

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOCIAL REALISM IN THE FICTION OF KAMALA  
MARKANDAYA AND NAYANTARA SAHGAL

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Article info

Article Received: 15/12/2022

Article Accepted: 24/01/2023

Published online: 27/01/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.1.40](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.1.40)

Abstract

Society is a group of people and every person more or less influences it and influenced by it. Kamala Markandaya, born in 1924 in a South Indian middle class Brahmin family of Mysore (presently Karnataka) and born in 1927 Nayantara Sahgal, a member of the first Indian Nehru-Gandhi Political family both are not an exception and they have depicted their respective societies realistically through their writings, particularly novels. Kamala Markandaya had seen low- and middle-class society very minutely and closely and writes about the issues of middle and poor class of society while Nayantara Sahgal belongs to high class society raises the issues of high-class society. Both feminists have expressed their own experiences of which they had witnessed. They are keen observers of social problems faced by the people particularly women in the contemporary society. They have portrayed post-colonial Indian society in its depth and complexities and predicament of people who are engaged in the struggle not only with their circumstances but also with their own life their failure and limitations. They show a deep insight into human nature and the same time they capture the epiphanies of life in their fiction. They view life with a fine and sharp sensibility, an acute sense of observation and a keen perception. In their works both have depicted different aspects of Indian society, culture and tradition. The present paper is an attempt to portray the contemporary society which is depicted by these two novelists in a realistic manner as per their own experiences. Being feminists, their main concerns are problems of women in family and male dominated society.

**Key words:** Indian society, Feminism, realism

Introduction

Indian society has been patriarchal from ancient times in which man dominates the family, society and the state. In male dominated Indian society, man takes almost all decisions of family.

Indian society has various levels but broadly it can be divided as under:

- low Class Society
- Middle Class society
- High Class Society

In above mentioned all parts of society a woman is considered second sex and more vulnerable. It is the major reason that a woman is harassed, exploited, her voice is ignored and goes unheard. It has attracted the attention of writers, social workers, activists, educated and bold feminists. They tried their best to bring forth their pains, and suffering through their writings, rallies and demonstrations and Indian Government has done much to improve the condition of women in Indian society by making many rules and laws. In present times there is equality in all fields. There is Equality before law and equal protection of law, and no discrimination is there in education and job opportunities but reality is miles away.

There is no doubt since independence Indian women novelists have made much progress in various fields and they have achieved much but much is yet to be done. Actually, they have acquired great position and significance not only not in post-colonial Indian literature but also in the world. They have got their education either from foreign or leading Indian educational institutions where English is used as a medium of communication. English is not a foreign language for the Indian writers who write in English language rather they use it effortlessly as their mother tongue and enjoy with many Indian words. A large majority of Indian-English writes uses English language as a medium of expression. It is to be noted that the number of educated women is comparatively less than men while it is different thing that they are more sensitive to their men and children and see things minutely and make balance between things very carefully. Salman Rushdie rightly observes:

One important dimension of female writing is that it is a means of holding a conversation with the world. These women writers ensuring that India or Indian voices (for they are too goods to fall into the trap of writing "nationalistically" will henceforth the confident, indispensable, participate in that literary conversation.

It is believed that literature is the mirror of the contemporary society and every writer gets his or her some contents of works what latest happens

in the contemporary society. The writer writes sometimes by poems and sometimes short stories or novels. Novel is regarded one of the most powerful and dominant literary form in post- colonial Indian literature and position and significance of women novelists is worth mentioning. They have skilfully and successfully captured the Indian ethos of post-independence India. At the same time, they show their deep insight into human nature, Indian culture and their understanding of day to-day problems. In recent years some Indian women novelists emerged and they have given their much contribution to the post -colonial literature particularly novel. They come from different regions and some are even of mixed region. They are settled in different parts of the world and have travelled many western countries. Their novels portray the complexity and different colours of post colonized India.

In post -colonial fiction these multi-talented women novelists have their own different styles but they share one common quality that in their hands English as a language becomes more refined and they use it effortlessly. They have much knowledge of Indian system, Indian culture Indian society and its basic problems. Unlike the male novelists who write about action, chivalry, affairs of state war, business espionage and sexual encounter the post-colonial women novelists write about exploitation of women by men, gender biasness, women's problems inside and outside home, inequality, injustice and beauty etc. In their works the female protagonist is the "SELF" and man is the "OTHER". They consider search for identity is the first and foremost condition of living. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes:

Women are natural story tellers they don't write or publish..... These writers too have their mark in Indian fiction.

Kamala Markandaya is among such writers who has made her all-possible efforts to highlights the reality of low and poor class Indian society. She has presented a true and realistic picture of contemporary low class Indian society. She has made her separate recognition through her novels and in almost all of her novels she has focused on women's issues and their predicament in the lower-

class society. In her novels she highlights the major issues like... cultural identity, social problems, poverty, hunger, exploitation of women by men, plight condition of children and the poor and their exploitation by the rich and industrialists. Her mostly novels highlight a cross section of Indian society within female characters are in quest for autonomy. She was greatly influenced by the contemporary progress in Indian society and she has depicted in a realistic manner. Actually, she is regarded one of the most realists of post- colonial Indian Writing in English. She is the pioneer of Indian diaspora and much influenced all Indian writers who write in English. K. Markandaya has given her contribution of novels as mentioned below and almost all these novels depict issues and problems Indian women in Indian society.

