

Kamala Markandayya's portrayal of the authentic Image of the Indian woman in different roles heralding the dawn of a new era :An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper envisions rather neatly the authentic image of the Indian woman in Kamala Markandaya's novels with special reference to Nectar in a Sieve and A Handful of Rice. It reflects the social life, religious reformation and emancipation of woman and throws light upon the authentic image of the Indian woman in her fictional world by taking intense efforts to replicate and reproduce the rural Indian woman with real life situations. It also focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the average Indian woman of the twenty first century with the vision of the enlightened and awakened modern India.

Key words:

In the development of Indo-Anglian literature, Anglo-Indian fiction played a vital role. In her book namely **Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel**, Meena Shirwadkar stated as;

“Indo-Anglian fiction was the inevitable outcome of the Indian exposure to western culture and art-forms like the novel”

Murlidas Malwani regarded Indo-Anglian literature as “a wonderful new literature born of the marriage between an Indian sensibility and world language. Truly speaking, the stream of Indo-Anglian fiction started with the writings of R.C. Dutt, B.C. Chatterji and R.N. Tagore. Two of six novels namely **The Lake of Palms** and **The Slave Girl of Agra**, written by R.C. Dutt brought a theme of social reform to Indian English fiction. B.C.Chatterji was considered not only a successful novelist of social life and reforms. Rabindranath Tagore depicted rather significantly social problems in such novels as **Gora**, **The Wreck** and **The Home and the World**. Raj

Lakshmi's **The Hindu Wife**, H. Dutt's **Bijoy Chand**, Rajam Iyer's **Vesudava Sastri**, Mrs. Ghoshal's **Unfinished Song** and **The Fatal Garland**, Jogendras Singh's **Nasrin**, **Kamala**, **Kamni**, Balakrishna's **The Love of Kusum** and **Between the Twilight** are, no doubt, remarkable commentaries upon the problems existing in society. While all these novels were produced for reflecting the social life of that period, it was given to understand that it was nothing but an age of religious reform and emancipation of woman. While the great men like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, D.F. Karaka, Ahmed Abbas and Ahmad Ali dealt with everyday problems of the rural community, contemporary public issues no longer shutting their eyes to the injustice, misery and struggle for freedom around them, Venkatramani, Nagarajan, Shankar Ram, presented rural problems rather vivid in their works namely **Murugan the Filler**, **Cold Rice** and **The Children of Kauvery** and **The Love of Dust** respectively. As a prolific writer on the traditional lines,

A.S.P. Ayyar went to the extent of discussing the problems of the fallen sister, the struggling youth, the silent sufferings of the Hindu wife and the frustrated love and ambition in life.

Generally speaking, Malgonkar's novels are valuable documents in as much as they faithfully present the particular phases in our national life whereas Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels depict depths of human misery, exploitation, famine and hunger and Jhabwala's novels deals with India's problems, racial problems, East-West encounter, social injustice and inequalities, but broadly emphasizing and examining social and economic conditions and their effects on character, Kamala Markandaya did present rather beautifully various human foibles and human relationship, becoming almost didactic using the novel as a medium of expression with a specific purpose to treat of themes of tragic waste, the despair of unfulfilled or ruined love, the agony of artistic ambition, the quest for self-realization with a focus on contemporary life of India racked by confusion, violence, convulsive social and political changes and also the image of woman tradition vs modern in the Indian society at large.

