

SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES OF INDIAN WOMAN IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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Indian writing in English since Toru Dutt deserves to be better understood rather than condemned as suffering from superiority complex. To Indian writers English served the purpose of an intellectual means of expression. The Indian novelist in English had attained a dignified stature. Those Indians who settled on the foreign language for creative literature had an uphill task ahead, that of projecting their country's heritage in an alien idiom. Apart from the big three - Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, a host of other writers such as Bhabhani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Pravar Jhabwala, Nayantara Sahgal, Arun Joshi, Chaman Nahal, Salman Rushdie, Namita Gokhale and Amitav Ghosh are Indian novelists writing in English relentlessly exploring Indian themes. Their significant contribution demands a serious reckoning.

Cultural conditioning does affect the literary expression of women. Intellectually fed on literary models by men, women writers till recently have been creating a literature of 'imitation' despite the vast leadership they have enjoyed. Universally applicable to women writers everywhere, this factor of cultural conditioning acquires an important dimension in any discussion of Indian women novelists also. Put in the historical perspective of Indian writing in English, analysis of novels by Indian women writers in English reveals new dimensions of their contribution to the mainstream of Indian literature. Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Attia Hosain, Anita Desai and Ruth Pravar Jhabwala are some of the important names. Kamala Markandaya occupies a special position among these writers. A brief analysis of her novels would reveal her South Indian identity and expatriate existence. Markandaya's writings are a reflection of her close observation and understanding of Indian life. In her artistic creation and portrayal of Indian life, her western education has stood her in good stead. Kamala Markandaya stands apart from these novelists because of her depiction of reality in a natural way. She allows her characters to follow their own minds and face life as a natural man should do. There is no exaggeration in presenting the sufferings of the people.

Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is set in a village and examines the hard agricultural life of the Indian peasant; *Some Inner Fury*, which includes highly educated woman and her English lover who are torn apart by the Quit India campaign of the time, has to do with the quarrel between Western and Indian influences, as they are focused in a marriage; *A Silence of Desire* deals with the middle class, and *A Handful of Rice* with the city poor; *Possession* moves from the West End of London to a South Indian village, and is centred on the conflict of Eastern spirituality with Western materialism.

Markandaya has not the same intimacy and familiarity with all these areas of life, and she has indeed been criticized by Indian critics for a certain lack of inwardness with the life of the Indian poor. Her particular strength lies in the powerful social realism that she analyses through various interpersonal relationships of her characters. She has, too, the genuine novelist's gift for fixing the individuality of the character within the given sociological milieu in a reasonably convincing social context. She has been most successful and at her best, in dealing with the problems of the educated middle class, and she has a gift in particular for delineating the self-imposed laceration of the dissatisfied, which is partially the direct extension of the social realism and partially of their own mental complex. Her works have received critical acclaim for their themes, and a rich social realism, and with each successive novel she seems to have achieved distinction as an important social realist and a visionary.

All of Markandaya's novels reveal her deep preoccupation with the changing Indian social and

political scene, her careful conscious craftsmanship and her skillful use of the English Language for creative purpose. She excels in recording the inner workings of the minds of her characters, their personal perplexities and social confrontations. She has highlighted the suffering of ordinary Indians. In this connection S.K.Krishna Swamy observes: Her concerns being, predominantly socio-economic, her novels offer us a savage tale of brutality, ignorance, mental and physical bludgeoning that the ordinary Indian, man and woman is subjected to.(86)

Her presentation is quite authentic because of her having a personal experience of both the cultures. She gradually advances the domain of her novels from the joys and sorrows of simple folks, always interpreting the clash in terms of emotional follies and foibles of individual characters. Such portrayal gave tone and direction to her mind by awakening her to the realities of society, particularly the plight of Indian Women. Writing about Markandaya, Stephen Ignatetus Hemeway remarks: Markandaya is definitely one of the most productive, popular and skilled Indo-Anglian novelists and a superb representative of the growing number of Indian Women writing serious literature in English.(52)

Markandaya is gifted with artistic perfection and simple expression. The realistic approach to life is the hallmark of her social vision. She presents life as she sees it. She neither idealises it nor denounces it. She sees life with her own stark naked eyes and portrays it without any bias or colour. In fact, she never takes sides with any of her protagonists. Her portrayal of village life in transitional state is simply superb. She describes urban squalor with equal mastery: With her impeccable representational realism and innovative description of the Indian arcadia, Markandaya achieves a perfect poise between the rural reality and the disciplined urbanity of Art.(190)

