

Critical Study of Female Protagonists in Kamala Markandaya's Select Novels

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Abstract

The post-independence era marks the grand inception of the literary emancipation of women. It evinces the creative release of the feminine sensibility, which notwithstanding its relatively later manifestation, merits recognition under its self-sufficiency. This article aims to study critically the female protagonists of select novels of Kamala Markandaya such as The Handful of Rice, The Golden Honeycomb, and Two Virgins. The methodology adopted for this study is a character analysis of female protagonists. The results reflect on the quest for self –identity, spiritual responses, search for connotation and value of life, the journey from self-denial to self-assertion, and other important aspects of a woman living in a male-dominated society in the country like India. Kamala Markandaya's female characters of her fictions also concerned with the fundamental question –the loft of womanhood. The female protagonists are also seeking self-fulfillment without losing their basic identity. The female protagonists of the author's fictions also reject the convention role of subjugation and self-deny. They also raise their fingers against the customs of the male-dominated society of post-independence India.

Key Words: *female protagonist, self–identity, spiritual responses, search for connotation, social evils.*

Citation: Bhatt Komal. (2019). Critical Study of Female Protagonists in Kamala Markandaya's Select Novels, *Ganpat University Journal of Applied Research In Social Science & Humanities*, 8 (2), 40- 51.

Introduction

The post-Independence era marks the grand inception of the literary emancipation of women. It evinces the creative release of the feminine sensibility, which notwithstanding its relatively later manifestation, merits recognition by its self-sufficiency. There germinates on an opulent and convincing crop of women novelists in the terra firma of Indian fiction in English in the post-independence era. Several highly talented and prolific women novelists including Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, R.P. Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Attia Hosain, Santha Ram Rau, and Shashi Deshpande have enriched Indian fiction in English. In the present study, female protagonists of *The Handful Rice*, *The Golden Honeycomb*, and *Two Virgins* written by Kamala Markandaya are discussed. Kamala Markandaya's novels direct attention to the awakening of a woman's consciousness and her confrontation with a tradition-oriented society. They also reveal women's sufferings because of the inherent imbalance in the social order. The novelist's depiction of women has shown a change of women from the traditional to the emancipated and liberated, expressing the freedom of choice and action.

Most of Markandaya's women are the conformists/traditionalist and non-conformists/non-traditionalist while the introverts and the extroverts are seen in the novels of Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal respectively. Women who conform to the existing moral codes and social norms, especially concerning their relations with men and their reactions to familial frictions, can be termed as conformists.

Kamala Markandaya in her novel *A Handful of Rice* presents Nalini, a shy, docile and traditional Indian woman. Her husband Ravi is a village hooligan who comes to the city in search of work to earn a living. His first contact is the gangster called Damodar who teaches him his profession like pick-pocketing, breaking in a stranger's house to steal anything worthwhile. It is in one of these ventures that he chanced upon the beautiful daughter of Jayamma and Apu, the tailor. Ravi however, mellowed to some extent after meeting Nalini. He starts working as an apprentice to Apu and in time marries Nalini. The novel reveals the ennobling effect of the love of an attractive young woman on a vagabond, unsocial young man who is subsequently converted into a loving husband

and a responsible householder. We can see the captivating power of Nalini over Ravi in the following lines from the text:

Ravi, captivated by Nalini accepts Apu's offer of the tailor's job. Nalini, his girl. He said it to himself sweetly, roundly, secretly, and it filled him with a delicious sense of pleasure. Nalini, the girl who could make a man feel like a man even outside the jungle of his choosing the girl for whom he was ready to repudiate all in his life that was unworthy. (MK,33)

Nalini contented with the little she has, entreats Ravi not to feel envious of the affluent people. She argues, "They're a different class... Ordinary folk like us can never be like them." (MK,75).

She has a sense of adjustment and pragmatism. Nalini, well-drilled in the conventional ideas of wifely duties silently bears the torture and ill-treatment meted out by Ravi who is unable to cope with the harsh economic problems. Despite being beaten and abused by her husband in his drunkenness, she tries her best to bring her wayward husband on the right path. She dissuades him from associating himself with Damodar and his team who use force to get easy money. She acts as a strong stimulus in helping Ravi withdraws from the clutches of the gangsters. Her gay and ever-pleasant, soft, and tender ways could at last transform the juvenile delinquent Ravi, into a respectable householder. As SrinivasaIyengar says, "*she is a sort that can redeem even an errant husband like Ravi.*" (KRS,438) Ravi is also aware of Nadine's forbearance.

