Women in Kamala Markandaya's Novels – Trendsetters in Feminism

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Literature is the supreme and the most ingenious method of manifestation, enlightening or sustaining or reviving the various social movements. Srinivasa Iyengar quotes Gandhiji in relation to the use of English by the Indian writers to convey their message to the readers: "The purpose of writing is to communicate, isn't it? If so, say your say in any language that comes to hand" (Iyengar, IV). The portrayal of society in Indian literature is honest and truthful. Indian novel, in effect, is an end product of the Indian renaissance: it came into vogue as an upshot of the bearing of the west on Indian life and literature (Ramesh, 67). The transition may take different forms – status of life, ethnicity, bearings and ethics of men as well as the behavioral paradigm. The demeanour of the Indian novel is replete with Indian aesthetics, creative imagination and compassionate posture. Thus the novel becomes a social deliberation portending positive alternatives to the smothering negatives in life.

Feminism and feminist movements are discernable in every corner of the globe and hence are neither innovative nor unusual: "It (Feminism) emerged to be worldwide movement to secure a complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights – moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and so on" (Barche, 9). The fruition of the 'New Woman', demonstrating a new insight into her duties and responsibilities in family and society, is mainly aimed at the affirmation of her rights as a human being and her fortitude to attain gender equity with man. The ethnic Indian woman is rendered in an array of roles – mother, wife, daughter and sister. A monument of endurance and loyalty, she takes pride in service and self-sacrifice and enjoyed an enviable status during the Vedic age. Manu is crisp: "Where women are honored, there Gods are pleased; but when they are not honored, no sacred rites yield rewards."

Rig Veda decorates woman with compliments like *jaya, jani* and *patni*. But this adulation ebbs in course of time. The Maitrayani Samhita is derisive, equating women with dices and drinks and daughters become encumbrances. The stateliness of woman is somewhat restored in the modern era with forceful forays. Swami Vivekananda retorts: "educate your woman first and leave them to themselves." Annie Besant exudes positive trend: "The rising of India depends on the education of Indian women." The University Grants Commission decrees: "There cannot be educated people without educated women." The tenor of the extensive feminist literatures swerves in kind and style – docile, commanding and vociferous. The belligerent issues swirl around male chauvinism, sexist bias, psychological and physical exploitation, hegeministic inclinations of not only male but also female sections of society and the condescension of women's psychological, cultural, familial and spiritual quests. The statement of issues is tagged by solutions: expression of dissent in a mild manner, compromise through mediation or moderation, love or persuasion and burying oneself in a self-made exclusive environment, mostly escapist in style. The paradox of feminism is that the 'new' or 'enlightened' or 'modern' woman, intellectually on par with man or economically independent, is an understatement and far from existent. Ajit Garg dubs it: "...enslavement on two fronts: domestic and employment." Post independent women novelists' deliberations focused on the genuine predicament of women in the male chauvinistic society. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's axiomatic expression is quite terse and justifiably validated: "Women are natural story tellers even when they don't write or publish" (435). The catalogue includes Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Santa Rama Rau and Anita Desai. Of these, Kamala Markandaya is bifocal in presentation – characters and also themes relating to financial, political, social and cultural.

The post-colonial fiction is comprehensive in the optimization of the classic shift of women characters from "feminine" to "female". Elaine Showalter's proposition has this overtone of different phases in women liberation movement in the twentieth century (13). The earliest category internalizes the ideas and concepts of the contemporary humiliating tradition through replication. This trend is followed by the protest of the crunching shackles and advocating for their autonomy. The tertiary phase is the turning-inward phase, self-discovery phase, searching their own minds seeking identity of their own.

The adjustment of the Indian women novelists to the altered psychological pragmatism of Indian life after independence defines the progression towards stirred consciousness. In such a development, three archetypes of women emerge: women of the first class are hyper sensitive ham-fisted to cope with the environment and the mêlée and the inequality drive them to the

inevitable neurosis. The second brand reverberates with women who are mute victims and who convert themselves as idealists due to incessant pounding. The third breed of women is mature with self-awareness leading to 'sober' outlook and a 'fulfilment' and thus acclimatizing themselves to the realities of life. This perception escorts them in the development of value systems of their own and empowers them to defy the irrational social system.

Kamala Markandaya's novels explicate the action of women in identifying confirmatory solutions to apathetic state of existence. Perhaps her pictures are depressing or murky. But she signals a positive path – meaningful life is still a possibility with togetherness and mutual understanding.

Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is resilient and stoic and she emerges from a state of innocence to mellowness, defiance to concurrence. Her first exposure to her husband's place is shattering: "Rukmani wanted to cry. Merely a mud hut and nothing else...and she sank down" (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 50). This disappointment turns into admiration when she comes to know that her husband has built it himself for her. Her sensible remark about man-woman relationship is a lesson to many: "A woman, they say, always remembers her wedding night...but for me there are other nights...when I went to my husband matured in mind as well as in body" (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 66). She is a visionary when she releases the crucial quantity of rice, dhal and money for Ira's wedding and surprises Nathan, her husband. She transforms herself as a peasant's wife by learning the tricks from her friends, Kali and Janaki. Her fortitude comes to the fore on at least two occasions. She is so tolerant that she could remark about her poverty thus: "Want is our companion from birth to death, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?" (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 113). She has the serenity to console her husband who is down with physical and emotional crisis: "Have we not been happy together? Always, dear, always" (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 110). She reaches the summit of wisdom at the end and evaluates her life "....with calm of mind with all passion spent" (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 135). R.A. Singh observes: "Rukmani's spiritual stamina, heroic impulse, and love-like simplicity, love for her children, tolerance and respect for traditional values make her an outstanding character."