- *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954)
- *Some Inner Furry* (1955)
- *A Silence of Desire* (1960)
- *Possession* (1963)
- *A Handful of Rice* (1966)
- *Coffer Dam* (1969)
- *The Nowhere Man* (1972)
- *Two Virgins* (1973)
- *Golden Honeycomb* (1977)
- \**A Pleasure City* (1982)

Markandaya, in her novels, has not ignored the contemporary issues but her principal focus on the issues of women which they have to face in their day-to-day life. The irregularities in the social system and Indian culture confine women to time-honoured and taboo-ridden path. The economic prevails inherited in Indian society is further complicated which women accept as "KARMA". Her novels present conservative and traditional outlook of Indian women. Much of them manage to be independent in working while performing the traditional roles following the Indian culture. Almost of her characters are drawn from poor social background and the novelist has depicted brilliantly and in a realistic manner.

Markandaya was an eye witness of real condition of poor working Indian women and expressed realistically. Her masterpiece *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) depicts the illiterate and rural India poor people and farmers and middle-class people and their problems which they face in their day-to-day life due to modern technology. The novel is about the problem of child marriage in India. It presents the story of arranged marriage of a twelve years old girl Rukmani and a tenant farmer Natahan. No doubt the marriage is arranged but loving. The novel presents the rural peasant life on one hand but on the other hand, it presents a tale of indomitable human spirit that overcomes poverty and unending misfortune. There are issues of conflict between a traditional agricultural culture and a burgeoning Industrialist society and East-West conflict. It also touches several many important social issues, the importance of traditional cultural practices, reluctance of people to change due to moral values and impact of economic change. It brings out the pathetic condition of women and their sorrow and suffering. The novel was much popular among the readers and due to its popularity has been compared to Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. Uma Parameshwar writes:

*Nectar in a Sieve* is a very realistic book. After reading the book I was shocked to find it out that it was written over 45 years ago but it is so modern and forward that I assumed it has been written the year past or two. Its entire core is Rukmani (Ruku) a peasant Indian girl who marries at the age of twelve.

Markandaya, in her another novel *Some Inner Furry* (1956), seems to present a realistic picture of the contemporary society. Some readers claim it to be autobiographical novel. It presents the conflict of Mira, a modern woman who is divided between her ardent and genuine love for Richard, an English man and the compelling political forces of Indo-British turmoil. These forces put them apart and she faces harsh realities of life.

Markandaya's *Possession* (1963) is concerned with clash of will, the confusion or cross purpose and the unpleasing of passion. In the novel scene shifts from India to England, America and again back to

India. While the writer in her novel *The Nowhere Man* (1972) portrays the dilemma and clash between East and West and exploitation of the poor by the rich. Markandaya in this novel talks of the major issues and diaspora's realities like racial violence, educational degrees those are not given accreditation, the resistance of immigrants to the expectations of "host" culture, chasm of communication between generations, cultural values and needless baggage. The main Diasporas' issue is— it warns us and our children what think they are "Americans" and "Canadians". The sense of alienation, psychological, social, political and cultural crisis of Srinivas, a modern man who is depicted as a rootless with no sense of belonging:

No more he said to himself. I can't endure no more. I am quite worn out. So he drew himself and rested.

Some of her other Post-Colonial novels like--- *A Silence of Desire*, *A Handful of Rice*, *Two Virgins*, and *The Coffer Dams* deal with the quest for identity, spiritual realism, uncontrolled passion, rural and urban economics in a realistic manner. Markandaya can be called a champion of lower working-class women who are exploited and suffer silently without making any question and raising any voice and they are silent sufferers in a male dominated society. Sometimes they are harassed by their husbands and other times by the rich and influential people.

Natantatara Sahgal (1927-) hails from a rich and the most influential Nehru-Gandhi family and for her money is not a problem. Ms. Sahgal, unlike Kamala Markandaya whose novels deal with hunger, poverty and exploitation of poor farmers, children and particularly women by the rich and powerful people, focuses on the mental and psychological problem of women, sexual harassment at workplace, and woman's role for the progress of family, society and nation. She depicts the upper class society which exploits the sentiments of the women emotionally. She got her education most advanced Indian schools and higher education from USA and her education in America broadened her thinking, outlook, mental horizons and attitude towards life. Ms. Sahgal highlights the contemporary

social issues in various lights and shades in almost all her following novels:

- *A Time to be Happy* (1957)
- *This time of Morning* (1965)
- *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969)
- *The Day in Shadow* (1971)
- *A Situation in New Delhi*(1977)
- *Rich like us* (1985)
- *Plans For Departure* (1986)
- *Mistaken Identity* (1988)
- *Lesser Breeds* (2003) is hitherto her last novel.

