

## **Cultural Perspective of Kamala Markandaya's Selected Novels**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Literature is a reflection of society. In other words, it reflects the culture of that society. The History of Literature is the history of society and also of that era. Reading Literature one goes through the culture of the past. When we read about our own culture we are more absorbed by our literature. The growth and development of Indian Literature in English are proof of this. Reading English Literature has motivated our educated men and women to use English as a tool to spread our culture and our heritage not only among the westerners but also to bring an awakening among our educated elite... Many writers like Tagore, Rajaram Mohan Roy, Bakim Chandra Chatterjee, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Gandhi came forward to share their thoughts through writings. Of these, novel writing became popular. The women writers who came after these writers began to write on the sensibility of Indian women. Kamala Markandaya is one of the early novelists. Though she lives abroad, she enables herself to portray the strength and weaknesses of Indian women characters and most of her women are protagonists in her novels. Two such characters have been taken for analysis to prove that women with fixed roots in our culture could be successful but not the other who has aped the foreign culture.

### **KEYWORDS**

Literature and Culture; Cultural Representations; Women Characters.

Storytelling is an art form through which any author can transmit a message or information or impart cultural tradition or morals. These narratives are shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, and cultural preservation. For a long time in India, this storytelling was in the form of oral tradition. Only in the 18th century, the format Novel becomes popular. In the beginning, it was started in Bengali. Tagore popularized this in Bengali and he began to write in English too.

The Indian novelist had a large audience with an educated class, a new

questioning of age-old social and religious dogma and a consuming urge for knowledge and interpretation of society. As the Indian novelist has an extraordinary cultural multiplicity to contemplate encompassing differences of age, caste, religion, wealth and politics, he/she is complementary to the modern economist, sociologist and psychologist. Hence even individual drama tends to have a broad social content and one life reflects another. The novels depict the individuals whose experience is in Indian culture.

This culture is reflected in the writings of Venkataramani, Raja Rao, MulkRaj Anand and R.K. Narayan, but women excelled in story-telling, especially of women's experiences. Women protagonists of women writers proved that their experiences reflect the society's culture. The predicament of women, her transformation, her changing facets, and her adaptability trace the growth and change of Indian society.

The present study centres on two characters of Kamala Markandaya – Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* and Premala in *Some Inner Fury*. The perspective is social as well psychological as they affect the context and quality of life at each stage. This raises a question: 'How does the relationship between a woman's objective roles and his subjective attitudes or values affect her overall life situations?' Of the two characters, one learns to adjust through the learning opportunities thrown open to her while the other is unable to. This becomes possible only through self-education, not through formal training. The strength of Indian women lies here.

This shows that education is a lifelong process. Indian women may lag in formal education, but she is in no way less intelligent than others. "Her education is rooted in the community starting from the family exerting crucial influence on the initial and continued development of its members in a truly lifelong dimension." (Mariadoss). This provides individuals and society with opportunities not only to change but also to participate and innovate.

The women characters of Kamala Markandaya's novels adopt 'Liberalism' and 'Liberationism'(Neil) through the process of life. Liberalism refers to the change within the established social order whereas Liberationism refers to the rapid and large-scale changes in the basic nature of the established order. These women act at the emotional and reflective levels. Whether it is Rukmani or Pramela, they

seek autonomy. Each one tries to speak for herself with the knowledge that this will change the self that is "being, taking and deciding" (Griffiths146).

Women in India may be perceived in two aspects:

1. The social structure
2. The social customs and institutions which affect women directly

Most of Kamala Markandaya's women characters are bound by the customs and social structure. Through these characters, the novelist presents "a drama of life rather than a dream of ideologies" (29). Being on terra-firm the novelist focuses upon the problems of the self and the inner life of women. The women who have innate strength or acquire this through observation and experience are successful; others are failures.

Pramela, an educated girl in "Some inner Fury", proves that in India "a marriage is performed to please everybody else except the principal partners in the union" (Krishnaswamy 185). It is disheartening to note how an educated girl accepts this and as a result, she is nothing else except the shadow of her husband. Temperamentally she is unsuitable to wed Kit. Though she admires Govind, she does not express her feelings.

The "innocent, modest, and utterly unpretentious" Pramela "wears shorts, plays tennis and throws parties" (Belliappa 56-57) for her husband's sake; she is not herself. The mask that covers herself makes her tense and rigid. Her efforts to satisfy her husband make her "end up being a non-person" (Krishnaswamy 184). The beliefs, the faiths, and the values of the society in which she was brought up suffocate her.

A revolutionary change in life occurs in her only after observing Roshan and Mira. This change in her makes her associate herself with an orphanage and a school with poor children. She sublimates her disappointment in married life by adopting a poor child, but her husband

does not like it. Her coy nature does not allow her to put a firm foot on this. She sacrifices her life in an attempt to foil her husband's destructive plans. The education she received does not help her to stand on her principle. It has not helped her "to maintain and improve the quality of life" (Wain 58).