Mira, Roshan and Premala are the three icons in Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*. Mira, the upper middle class woman, is bounded by several restrictions on the domestic front. She audaciously breaks these shackles but this unfettered autonomy makes her restive and cross the threshold of family and land in perils: "It was out; the uncertainty, one's helplessness, the fear, the despair, never allowed into the consciousness but always existing there" (Markandaya, *Some*

Inner Fury, 66). Her safety is ensured by Kamala Markandaya's dictum – no roots, no survival. The impermanence of negative freedom leads her back to Mira's roots: "To keep our peace, we would have to go back then to the world from which we came, to which we could always return because it is a part of us..." (Markandaya, *Some Inner Fury*, 192). Roshan is forthright and progressive. She has a universal outlook about freedom and thus remains a role model to other women. Roshan symbolizes a refreshing foil to Mira in exposing the extensive vistas of the other free worldliness. A culturally non-conformist woman, Premala represents insecurity, isolation, bewilderment and vulnerability possessed by the traditional woman caught in the cultural flux and ending as a "non-person." The unifying factor of these diametrically dissimilar women is the imbalanced tussle between tradition and modernity.

Sarojini of *A Silence of Desire* is orthodox in every sense of the term. She is an ideal picture of a woman of her class, discharging her duties and responsibilities in every respect in the best manner. Even her rendezvous with the Swamy in seeking a cure for her illness comes within the bounds of her culture, tradition and societal norms. Dandekar, her husband, suspects the motive of her visits but sheds his distrust because there is a "...spiritual in growing which made it impossible for him to be whole so long as any part of her was missing" (Markandaya, A Silence of Desire, 115). Sarojini is an envoy of 'new and revolutionary' woman within the compass of family and society because she could record her voice of dissent without dislodging the values and principles of the institution of the family.

Lady Caroline Bell and Anasuya are the two dimensions of Indian women in *Possession*. Anasuya is traditional to the core – gifted, civilized yet uncommunicative and highly spiritual and represents the sect of women who could demonstrate that, as woman of means, a decent living is feasible even without a man. Caroline is a bundle of vices – fixated, self-centred and mercenary. She is a despot, a reminder of the British Raj in India.

Nalini of *A Handful of Rice* is the sheet anchor amidst the diverse themes – scarcity, tradition, moorings, morality and success ethics (Ramesh, 78). Being a woman of custom and manners, "Nalini never complained....he (her husband) had never heard her complain...neither of the ills of her pregnancy, nor of him" (Markandaya, *A Handful of Rice*, 165). Kamala Markandaya's unyielding fervour is to the fore in Nalini – the visible fragility becoming an asset through her faith in family bonds and personal relationships more than anything else.

Vasantha of *The Nowhere Man* is a stickler for Indian tradition. As a disciple of Gandhi, she could design a modest living even in England without ever discarding her penchant for religion and traditional values of India. Her religious zeal strengthens her to bear her sufferings

stoically – racial prejudices, turbulence in society and the trauma of her son marrying an English girl. Even at the end, she declares her marriage to be a happy marriage and thus makes Srinivas, her husband, stranded and crestfallen.

Amma, Aunt Alamelu, Saroja and Lalitha merit our attention in *Two Virgins*. Amma and Aunt Alamelu are rocks of tradition, the norm of moral behaviour. Nothing liberal in the name of western ideals and detrimental to the moral codes of tradition and culture is acceptable to them. For them, modernization is a deliberate deviation if it is not in compliance with core values of life. Lalitha has a strong inclination towards a western system of life which is boosted by her fickle nature, false thought that the traditional society is asphyxiating and obstinacy. Kamala Markandaya is blunt – women should never shy away from the tradition bound society with its own cherished and impressive values in search of the mirage – liberation.

Queen Manjula and Shanta Devi of *The Golden Honeycomb* are two characters through whom Kamala Markandaya juxtaposes independence and accountability and the presence of unquestioning obedience even in the higher strata of society.

Pleasure City underscores the need for strength of mind in women, eschewing timidity and passivity, to overcome the challenges in life. Zavera is so strong that Cyrus Contractor becomes blank longing for her in her absence.

Indian English Women writers have been substantially influential in their portrayal of women rich in essence – drawn directly from everyday life and infusing in them the discrete representative values, traditional as well as modern. Kamala Markandaya uses oriental approach in the explication of feminism. As K.S. Narayana Rao writes, her novels render traditionally moral, immoral and amoral attitudes and her women characters are better drawn than their male counterparts (69-70). With reference to Indian subcontinent, feminism is deemed to be at least in a limited measure successful in achieving women a responsible status in society. But feminism as a fight to attain the status of equality with men, it is far-off from its desired goals. The empathy and surrender are the outstanding traits of Markandaya's women. Her women are a class apart, though not comprehensive in perspective, in laying bare the human psyche enmeshed in the values of assorted tones.

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