Markandaya has deftly described all the social customs, traditions and conventions in rural areas of India. She has first-hand knowledge of South Indian villages, the real conditions of the villagers, their miseries, their sufferings and their real ways of life. She has depicted all the hardships faced by the poor peasants in her novels. Like Mulk Raj Anand, she wants to bring reforms in Indian society. Her fiction rooted in the Indian Soil and ethos, has a subtle social purpose. In a sense she fictionalizes the sociology of India. Her intention is to awaken the polite society to the real problem.

Markandaya started writing her novels at a time when India was in the vicious grip of many problems like racial differences, poverty, starvation emanating from natural calamities like famine and draught. Markandaya treats fiction as a medium to teach humanity the real meaning of life. To her life is a mixture of happiness and sadness. Both these aspects of life have been realistically depicted by her. All racial conflicts, cultural differences, temperamental disparities and sexual perversions find true portrayal in her novels. She has drawn a realistic picture of rural India contrasted with the glamorous westernized world of England. Her stay in South villages before marriage and her settlement in England after marriage enabled her to draw a realistic picture of east and west.

Markandaya loves to portray man-woman relationship. Her characters are strong and daring. They are strong-willed and face all the odds of life with courage. Her protagonists are not idealists but are flawed with common weaknesses of mortals. They believe that despair, despondency, disappointment, conflict, frustration and struggle are the integral part of life.

Markandaya's literary debut, *Nectar in a Sieve* dramatizes the tragedy and trauma of a traditional Indian village and a peasant family whose livelihood depends on rain, rice and land. Rukmani and Nathan, who knit and knot the tapestry of the novel, have become the prey of the two evils-Zamindari system and capitalist economy. The novel portrays the narrator heroine Rukmani who earns the prominent position in the novel and she too embodies the central consciousness. On the thematic plane the novel becomes the saga of a peasant woman Rukmani, the soul of the story

She won name and fame all over the world after the publication of her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. She is blessed with an extraordinary vision of life. As a novelist she has a practical feel of life in rural areas as well as in urban centres. Initially she lived in a south Indian village and closely observed the rustic life with a sense to get basic knowledge of village life in India. In her novels realistically depict the life of

villages, cities, husband-wife relations, social conflicts and attraction for modernism. In her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* she attempts to portray the true vision of life through her protagonists.

Nectar in a Sieve is a fictional epic on Indian life, revealing a rich gamut of human experience. This novel is a graphic portrayal of the peasants' life, their toil, torture, anguish, suffering, and above all, their tragedy. It has been compared with Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* and with Bhabani Bhattacharya's *'So Many Hungers'*; it may even be compared with Prem Chand's *Godan* and Rang Bhoomi. The comparison is true in terms of hunger and human debasement. It is a realistic portrayal of the surroundings and sufferings of human life. It is an epic of the Indian life at the grass-roots, a full view of the village world where peasants grow and live, suffer and endure and emerge more dignified, more human in their elements with their tattered rags, their dying moans and their obstinate clinging to the soil like the stump withered all over but its roots delved in the earth, which make Markandaya a social visionary par excellence. Rukmani and Nathan are individuals; they are also symbols of teeming millions, archetypal figures like Adam and Eve. Rukmani is the daughter of a village headman whose power gradually dwindles and pales into insignificance and she is married to a tenant farmer: "Who was poor in everything but in love and care for me." (NIS-49)

She is both sensible and sensitive. The mud hut, thatched, small, set near a paddy field which almost frightened her at the first look, gives her a sense of pride when she learns that it was Nathan who made every bit of it. She spends her days watching the seeds split, the shoots breaking through and the fruit ripening. And then things changed and the change came blasting its ways into their life in the form of tannery, the symbol of industrialization, in the form of flood and drought, Nature 'red in tooth and claw.' Hunger raises its head. Hunger appears like an Octopus in the story. It is the real evil, stronger than the original Satan that disturbed the bliss of Eden Garden. The eldest son Arjun joined the tannery against their wish, silencing them with the thunder of reality: "The important thing is to eat." (NIS- 185)