The perspective of Rukmani is social as well as psychological. She has both individual and social roles. She is the last born of the family of a headman. She is aware of her father's power. Naturally, she dreams of a grand wedding. Unfortunately, when she reaches womanhood, her father loses both power and position. Added to this, by giving in marriage the three daughters of the family to rich men her father has little to offer by way of dowry to Rukmani. He manages to get only a tenant farmer as her husband. Even at the age of twelve, she understands the evils of the dowry system and she is victimized.

Though she is disappointed she has no other choice but to reconcile herself to the situation. She is petrified looking at her husband's mud house. She is baffled when neighbours congratulate her for having got a good husband. She is surprised to know that her husband has built the house with his own hands. After overcoming the preliminary shock she turns her attention to building her garden. This makes her a small-scale entrepreneur. Later she becomes a vegetable seller. She finds that "she changes with time. Throughout her life, she is indeed acting at her behest both a feeling level and also an intellectual, reflective one." (Griffiths 179-180).

She is happy in her paddy fields. She wants her son to work in the paddy fields. When her sons choose the tannery, she accepts the transition. When the landlord takes away the paddy fields she feels like a fish out of water. She says, "While there was land, there was everything nothing new, nothing whatever." (36). However, she overcomes the loss and decides to visit her son in the town. As an innocent villager,

she and her husband are cheated on by townsmen

Shocked but quickly composed Rukmani finds her way to earn money. They go to the quarry but are not used to this type of hard work, she offers herself as a letter writer. For the first time, she realizes the value of education. As she felt happy seeing her children writing the alphabet, now she feels proud. However, she is unable to compete with men. The patriarchal world drives her. This makes her strong and decides to earn money to get back to the village. Unfortunately, she loses her husband. This loss is irreparable to her, but she feels returning to the village is safe for her.

Her preference for village life makes her traditional and she proves Gandhi's statement 'the real India is in the village'. It does not mean that she is not adapted to changes. Though she wears lingam as per her mother's wishes, she consults Dr. Kenny and undergoes treatment secretly. She doesn't divulge this even to her husband. As she has been successful to get boys after the treatment, she follows the same with her daughter Irawaddy. Her mind is open to accepting good things from any quarter whether be it Indian or British. She knows that Kenny serves the downtrodden community.

She is a perfect mother. She knows Kutti will not live long but yet she looks after him with a balanced mind. She is aware that her daughter Ira sells herself to the tannery people to feed her ailing brother. Though she wants to stop her she is helpless. On his death, she accepts the Mongoloid son of her daughter though she knows that this is an illegal child. On her return from the town, she brings Puli, a leprosy-affected boy and leaves him under the care of Kenny.

As a perfect village woman, she loves freedom. When she goes to sell vegetables, she happens to meet women in Purdha living in Janana. She couldn't believe how one can be away from breathing fresh air. She gives a helping

hand to her husband in agricultural work and she is proud of that also. So she condemns the development of tanneries but at the same time is happy that this has caused the village to have a god hospital. Hardship in life has not hardened her feelings, but has rather mellowed her heart and softened her towards people. "She becomes the fulcrum of the family (Indra 69)

Each writing has its own cultural perspective. When this cultural perspective has a universal appeal it becomes classic. The Indian writing in English has established its ethnicity even with changing traditions. This ethnicity is the root of Indian culture; in other words, it is social culture. This culture makes the people accept the good things of life wherever they may be. Gandhi used to say that though he is against the British colonial system he is not against the Britishers. He knows *Kuran* and *Bible* as well as *Bhagavad Gita*.

Kamala Markandaya points out that Rukmani is able to differentiate the ills of society from the good and accept any type of work. Not only she is happy even in adverse circumstances but also makes her husband happy, Ira comfortable, encourages Puli, adopts the Mongoloid

child, and admires Kenny though she defends certain traditional ways of life in her society.

A village woman is open to all changes but the same attitude is not with Pramala, a graduate. Her education has not helped her in decision-making. She is unable to change or even convince her husband of the artificiality of the parties. The ill effects of aping foreign culture should have been pointed out by her. Further when she involves herself in devoting her time to the poor and when her husband is irritated she could not point out the serving attitude of a foreign priest to the Indian children. Her muteness infuriates Kit who goes to the extent of plotting to get rid of the children.

A study of the women of Kamala Markandaya has proved that Indian women are made to adopt two contradictory roles-the nurturing caretaking and the passive helpless role. She is expected to shift herself between these two roles. The women with strong roots are successful while others are not. Reading these novels a student would understand the innate capacity of Indian women and also would know the illness of aping foreign culture.

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