A major development in Indian fiction in English has been the growth of a feminist or woman-centered approach, an approach which seeks to project and interpret experience from the viewpoint of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. Feminism assumes that woman experience the world more differently from man, writing out their perspective. One of the dominant, ever-present themes in Indian fiction has been the oppression and exploitation of woman in an essentially patriarchal society. The portrayal of woman's suffering, which has been a central and eternal theme in Indian literature, goes as far back as **The Mahabharata** and

The Ramayana. What has changed is that no longer is a woman's suffering glorified as a noble sacrifice as enveloped in an aura of romanticism. Writers with weak realism now project women's suffering as evolving from factors like male egotism, selfishness and heartlessness. In brief, the Indian woman represents perennial qualities like love, charity, compassion, Kindness, altruism and preference for the emotional attachment. They face all sorts of difficulties with a stoic fortitude and the stalwart resignation. In contrast, the men in their lives are selfish, cruel, violent, possessive and materialistic, where as the values that the women embody are essentially the core as the ethical and moral code of most religions.

Writers like Bankimchandra Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore, Jainanda Kumar, Nayanta Sahgal, Jhabwala Kamala Markandaya and many others created the most memorable portraits of woman in Indian literature. The primary theme that emerges from Kamala Markandaya's fiction is how poverty, want and starvation drive woman to unimaginative ends. What is generally understood is that in modern times and environment, woman suffer untold miseries to hold the family together as well as to provide for it. They have to suffer sexual assaults, emotional isolation and a number of psychological predicaments. They naturally become victims of fear; fears of all kinds. Besides, the women have to cope with personal disasters mostly man-made and man-devised. Simon de Beauvoir in her book namely

The Second Sex refers to the various myths of woman:

“Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena. Woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness, she is the elemental silence of

truth, she is artifice, gossip and falsehood, she is healing presence and sorceress, she is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison de'être*" (TSS 143)

The various myths of woman are not only confined to the west but also evident in Hindu culture. The Hindu society being a patriarchal one assigns to woman the role of a passive, docile, demure, self-sacrificing being. There are numerous common images usually associated with the woman who is primarily seen in Indian culture as a mother, protector, an inspirer, a cherisher, motivating primal force – a **Sakthi** to protect the good and destroy the evil, a virgin eviction, a bitch goddess, a faithful wife, a beautiful temptress, a seductive destroyer, a healing Madonna but the so-called man want to exploit woman as a possession or property " which is basically an instinct to hold fast and blindly to tradition" (Sahgal 4). Women have been projected and seen as a toy, as a sexual object and a glamour girl. The highest compliment that she is often paid with is "she is the successful woman" who has helped her husband to get ahead in his career. She destroys her individuality so that the man in her life continues to feel like a man. She is a possession, a puppet dancing to the whims and fancies of her man, the puppeteer.

The phenomenon of the emergence of women was reflected in the literatures in Indian languages. The work of women writers had given a distinct dimension to the total picture of woman in family and society. The early Indo-Anglian novels show the operation of the forces of famine, orthodoxy and conservatism in the lives of these women M.R, Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamalaya Markandaya in their novels have brought out the sufferings women usually

had to face in such circumstances. Kamala Markandaya explores the problem of womanhood in her fictional world.

Holding a unique place among women novelists in depicting woman in literature, Kamala Markandaya has portrayed the various roles from the rustic to the modern Indian woman. She is an adept in exploring feminine and societal issues. A.V. Krishna Rao observes thus:

"Markandaya's contribution to the Indo-Anglian fiction lies essentially in her capacity to explore....vital, formative areas of individual consciousness that project the images of cultural change and in her uncanny gift of inhibiting the shifting landscapes of an outer reality with human beings whose sensibility becomes a sensitive measure of the inner reality as it responds to the stimulus of change" (P89).