He says:

Nalini never complained. He had seen her fighting for breath, or covertly rubbing oil into the livid stretch marks on her abdomen, or arching her back for relief against the cold granite grinding-stone, but he had never heard her complain. Neither of the ills of her pregnancy nor of him. (MK, 194-195)

Later on, Ravi resolves that no act of his should sully the wholesome quality he found in his wife, a kind of vulnerable purity that he wanted to enclose and guard, feeling cleansed and enriched by it. Nalini provides an anchor and refuge to Ravi whenever he is tossed and torn by thoughts of Damodar. Here, an instance may be given when Ravi joined the mass strike against the authority and hoarders for the scarcity of rice. These angry men smashed open the rice go-downs and swarmed up the piled gunny bags, frenziedly, holding out baskets, sacks, their shirts, and their dhotis, whatever they could find to receive the rice. Ravi just looked on, without touching a single grain. The striking men also attacked the shops where the rich shop, like an eye, breaking down the facade and when it was his turn to throw the stone, he suddenly could not. Ravi coming out unsullied and without throwing a single stone in the strike indirectly shows Nalini's victory over Ravi's discontent and greed.

Nalini's values promise him respectability and peace but demand honesty and hard work. He realizes, *"she was constant, a rock to which he could cling and keep his head level when his views and values began their mad dance."* (MK,118). She never protested she had known of Ravi and Jayamma's illicit affair in Ravi's drunken state and her absence. Her good soul bears no grudge over the indecent incident. Like Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Nalini accepts her fate and forgives her erring husband. She chooses to be by his side a true devoted Hindu wife till the end despite all the odds.

"Jayamma in *A Handful of Rice* is a worthless woman- neither a good mother nor a good wife. She is selfish, greedy, cruel, mean, and a lustful woman, who only cares for her joys and comforts. A mother must be able to feel the pulse of all her family members - husband, in-laws, children, their friends, servants, and others. She must specialize in the art of holding the family together. The relationship between mother and child is so pure that nobody can think negative, but few of them have negative views between the relationship of Mother - in - law and Son - in - law. A mother is a mother whether it is one's own or in law and a son is a son whether it is one's own or the law.

Markandaya's novel *A Handful of Rice* indicates such a negative relationship between a mother - in - law and Son - in - law. Jayamma is a lustful woman who often admires

Ravi's masculinity and is attracted to him. "But going deeper which she could hardly bring herself to do, she knew that what troubled her was the lust that had risen in her like a tide, the surging exultation that gluttled her as she felt her blows falling on his flesh".(MK,203)

Jayamma liked her 'handsome son - in - law'. "Jayamma at first was concerned for her daughter, but when she realized there were no real injuries she held her peace. In all the years of their married life Apu has never once raised his hand to her, but then, she thought, with the faint contempt. She still bore her husband, which even his death had not expunged, in that way Apu had never been much of a man. She shivered a little thinking of Ravi's masculinity; and there was even the seed of a thought in her mind, though she would not let it grow.

Kamala Markandaya's ninth novel, *The Golden Honeycomb*, a saga of princely life in India portrays the life of a Maharaja who is merely a puppet in the hands of the British. The novel is written in political background and is fully charged with the feelings of patriotism and nationalism. In this novel also, the writer has glorified the life of a woman, Mohini, who is a liberated woman and is not confined to the four walls of maharaja's palace. Unbounded by the familial or homely ties, she enjoys complete freedom of movement, and though living in colonial days, she appears to be a liberated woman of modern India.

The Golden Honeycomb is hailed as Markandaya's "memorable fait accompli". Once again her attention is focused on the momentous historical events during the British regime. Rabi, the chief protagonist develops into an autonomous being thanks to the different women whom he comes into contact with. These women from different walks of life shape and fashion his conscience. His grandmother, the Dowager Rani Manjula is a remarkable figure. Sculpted in the pattern of the great Indian heroines she proves a spirited companion to her husband. Though controlled by the British Resident, her spirit remains free and this helps her enlighten her grandson with the legends of the country. One cannot but admire the poise with which she ends the misery of her husband, bed-ridden after an accident. Her tremendous will power enables her to don the mantle of a

widow courageously. As the supervisor of Rabi's education, she does not fail to inculcate patriotic as well as human values in him.

History records not only the merits and demerits of powerful kings but also the private lives of the royal palaces. Living in the shadow of their husbands, most queens are forced to eschew their identity. Most often it is a life of compromise. Shanta Devi is married to Bawajiraj because of her suitability, her royal lineage. "The docility of the girl enchants the Agent". But the very docility that has been eulogized in her causes marital discord. To worsen the alienation the king enters into many liaisons until he meets Mohini with whom he has a son. Blessed are those who can give birth to a male child. Even the royal chambers are not free from double standards. The obloquy for failing to bear an heir in royal wedlock is attributed to the queen while "Bawajiraj, whose sperm sexes the child is not even Darned". Shanta Devi's lack of a strong will, her submission to the royal commands make her accept Rabi as the royal heir. The king boasts that "he would never accept a child of his wife's that he has not sired. That she accepts his; he considers both natural and his due" (MK,53). Patiently waiting for the king's visits to her chamber, she ungrudgingly plays the role that is expected of her. In her Krishnaswamy discerns "the symbol of the passive feminine, stunted in her womanhood, stunted as a human being".