Awe, starvation and frustration are the characteristic feelings which dominate the villages. It is "fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger, fear of the blackness of death" (NIS-79). Rukmani says, 'hope and fear' are the twin faces in the villages that drag the people first in one direction and then in another: "Fear, constant companion of the peasant, hunger, ever at hand to joy his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter." (79). Rukmani and her family bear the physical and spiritual pangs of indigence and degradation poignantly and they move back and forth in life. Rukmani, who loses her husband at the end of the novel, contemplates that he will come back to her life again: Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together. Then morning comes, the wavering grey turns to gold, there is a stirring within as the sleepers awake, and he softly departs. (NIS-7)

The story begins where it ends. Madhusudan Prasad says: *Nectar in a Sieve* has a neat circular structure. The beginning and end of the novel are closely connected, creating a circular structure." The subtitle of the novel, "A Novel of Rural India" lays stress on rural setting and its characters. Nageswara Rao rightly says:

The novel deals with the peasants, their activities, problems and anxieties, hopes and expectations, and joys and sorrows. It is therefore natural to find in it an emphasis on rural ethos and rural value system. (7)

Echoing similar views about Markandaya's realistic portrayal of rural problems faced by Rukmani, R.K. Srivastava comments: "Nectar in a Sieve deals mainly with the tragic issue of life-hunger, pain and separation-the tone throughout the novel is reflective and philosophical as if Rukmani were indirectly accusing the heavenly powers on her Karma for ill-plight" (74).

Markandaya succeeds in presenting a woman's self in unadventurous social milieu. The role of Rukmani as an unsplit self is not a gesture of civility extended to tradition by the novelist, but the reality made potential by the nature of the culture in which she lives. She presents the paradigm that while playing the conventional role of mother and wife she does not forget her other role as a human being. A profound

self-knowledge can be attained not through separation and divided-self but through expansion and association.

Thus Markandaya uses fiction as a vehicle for communicating her vision of life. As a writer, she has clear perception of life in rural areas as well as in urban centres. She differs from other Indo-Anglian novelists in many ways. She focuses on the family structure to establish her themes in different novels. She is different from her contemporaries in that she vividly and with a rare understanding depicts the hard harsh realities of Indian life in all their horrifying and inhuman shapes and shades that makes Markandaya a social visionary.

Markandaya is against the oppression and exploitation in any form-political, economic, cultural or racial. It is, in fact, Rukmani's strength, an all-out human effort that sustains the novel. Nathan advises Rukmani to bend like the grass so that she would not break. Rukmani helps Kunti to deliver her child fathered by Nathan. Ira conceives an illegitimate child who is previously abandoned by her husband because of her infertility. The most ironic situation is that Rukmani who despises Kunti for her immorality has to accept Ira's prostitution and the illegitimate son too. Other important aspect of Markandaya social vision is her portrayal of man-woman relationship. Her characters are strong and courageous. They are not idealists but they possess the general weakness of the mortals. They know how to bend like grass and how to face the reality of life. The novel portrays its positive woman characters as ideal sufferers and nurturers. The cause of her suffering springs mainly from poverty and natural calamity. The women are from the rural sections of society.

Social relationships remain incomplete without understanding of Markandaya's depiction of women characters in various shades. Markandaya has presented the life and travails of a peasant woman, Rukmani. She faces so many odds of life like famine, death, adultery and prostitution in the condition of bone chilling poverty and fights against them constantly. She has been able to win the sympathy of the readers by her astonishing will-power that endures a life without hope. Her plight resembles that of Nalini of *A Handful of Rice*. What we witness is the transformation of a carefree girl into an exploited and victimized woman trying to pull her family through the harsh and cruel life of a big city.

Markandaya's novels reveal the evils and deficiencies in Indian life and society and warn her countrymen against slavish imitations of the west. However, novelist does not offer any ready-made solutions to the many problems facing the country. Her emphatic teaching is that India should preserve her soul and carve out her own destiny. In religion she should be proud of her great legacy and her constant aim should be the attainment of the purity, equipoise and altruism represented by the Swamy of *Possession* or *A Silence of Desire*. When the menace of poverty strikes Indian pastoral life and brings, despair, dependency, disappointment, conflict, only women rise to the occasion and tackle them confidently. They may be in pitiable plight but they do not give up their struggle. The novel *A Nectar in a Sieve* depicts the struggle of women. Kamala Markandaya's writings also illustrate how women fall victims to Indian Zamindari system.

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