According to K.R.S. Iyengar,

"Women are natural story-tellers. It is however only after the Second World War that women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian fiction in English. Of these writers, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala... are outstanding" (P438)

The women in Kamala Markandaya's fictional world are on a quest for autonomy and the hindrances that stem from nature, from irregularities in the social system confine her to the time-honoured and taboo-ridden mores. In her first novel **Nectar in a Sieve**, the narrator heroine by name Rukmani describes the pathetic plight of villagers in a nameless south Indian village in colonial India. She is also a mother of sorrows" (Iyengar 438). She has to endure shock after shock, her husband's infidelity, her daughter taken to the streets to save the family from

sheer starvation, the death of the child Kuti and the final disaster of being evicted from their house. On the one hand, the villages are subjected to the varying modes of nature, on the other, modern technology invades the simple village folks in the form of the tannery and generates exploitation and misery. Intermittent collision with hunger and starvation gives rise to fear, "fear of the dark future, fear of the sharpness of hunger, fear of the blackness of death" The trauma of privation exists in the disintegration of Rukmani's family. She wins our sympathy by the dink of her sheer will-power that endures a life without hope like "nectar in a siere". P.P. Mehra rightly holds:

"This first novel of India recalls in its savage power and authentic atmosphere that great novel of china, 'The Good Earth'. It records vividly the poverty-stricken, of Madras province. But in its particular theme the story of Rukmani, her husband and children-there is a universality of love and loyalty that will appeal to readers all over the world" (59).

In order to indicate the contrariness of human life, writers use a literary device known as irony. Since literature is the mirror of life, irony plays a very important role in it. Irony has become a strong medium to create tragic effect Kamala Markandaya like the Greek Tragedians puts the responsibility for man's misery on 'fate' that will not allow mortals to exercise free will successfully, 'Her characters are all the victims of life, of 'fate'. What happen to them is quite contrary to their wishes and expectations. Since their happenings are not desired and unexpected, they face sorrows and sufferings. The life of Rukmani and Nathan becomes a tale of unexpected and undesirable problems. Both of them are good at their hearts, yet here to face the irony of fate. They seem to become

playthings in the hands of cruel destiny. Rukmani whose father was a rich man thinks that she would be married like her three sisters. But poverty of her father ruins her fate and she is married to a poor tenant farmer, Nathan. After the marriage, both Rukmani and Nathan lead a peaceful married life, despite their poverty. Later on, Rukmani gives birth to a daughter named Ira. Nathan seldom pays his attention to Ira because he wished for a son. After the birth of Ira, Rukmani gives birth to many children, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam and Kuti and Rukmani feels a lot of difficulty in feeding her children. Nathan and Rukmani ae usually crushed by the natural happenings. Sometimes it is heavy rain that ruins their fate and another time drought becomes the cause of their decline. After the marriage of Ira, it rains so hard that everywhere there is water. Both of them lose their peace of mind. Thus, heavy rain ruins them completely.

Ira's fate is the best example of irony of fate. Since she is a barren lady, her husband rejects her and she comes back to her parents. After some days, there is a period of drought and all the peasants are bound to starve. Ira loves her brothers so much that whatever is given to her, she provides it to her younger brother. Therefore, she prostitutes her body at the hands of tannery workers in order to feed her younger brother. Irony of fate reaches its climax when that barren Ira becomes pregnant and gives birth to an albino child. When Nathan dies, all hopes of Rukmani get shattered to the core. In the words of Kai Nicholson,

"In **Nectar in a Sieve**, Kamala Markandaya has with pointed clarity, portrayed life in its most gruesome and degrading form, undoubtedly her realism is purposeful and her intention is to awaken polite society to the real problems" (Kai 34)

Laxmi R. Moktali observes:

“In **Nectar in a Sieve** the narrator Rukmani is a little educated women and narrates the story, perhaps, in her own language and the whole novel could be considered as tradition” (P84)

Thus, **Nectar in a Sieve** is a simple and powerful novel. It is a subtle study of the traditional social milieu under the disturbing impact of change and modernity. Unlike Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya lends no intellectual substance to her themes in this novel. She is concerned with men’s struggle with hunger, nature, social change and modernity. As S.C. Harrex states, “**Nectar in a Sieve** is characterized by tragic pathos. If tragedy lies only in combat and clash ending in death, it is not tragedy but tragedy denotes silent suffering and gradual erosion of life” (78). Truly speaking, Kamala Markandaya portrays a village so realistically that it may be taken as a documentary novel but the novelist uses exquisite craftsmanship in narration and characterization in presenting a simple woman’s conflict with her sufferings.