Sahgal in her novels forcefully raises the contemporary social issues. There is a juxtaposition of two worlds--- personal world of man-woman relationship and impersonal world of politics. She considers her novels political in content and she says:

Each of her novels 'more or less' reflects the political era we were passing through.

Sahgal's observation, of the universal behaviour and reactions of the people, her mild humour and depiction of the changing social conditions in contemporary India, is quite interesting. Unlike Kamala Markandaya, Mrs. Sahgal's fictional world is occupied by political leaders, business tycoons, foreign advisors, upper class people, journalists and highly qualified persons like professors, Vice-Chancellors, and Ministers etc. As Shyam Asnani remarks:

There is selective world of upper class people of power and position in the novels of Mrs. Sahgal.

The major issues in Nayantara's fictional world are ---political misunderstanding, blaming, sycophancy and quarrel among ministers for good departments and for power, quarrel on boundaries of states, their temperamental incapability, problems arising out of their ego and misuse of money in elections in order to win on one hand and on the other hand there are issues of man-women

relationship, their marital problems, and finally the problems the place of women in society.

Sahgal's novel *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) brings out the political issue – the problem of Chandigarh. As we know Haryana came into existence on November 1, 1966 and both states Punjab and Haryana share a common capital Chandigarh and there is dispute on the boundaries, share of water and electric power. Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh are Chief Ministers of the two states respectively. Gyan Singh believes that only threats will solve the matter while Harpal Singh believes in taking sensible approach which may be agreeable both the parties. M.K Bhatnagar traces a parallel between Gyan Singh and Kairon:

Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab in *Storm in Chandigarh*, with his earthiness, his zest for action inhibited by norms is suggestive of his real life counterpart around his period, Partap Singh Cairon.

By linking the issue of language to religion Gyan Singh tries to exploit the religious sentiments of the People of Punjab in order to safeguard his position as Chief Minister. He is a shrewd politician and strikes while the iron is hot. The language issue is one which is sure to find the support from politicians of different religion. Jasbir Jain's analyse of Gyan Singh is worth mentioning:

Gyan Singh is very clear about his goals in life and has no scruples whether he exploits the emotions and sentiments in order to achieve them.

Sahgal also focuses on the Man – woman relationship in life. Here she describes her own personal life experience of her marriage with Gautam Sahgal and she tells her marriage marked a turning point in life. She says life of a girl before marriage is different while post married life is different. Before marriage as she says that she was keenly aware of the joy of being herself but marriage unsettled her disastrously. After marriage for the first time she came across of the shocking assumption of inequality. Her personal agonies and traumas are reflected in her novels and the disharmony and dissolution of marriage becomes

one of the major issues in her autobiographical novels --- *Storm in Chandigarh* and *The Day in Shadow*. Sahgal writes:

Women are not a subject for discussion. They are wives, daughters and mothers. They belonged to their men by contract or by blood. Their sphere was sexual and their job procreation. They were dependents and not individuals. ....A woman was not entitled to a past, not entitled to a human hunger, human passion or even human error.

The novels deal with woman's struggle against patriarchal domination, against social construction, and identity crisis. The women in these novels are verily more aware of the injustice made by men but habit makes them willing prisoners in the macrocosm of exploitation and injustice. In the present patriarchal set up man is not only the master of his own life but also he decides future, fate, career and above all life of woman also. Saroj and Simrit in the novels are women akin to each other and both these women enter into marriage with dreams of peace, harmony and mutual understanding but both later discover that they have made a wrong choice. Both fail to realise their victimisation till a man enters their life to open their eyes to the ugliness and irony of their surroundings. Sahgal In her novel *The Day in Shadow* chose purposefully an intelligent, aware and sensitive woman who is a writer and free lance journalist who is shrewdly trapped in a brutal divorce settlement as just like Sahgal was in real life. Sahgal shares her experience and in the Preface to *Relationships* as she writes:

The women of my two novels.....grieve over broken bonds and a longing for ordinary uninterrupted living....But the women in my fiction did finally emerge.

Sahgal's novels despite her feminist propensities do not smack down of despite of men rather express the true picture of the contemporary society. Her kind of feminism is more humanism. Unlike the militant feminist she does not paint her male characters in black rather she takes an objective view of situations. She has all respect for those men who care for women and give them full freedom in man-woman relationship and believe in

mutual understanding and equality between man and woman.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion clearly shows that Kamala Markandaya focuses on the contemporary eye catching social issues like - exploiter-exploited problems, hunger, poverty, money and its negative impacts on life people particularly women and children etc. while on the other hand the novels of Ms. Sahgal deal with elite section of society and their key issues like man-woman relationship, superiority of man over woman, man's ego, unnecessary pressure of parents on girls for marriage, issue of divorce, woman's place in family and society etc. In the novels of Mrs. Sahgal political issue is often combined the issue of man-woman relationship, their marital problems, temperamental incompatibility, the problems out of their ego and submissiveness and finally the problems of the place of women in society.

To conclude we see that every society has its particular types of problems and issues and problems. As we notice in lower class money is a major problem while in high class society the issues are psychological and over ambitiousness. Both novelists have focussed on the contemporaries' social issues very minutely, realistically and skilfully as they seen and experienced in their day-to-day life.

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