Mohini, the concubine, proves that she is more spirited and independent than the passive queen. She refuses to be drawn into a royal marriage despite her great love for the king and her concern for Rabi's future. She asserts herself when the king proposes marriage: "*I don't want to be your queen. I want to be free*". A true patriot, she does not hesitate to criticize the king for his unflinching loyalty to the British rulers. She insists on educating her son in the Indian way and arranges a pandit with the help of the Maharani. This discernment on her part enhances his nationalistic feelings and makes him aware of his responsibility to his people. She does not need a royal marriage to make her unorthodox union with the king meaningful and enduring: "I can make you happy without that. I have no wish to be your second wife either". He is forced to accept her spirit of independence. She maintains her freedom and makes the king accept the doctrine of equality.

Two Virgins is a pathetic story of two sisters, Saroja and Lalitha who dream to soar high in the world of glamour. Saroja is a realistic girl who is happy with what her village has given her. Kamala Markandaya contends:

People were always surrendering things in the temple, not to each other but God. The priests took them in his name. Mostly it was fruit, flowers, coconuts, honey, and milk which they laid at God's feet, which Saroja considered beautiful and proper. (MK, 23)

She lives with her parents, aunt, and beautiful elder sister Lalitha. Saroja's life is uncomplicated and she is happy with her life and simple things give her joy. Saroja, the younger of the two, is not as beautiful as her elder sister. She does not get equal opportunities as her sister. She is admitted in an ordinary school. She is happy intending the buffaloes and to ride on them and enjoys Chingleput's sweets. Her thinking is like ordinary women and likes them, she wants to get married and wants lots of cuddly children. She does not think rustic life as her weakness but she is satisfied with what it has given to her. It is Lalitha's success that inspires her but she also likes Lalitha could not understand the hazards of this path. In *Two Virgins*, Markandaya narrates again an unconvincing tale of Indian village life by contrasting two sisters, Lalitha, the child of grace, who yearns to become a —town miss and Saroja, the child of soil and the country miss is utterly mechanical. The novel attempts to probe into the mantle and psychological states of two young girls of upbringing middle class.

Lalitha is born of Appa and Amma in a rural middle-class family. Lalitha is the more beautiful than Saroja and she is also an elder one having blue eyes and charming personality. She attends Miss Mendoza's expensive school and learning maypole dance and things related to elite society. This is the place where she thinks that she is not made for the impoverished life which Appa, Amma, Saroja, and Aunt Alamelu are living. She thinks that she will not accept this life as her fate as other members of her family think. Instead, she tries to come out of the quagmire which outwardly seems bright, glamorous, and glitzy. She has attracted by the glamour of the film industry. She is highly ambitious and dreams to be a Cine Star. Lalitha is still a child mesmerized by the

distant hollow attractions of the film industry. Lalitha ignores the advice of Aunt Alamelu who warns her about the bizarre consequences of the film industry. But Lalitha is adamant and turns deaf ear to her exhortation. Aunt Alamelu criticizes the modern youth who pays no attention to the advice of old, experienced, and traditional people. She condemns the modern youth in these words,

"I know what is going on these days, these days young people think they know best, they have no respect for their elders, they have no respect for anything except their willful ways..." ((MK,62)

Her dream is fulfilled when she gets a role in a film in village life. When one day, Lalitha comes across Mr. Gupta who is a film director, she makes her mind to do work for him on country life. Lalitha is extremely happy over her success when she becomes famous overnight and becomes the talk of the town. Lalitha finds this life much better than that of village life. Preetha R. cites about Lalitha's inclination towards city life in her article such as:

Lalitha, being modern in her ways and outlook, always disparages the traditional village life considering it primitivistic due to the absence of comforts and facilities the city life has, such as refrigerators, telephones, and electric fans. (Preetha R, 259-264)