As a multifaceted personality, woman plays several roles, exhibiting many facets of her character. All those roles reveal her traits. Bettelheim holds as:

“As a woman, she can be a loving daughter or she can be an affectionate sister; she can be a responsible wife and a sacrificial mother as a women’s greatest fulfillment is motherhood as much as women want to be good scientist or engineer they want first and foremost to be womanly companions of men and to be mothers” (P63)

This again reveals a deeply entrenched patriarchal image of woman. It is how men expect and want women to be in the society.

If a women does not fit into the code of societal norms formulated by the male – she is looked upon as a deviant and either ostracized from the society or isolated as an individual. She is said to possess a dark side to her personality and is dismissed as an ugly, arrogant, quarrelsome and immortal woman who is not worth her name. in short, she can lead an evil life if she so desires. Thus, if a woman unresistingly conformed to the cultural and social moves of a male-dominated society, she is beautiful, virtuous and good, if not, then, she is a pervert and possesses a deformed psyche.

The image of woman as wife occupies a central position in Indo-Anglian fiction. Dorothy Spencer recognizes this phenomenon and comments thus:

“It seems clear that in the case of women as wife we are dealing with a literary tradition. Sita, Savithri, Shakuntala... at any rate, they exemplify the ideal and thus express the society’s values. Further, they serve as models and as such exert an influence on living men and women”(PP 17-18)

Here, Kamala Markandaya amply illustrates the traditional image of ‘Pativrata’ in her women characters who silently suffer in their sacrificial role though the cause of her suffering springs mainly from poverty and natural calamity. They are the daughters of the soil and have inherited age old traditions which they do not dare to question. Their courage lies in meeting the challenges of poverty or calamity with a cheerful fortitude and a stubborn determination. Such is Rukmani’s position too in **Nectar in a Sieve**. The reason for the woman’s submissive role is, as Dr. Radhakrishnan points out, that “centuries of traditions have made the Indian women, the most patient women in the world, whose pride is suffering” (Kapur 3)

In **A Handful of Rice**, one can find traits of Nalini and Thangam as daughters. They belong to middle-class family. Both are unwelcome at birth. The father is disappointed at not having a son. The same concept of having a male child is repeated here also. They do not have a good happy and healthy family relationship. Their parents, Apu and Jayamma, are different in many ways. There is wide page difference and no love lost between them. In this stifled atmosphere, they have imbibed their parent's qualities. Nalini is like her father. She is practical, patient and long suffering as she faces a hard reality. When Ravi builds castles in the air, she becomes the voice of realism. She is gentle and considerate. As a daughter, she is sorry that Apu loses money because of his carelessness. She says,

“nobody know about the money, otherwise we would all have been careful” (HR 177)

She loves and respects her father. She is an obedient daughter and nurses Apu in his sickness with patience and devotion. Ravi persuades her to go out during Apu's illness. She refuses bluntly. She tells him that it is her duty to look after her sick father. “As a daughter, Nalini can be likened to Coredelia who looks after her sick father, when Lear gets mad” (Das 8). On the other hand, her sister Thangam who is drawn as her foil is selfish. Anyone that thwarts her is lacerated by her sharp tongue. Ever complaining she nags at her good-for-nothing husband. Her constant nagging transforms him from a respectable shopkeeper to a petty thief.

