



The Many Traits of Female Protagonist of Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract

Ever since India's independence many female writers have taken the female centric issue into consideration and have written novels based on them. Since the dawn of the novel writing, Indian women in particular are writing in English and have compared the position of women in India with the women of western countries. Kamala Markandaya is one of the post-colonial novelist of the era and the prolific and the most polemical and parenthetical Indian novelist in English. She has taken an initiative to be the flagship writer for women's problem and bring about a seemingly change in their lives. The present paper attempts to minutely study and present the changes that have been the outcome of the movement. The focus of Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of her female characters is to show her feminist concern and their journey to carve a niche in the male dominated society.

Key words: female centric, subordinate, object, quest, change.

The position of women in India has never been strong or to say equal to their counterparts; be it the illiterate or literate women. Ever since India's independence many female writers have taken this issue into consideration and have written female centric novels. They were not thorough feminist but more or less the same as far as their position is concern or the status they enjoyed, be it the pre-independence era or the post-independence times. The dawn of the novel writing as a genre of literature, has depicted Indian women in particular writing in English and have compared the position of women in India with the women of western countries. Their writings reflected a male-centric socio political and economic culture, after a deep and insightful research. Women have a subordinate position both in social order and at home. Their existence remained under the care of their male counterpart. They have always been toyed at the

hands of the male in their life be it knowingly or by chance. Hence were mostly considered as the property of the men. This reality gets a reflection in the literature by the Indian women writers who have referred the women as an '*object*' at the hands of the male. They had no identity of their own and their every action was controlled by a stronger male counterpart.

The legal text of Hinduism, the Dharmashastras also an ancient manuscript called Manusmriti is the first and the authentic text on which the Hindu law were framed by the British colonial government states:

"The British colonial administration began the codification of Hindu and Muslim laws in 1772 and continued through the next century with the codification of complex and interdependent traditional systems froze certain aspects of the

status of women, for instance, outside the context of constantly evolving social and economic relations, which in effect limited or restricted women's rights."

From childhood, the right of woman is under the care and control of her father, in youth after marriage under her husband's and after in old age death under the protection of her sons. She has no independence of her own but with the rise of feminism the world over, the Indian women started emerging as a new woman with a new beginning. A new feminine literary tradition has been produced due to the curiosities and anxieties of women as a vent to their pent-up emotions. The changed position of Indian women is indispensable to today's men where she is an adviser, a slave, a partner, all sacrificing and self-effacing mother and wife, a friend and a daughter. This is the probable reason that post-independence, Indian women novelists in writing in English have been placed as the central figure in their novels. A woman's search for her identity is a recurrent theme in their writings out the many they tried to cater. Kamala Markandaya has depicted the most 'realistic' picture and themes of the Indian society and her concern revolved around women. She manages to draw the real life experiences into her fiction thereby giving a 'personal' touch to her female characters. All her female characters are from the Indian locale facing the social, economical and intellectual dearth where they happened to come out successful because of their insightful work, sincere efforts and their will to emerge successful from the paucity of the circumstances. As per Name Jackson, one of the most notable critics on Markandaya says that she aims "To create the impression of authenticity and objectivity in her portrayal of particular social environments" (2)

The most prominent feature of Kamalaya Markandaya's narratives is that her novels are geared up towards exposing social injustice in Indian milieu. Kamala Markandaya moves ahead from realist to realism wherein she traces the more specific term '*social realism*.' A number of critics have described Markandaya's novels very apt as a portrayal of the society. In almost all her women centric novels, she has raised the women concern right from her social to familial, education to

emancipation, rural to urban life have been dealt with much ease and real concern. According to A.V Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon, social realism is defined:

"The Awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence lives of men and women for better or for worse—and the overall interaction of the individual and society.

[3] Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is an Indian peasant woman coming from a farming society where education has not been paid attention to, and the very fact gives the narrative a semblance of universality. Markandaya has been successful in portraying this social realism through her novels is mainly through Rukmani's story that Markandaya explores social concern about economic hardship in India and the impact of industrialization and nature's fury in the lives of the rural peasantry. Indira Ganesan remarks:

She presented her life as an elderly peasant woman. In the beginning of the novel she takes a nostalgic plunge into the course of her life. The readers are taken back to her childhood and the narrative moves forward, ultimately ending at the point where it began. The narrative also is about the self-discovery of a female in an Indian context where the female suffers due to the social setup they are bound to live and die. No change is excepted as far as the social set up is concern.