But this joy remains short-lived. Mr. Gupta is a cunning director who seduces her and sexually exploits her makes her pregnant. Lalitha cannot face the people of her village. She tries to commit suicide. She runs away from the village and never wants to return. Saroja, on the contrary, is deeply rooted in the village soil. She loves her village with its buffalo, monsoon rain, and the calm and serene atmosphere with green fields and fresh air. Unlike Lalitha, she abhors the lure of the city and escapes the sexual temptation of Devaraj, the assistant of Gupta. Lalitha is beautiful and she easily falls into the trap of wicked people. This is the horrible story of these crime-ridden metro-cities. In the search of bright future and modern values, simple and straight-forward girls easily fall

into the trap of the cunning foxes who are in the search of these inexperienced or novice girls who tread in the city in the hope of bright perspectives. But in many cases these cities fail to provide them what they have had in their villages also as the race of modernism, economic development and advancement has made life mechanical and the people work like machines in metro cities where there is neither fresh air nor healthy food nor satisfaction. In this novel, Kamala Markandaya has depicted rural and city pictures where both these sisters are in the dilemma of what to choose. The Eastern traditional way to life or The Western life-style. Set in the post-independence era, Markandaya's fictions constantly bring up the clashes between Western liberalism and Hindu orthodoxy. While Saroja's Appa upholds Western ideas, modernism, and progressiveness, her Aunt Alamelu adheres to Hindu culture, practices, and rituals. Appa and aunt are continuously at war, and it is through their bickering and arguments that Saroja and the readers are further enlightened about the cultural conflict and the benefits and problems of change. 'Women's language was described as weak, unassertive, tentative, and women were presented as losers, as victims'. (Coates, 413) Women have to live a subordinate and depended on life in rural areas. But sometimes these women or girls have their dreams of living their lives. According to Paresh Patel, both these girls are different in their attitude, temperament, and interests:

In the novel, Markandaya has constantly made the two sisters Saroja and Lalitha to choose between the Eastern and the Western way of perceiving the world around. The contrast between tradition and modernity between India during and after British rule, between the older and younger members of the family, between the sons and the daughters, are all there around the two, in their school, at home, and in their upbringing in general. (47)

The novel tells the disadvantages of city life for the innocent rural girls. The industrialization and film city has a mechanical and spurious life and this life is different from real life. The urbanization and Western culture makes the life of these people different from the people who live in villages:

In *Two Virgins*, Kamala Markandaya touches on the traditional ways of Indian rural life and the damage brought by the impact of urbanization. The story centers around two sisters – Saroja and Lalitha, the former being rooted in Indian tradition and customs and the latter being influenced by the western ways of living. Saroja is a God-fearing village girl. Generally, the villagers acknowledge God's mercy and love by giving offerings to God in the temple. (Karthikeyan, 149-150)

There is darkness behind the dazzling city life and the new people from villages fail to understand that. These cities have only artificial things and these are much far from the real world. The people have fewer moral-values and more money. This money is also made by fair or fraudulent ways:

Despite their advancement and economic development, modern, unhealthy, crime-ridden cities are unable to even provide fresh air and food, what to speak of the peace of mind. Modernization has destroyed the traditional culture and values and modern man has descended to a level of a massive hard-working machine. Lust, greed, anger, sense gratification, avarice, etc. have become the constant companions of modern men and women. Though modern man does not believe in hell, he is busy creating it on earth by leading a machine life. (Karthikeyan, 151)

Kamala Markandaya's female characters have different aspects of female life and also a mixture of cultures.

Conclusion

Markandaya's fictional canvas thus portrays certain social conventions and attitudes that victimized women. Yet neither the struggle for survival nor the social inequalities can defeat them completely. The women in the earlier novels are victims of poverty. Material prosperity also does not guarantee any autonomy as is evidenced by Sarojini's crisis ensues from her blind faith. Shanta Devi ceases to be an independent individual

with emotions and feelings. Lalitha becomes a victim of her wantonness and urbanization. But the docility and acceptance of these women do not suggest that they are forever weak. In times of crisis, it is the woman who shows strength and courage which she transmits to others. Her soul is strong and resilient. The tragedy wakes her up to reality. Rukmani, Ira and show remarkable resilience for they know that work without hope draws nectar in a sieve and hope without an object cannot survive. Markandaya's relatively emancipated women like Roshan, Mira, Rani Manjula, and Mohini not only overcome social inhibitions but even rise above the men in stature. From the first to the last, Markandaya's novels present women who prove themselves to be as resilient and resourceful as the earth. The positive attitude of such women is an outcome of their inner strength which can withstand social oppression. Their strength does not lie in their muscular power but their inherent capacity for compassion, sacrifice, nurturance, and acceptance of the inevitable. Chronicling the experience of the Indian woman Markandaya shows such women as the pillars of the society supporting, strengthening, and enduring everyone around them. She is the progenitor, sustainer, and nourisher of the human species: the guardian of culture and the advocate of tolerance and acceptance.

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