has a growth in her womb and fears that she may be taken to hospital, so, she secretly goes to the Swamy. Dandekar suspects her of infidelity. Out of the frustration, he himself goes to whores but suspects her. But, when he comes to know the truth, he is shocked. Now, he realizes the importance of family harmony being maintained by the utmost care of a wife and a mother. Truly, "The woman fights a lone, silent, protracted battle for her right to love and happiness." (Lakshmi, 63). In 'The Nowhere Man', Vasantha & Srinivasa, the couple go to England to settle there. Vasantha shares the human commitment even on the alien soil, but does not change the essential Indianness of her way of living. After her death, Srinivasa feels orphaned. A woman by caring and nurturing people in need paves the way for the sisterhood of man. The vacuum created by the death makes Srinivasa feel to be a nowhere man. In 'Two Virgins' we learn a great deal about what the fabric of life means to a woman through the story of two grooming sisters Saroja and Lalitha. It is a tale of innocence and corruption. Saroja's adventure in life reveals one modern problem how the plight of sensitive human beings caught in a harsh dehumanizing society. She symbolizes a conflict between tradition and modernity. She has sympathy for her parents, her seduced sisters and is generous enough even for the seducer Gupta. One sympathizes with the difficult and trying situation of man, but a woman suffers more. She has hardly any escape route in a tightly organized, tradition-bound society. She can't hide herself anywhere. The women of 'The Golden Honeycomb' though devout religious, are agreeable and

charming in comparison to men whose constant view with regard to others is of hatred, distrust and suspicion.

These women characters teach us the need for nurturance and about universal sisterhood. What is focused is the shared humanity of man. The harmonious concern between human beings is essential to solve the social problems. Markandaya's women characters have the ability to care for people as human beings and also the rejection of the false and superficial values. The woman needs a vision of herself with power, enough to assert herself in life to motivate her and others around her towards the welfare of the human race. Though, it is difficult to translate this vision in practical life, Markandaya is successful in characterization of woman characters in overcoming the inequalities, the invisible barriers against the female sex in the existing social system; they also act as potent forces of social change by themselves. She protests against allotting rights according to wealth, power and sex rather than plain humanity. Her commitment to social issue makes her write for a higher moral coherence. Here is the truly enlightened mind that thinks of the vital issues that affect the welfare of mankind as a whole. Through her fiction, she gives fresh insight into the ambivalence of change in women and human nature. Her heroines assert themselves as their new culture and do not succumb to their elders.

"Women are natural story tellers even when they don't write or publish." (Iyengar, 435). They evolve towards a larger concept of universal love, caring and concord which by its very extension ensure the endurance and vitality of Indian womanhood. Whereas Markandaya's earlier novels depict the women submissive, silent and of fortitude, her later novels depict the theme of a more courageous, independent woman who try to change her prescribed life for the better. The earlier concept of the woman as a patient, long suffering wife or daughter is changing gradually to be perceived as having the same drives, ambition, needs, egoism and humanism as man.

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