According to Elizabeth Jackson, "It is about the female who has discovered herself." [5] She says that the narrative normally tends to go around a married woman, becoming a mother, re-assessing her life and her relationships as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother. It is in this fictionalization that the female tries to search her identity as a woman. The questions and crises that Rukmani faces are of her identity as woman. Her husband had an extra marital affair and an illegitimate child but her association with Dr. Kenny is looked down as an affair, no friendship between man and woman is acceptable in the society. What kind of a rule is this? Why I am looked down upon? Who am I? Such questions come to fore. Jasbir Jain elucidates that

identity or selfhood "has to work through the body."^[6]

In this light, *A Nectar in a Sieve* is about Rukmani's early life as a child-bride, wife, a young woman and the mother that echoes the throughout the fiction. Her eco-feministic claims get a vent through her narration wherein her affinity with her occupation as a farmer linked to herself and her spiritualism. However, her identity can be seen from both the angles materialist as well as spiritual. She sacrifices herself for the family and for that she takes to tilting the land to yield the produce and here she is more materialistic than spiritual. Her spiritualism can be seen from her immense faith in nature that doesn't shake with the changing circumstances rather she takes help from a more rational being, the British doctor Kennington.

The novels of Kamala Markandaya has a very strong feministic approach that voices the female concern. All her novels show the female perspective and their struggle to establish themselves. The one persistent theme that underlines all her novels is a constant quest for identity mainly by the central female characters. One can overtly read both the internal as well as the external conflict that goes on in their mind. Her female characters have all established themselves and could assert their feelings in their own way. A. V. Krishna Rao observes that in her novels Kamala Markandaya has shown "the creative release of the feminine sensibility in India."

The protagonists of Kamala Markandaya have brought about a deep transformation in their personalities. She has traced the transformation of women from self-sacrificing Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* to self-asserting Mohini in *The Golden Honeycomb*. They strived for what they felt was right and did what suited them rather what is expected from them. Their transformation from self-effacing to self-made in their non-domain have given them a respectable place in the society but were not denied completely. The 'social acceptability' has been brought by these female leads of Kamala Markandaya. Her protagonists are in search of finding a place and create their own identity. Kamalaya Markandaya has been successful in the

portrayal of her female characters who are strong and determined, as compared to her male characters who are incapable of handling their own responsibilities and surrenders to the circumstances and become meek and submissive to their women who make them aware and understand that they are not commodity and should not be treated as an object that can be purchased, used and sold.

A.V. Krishna Rao comments:

"Kamala Markandaya's novels, in comparison with those of contemporary women writers, seem to be more fully reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India."

Kamala Markandaya has a very deep understanding of human nature as well as a very probing insight, and probably this is the reason that she explores the emotional reactions and spiritual responses of women and their predicament with sympathetic understanding. Her female characters are constantly agitating to give meaning and value to their lives. They are ready for any sacrifice for saving the family. Ira is seen sacrificing her soul and body to feed her dying brother. Her females are full of life, enthusiasm hope on one hand and frustrations and pain on the other hand who are ready to accept any challenge of life that comes their way and make a mark on the world.

Kamala Markandaya's female portrayal has distinguished between the types of women and their different traits. She has painted both an awakened woman and an assertive liberated woman. Her liberated assertive women are completely different from the self-sacrificing woman. Assertive women are seeking equality with man and has her own personality that demand rights as a woman. Self-sacrificing women are gifted with depth and rationale thinking on the contrary. The awakened woman is the woman who are choosy with self-assertion and dominance and who calls herself emancipated and economically independent. Such women are often unconventional but confident. We find such awakened woman in Rukmini, Ira and Helen who sticks to their basic values and modify themselves according to the changing circumstances. Ira goes ahead of her social

background not to create her own identity or seek pleasure but only to protect the family from the crises. There is something distinct in these women characters of Kamala Markandaya, something of which they are made up of. They remain spiritual and emotional to the core. We find Helen is longing for self-gratification. Kamala Markandaya has taken a reassessment of her female characters in the Indian set up who aspires to be in forefront. Her female protagonists like Rukmani, Ira, Mira, Roshan, Nalini, Helen, Lalitha, Mohini, Usha, Valli etc. who are equal to their males and no less.

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