Unlike Nalini who nurses her sick father with devotion, Thangam forces him to accompany them to watch the fire walkers. Their absence provides puttanna an opportunity to steal Apu's savings. When the theft is disclosed and Apu accuses Puttanna, she swallows in self-pity. She is turned out of

the house. Later, but when Puttanna is comfortably settled and sends for her, she walks out from the house heartlessly. She does not care for her father who has helped her family so long in dire circumstances. She never cares about her father's sickness and the future of the family. No wonder, B.K.Das compares Thangam to Nalini and says:

“Thangam is like Tegan or Goneril in that she sucks her father's wealth, but does not give anything in return” (P8)

In **Possession**, Lady Caroline Bell presents a different picture of a daughter. True to her culture and tradition, she is a rich, well-placed woman descended from a long line of men who had ruled in the days of British Raj. An air of superiority that possesses her, marks her race. In Western countries, the women's issue is mostly one of identity, equal job opportunity and equal sex roles. In India, for the majority, it is a question of stark survival. She is a contrast to the traditional Indian women. Rukmani in **Nectar in a sieve** is portrayed as a typical Indian wife. She is faithfully devoted to her husband and according to Indian tradition, she does not call him by his name but addresses him as husband. Though married beneath her, she is stepped in tradition and regards her husband as her God. Hence, Hemingway calls Rukmani “a living replica of the stereotyped Indian wife”. Imbibed with a sound traditional pattern and cultural values, Rukmani is a tower of strength to her husband which Ira fails to be. Rukmani herself says, “A wife should be of help and not an ornament” (Nectar 8). Rukmani as a wife keeps her marriage vows to the end. The last scene of Nathan's death is pathetic. It brings out the perfect blend of husband wife relationship. To Nathan's question, “Have we not been happy together?”. Rukmani's reply is that of a faithful wife's emphatic assurance. “Always my dearest always” (Nectar 8). This incident

frames the picture of an ideal husband-wife relationship. “She mourns the death of her husband. After her husband’s death, the biggest blow that could fail to any Indian women. Rukmani comes back to her village with a renewed faith with the adopted son after giving birth to and becoming disillusioned by her own sons but reconciles herself to the life which is in store for her” (Parameswaran 93). Rukmani indeed depicts the picture of a traditional Indian wife. In **A Handful of Rice**, Nalini is portrayed as “a good wife who understands her world and dissuades her husband becoming violent” (HR 13). The novelist Kamala Markandaya highlights the theme of long suffering wife through the character of Nalini. Nalini regardless of herself, does what is expected of her, as a dutiful wife. No wonder B.K.Das compares Nalini to “the epic character” (P 14).

Sublime qualities radiate an aura of halo around the picture of motherhood while vicious qualities mar the picture. They display sublime and base traits befitting the situation, in which they are involved. Certain times in embarrassing situations, motherhood is sublimated in Ira’s case. Motherhood is glorified in suffering as in the case of Rukmani. Motherhood facilitates tolerance as in the case of Nalini. A woman plays diverse roles. Each role is interesting and fascinating as it is observed in a particular situation. The women who play these roles are flesh and blood like us. They show weakness as well as strength. Ira is good as a daughter but is a failure as a wife and touches sublimity as a mother. Rukmani is a hopeless sister but a good daughter, a responsible wife and a crowning glory as a mother. Jayamma is an unfaithful wife but a responsible mother. Thangam is a mean and selfish daughter, nagging wife, jealous and a protective sister and a useless mother. As a

wife, she is faith but useless to inspire him to be a man; as a daughter, she is cruel, as a mother she is hopeless. What is interesting and outstanding about these characters is that they are in our midst exhibiting traits similar to our own traits. We the readers admire, frown, glorify, rejoice, worry and suffer along with them.

To conclude, it may be said that Kamala Markandaya has created rather significantly the authentic image of the Indian woman in her fictional world by taking intense efforts to replicate and reproduce the rural Indian woman and her characteristics as exactly as they function and behaviours in real life situations. In brief, markandaya has with a focused vision brought to life the average Indian woman with her strengths and weaknesses, thereby heralding the dawn of a new era through the portrayal of the modern woman of the twenty first century-a woman with the vision of the enlightened and awakened modern India.

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**The time is always right to do what is right.
~ Martin Luther King Jr.**