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Search for Individuality in the Major Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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Search for Individuality in the Major Novels of Kamala Markandaya Abstract Kamala Markandaya is a great woman novelist in Indian Writing in English. She has to his credit a number of fictions which deal with, apart from several other things, the plights and prosecutions of women in a male dominated society. Most of her women characters are seen extensively engaged to retain their identity and individuality.

Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is a great woman novelist in Indian Writing in English. She has to her credit a number of fictions which deal with, apart from several other things, the plights and persecutions of women in a male dominated society. Most of her women characters are seen extensively engaged to retain their identity and individuality. They are also seen trying their best to raise their voice against male hegemony. Her fictional world is crowded by characters of suffering women as well as some other poor people of the village who attempt to fight against destiny in the face of anguish and suffering while most other characters specially the women choose to suffer their destiny in calm acceptance of pain and humiliation.

Keywords

Patriarchal hegemony, Feminine sensibility,
Women empowerment, Class consciousness.

Kamala Markandaya's fictional world is crowded by characters who represent a typical cross section of India. These characters are destined to act, speak and think in particular ways determined by their social class. It is this class consciousness which is at the root of fictional tension and moral polemics in the novels of Markandaya. Sensitive characters attempt to fight against destiny in the face of anguish and suffering, while most other characters particularly woman, choose to suffer their destiny in calm acceptance of pain and humiliation. Parvati Mishra rightly holds the view:

In recent years, there has been a plethora of theoretical speculations on the problems of woman in her famine and female identities in the context of social and interpersonal relationships. Many Indian woman novelists in English have reflected in their writings, a sharp concern with

Women have been the suffering lots from the time immemorial. There is a steady downfall in their status. They have always been given the phrase 'the weaker sex' or 'inferior being'. In other words, the Indian women are subservient to the male domination - her father, her brother, her husband and her son. They are always seen struggling hard for their liberation from the patriarchal clutches. More than any other genre of literature in fiction women attempt to portray their inner consciousness realistically. Elaine Showalter rightly observes in her great work *A Literature of Their Own*:

*It is important to see the female literary tradition in relation to the wider evolution of women's self awareness and to the way in which any minority group finds its direction of self expression relative to the dominant society.*²

Rukmini, the protagonist of the novel *A Nectar in a Sieve* is married to a poor tenant farmer, Nathan, in south Indian village. They have a daughter named Era and six sons — Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvan, Raja and Kuti. The problem arose after the arrival of a businessman of the town who built a tannery there. Naturally the evils of industrialization also arose rapidly. One of the evils of the society of the contemporary time was that in a poor family, a woman is always deserted by rural farmer due to poverty and hunger. This is what we find in the life of Era who is married to a farmer. Her husband deserted her only on the ground that she was barren. As a matter of fact women have to bear the brunt of male domination right from the beginning even up to modern time. Even today we see that a woman who is unable to bear a child is often maltreated by the male members of the family. This is the same thing which Era has to face in the novel. Due to poverty the family of Nathan and Rukmini is on the verge of starvation. The couple has no option but to accept to Arjun and Thambi. But the height of predicament lies in it that both Arjun and Thambi are dismissed from the work because of raising a voice of protest. Rukmini, the heroine of the novel, leaves the village in search of Murugan who himself left his wife and went away. On account of such troubles, both man-made and natural, Nathan dies and Rukmini returns to her village with Puli. Rukmini gives a very realistic picture of hardships, poverty and hunger of the people of the village in the following lines:

*This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. We live by our labour from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children, and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and this fact, too, is within our experience. In our life there is no margin for misfortune.*³

The greatest irony, or better say, the irony of ironies, in the book is the theme itself. It deals with the life of a typical poor Indian farmer in a typical Indian village. As all of us know, such a life is itself an irony. The farmer toils hard all his life but is always in debt, which he inherits from his ancestors. He works hard in scorching heat, chilly cold and heavy rains. Still he is not sure whether he will get anything out of the yield. The major share will be taken by the Zamindar and we know how relentless he is. The farmer has to pay Zamindar's share even if there is no harvest on account of drought, flood or anything whatsoever. And if he has no cash, he has to pay it by selling all his belongings even the honour of his women. Thus, money is built or embedded in the very situation in which he is born and condemned to live. The irony becomes even more poignant when he realizes that it is his fate decreed by the Almighty God. Here we get a glimpse of cosmic irony, often found in Hardy's novels esp. Tess.

It is interesting to note that Kamala Markandaya has shown a very beautiful east-west encounter in most of her novels particularly in *Some Inner Fury*. Her women characters are often seen suffering from the blows of this encounter of the west and the east. She means to express the erosion of tradition, Indian values by western modernity. Her women's characters become the mouthpiece of the writer. William Walsh rightly says:

*Her particular strength lies in the delicate analysis of the relationships of persons specially when there have more developed consciousness of their problems and are attempting to grope towards some more independent existence. She has been most successful and at her best, an impressive best, in dealing with the problem of the educated and middle class, and she has a gift for delineating the self imposed laceration of the dissatisfied.*⁴

It is interesting to note that Indian women's journey from cradle to the grave passes through the different stages. Right from her birth she is seen surrounded with so many misfortunes, societal restricts and loss of freedom. In spite of several social, natural and economic problems the women of Kamala Markandaya face the critical situation very bravely:

*They are like leaves of grass; the humblest, the most downtrodden, continually being rooted up and continually reappearing, pushing their ways, surviving all pressures and sprouting again with vigor and vitality. Sensitive, sensible and intelligent, they possess life affirming qualities.*⁵

Nalini is the central woman character of *A Handful of Rice*. She is a traditional woman. She is married to Ravi. Nalini has what Ravi lacks. She has some traces of Apu's uncomplaining temperament. She endures boldly all the challenges of life. She also faces poverty and other difficulty in a rural surrounding. But in spite of all her inner qualities, she is badly beaten by her husband, Ravi, and, that too, in her hour of pregnancy. Her character has been very beautifully presented by Sudhir Kumar Arora in his book, *A Study of Kamala Markandaya's Women*. Arora Observes:

*Here is stoic ungrudging attitude towards the sea of troubles. In fact, she adopts all those traditions and ceremonies, which were followed by her father, Apu. She is modest and humble on account of this traditional upbringing. She is satisfied with her present condition and does not pine for what is not. She understands that the Memsahibs for whom, Apu and Ravi work, belong to a different class. She never appreciate displaying of female anatomy which is shameless.*⁶

The plight of women which Kamala Markandaya has presented is very much near to the description of a number of Indian women novelists including Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, and Shobha De. But the presentation of Indian women by Kamala Markandaya is very natural. She has presented not only the rural women but also the urban women who have to face a different type of predicament in this materialistic world. Pravati Mishra is right when she says:

*Women, in Kamala Markandaya's novels, fall into a distinct too fold pattern: those who belong to the economically poor and middle class society and those who belong to an affluent and upper class society. While the former group behaves in traditional ways of quiet and helpless acceptance of pain and suffering the latter group stands up against injustice to women and asserts a distinct density for the Indian women in terms of close participation in social and political events and movements.*⁷

Conclusion

Thus, the women characters of Kamala Markandaya try their best to search for an identity in an averse patriarchal domination. Their positive attitude gives a great strength in order to face social operation. Their strength does not lie in the muscular power but in their inherent capacity for compassion, sacrifice and acceptance inevitable. In other words the women characters of Kamala Markandaya are the progenitor, sub tanner and nourished of the human species and the guardian of culture.

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