

## Woman as a Major Character in Kamala Markandaya's Selected Novels

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine and explore the study of Woman as a Major Character in Kamala Markandaya's Novels: *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *Possession* and *Two Virgins*. Markandaya's novels are marked for their use of women characters as her spokespersons. She published eleven impressive novels and in all the novels the woman characters are glorified. The key protagonists in most of her novels are female characters who are in constant search for meaning and value of life. In some of her novels she presents an existential struggle of a woman who denies to flow along the current and refuses to submit her individual self. Markandaya was master in the depiction of female characters in her novels.

### KEYWORDS

Individual Self; Female Characters.

What Ruskin said about Shakespeare that 'he has no heroes but heroines,' is quite true in the case of Kamala Markandaya, we can say that "She has no heroes but only heroines". Her women characters are peculiarly memorable: Rukmani, Mira, Caroline Bell, Saroja and Lalitha. She had a particular interest in analyzing women characters and suggesting, as in *Two Virgins*, the unusual poignancy of their fate. In her most of the novels the narrators are likely to be female and, if not women, the narrative will present a woman's perception in the main. It shows the value of women in the society as well in the works of Markandaya

Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* represents an eternal, universal mother figure bound by love and affection to hearth and home. Her family also supports her in her battle against her sufferings but many of the members of her family die

during this struggle for survival. Such a human spirit sends a powerful message that life needs to be taken as it is but one must not give in to adversities easily. It conveys the message that God helps those who help themselves. Rukmani presents to us a heart-rending tragedy of peasantry in India suffering immense loss. Her character has been sketched in such a way that brings out a sensitive woman in her – someone who is doomed to live an unhappy married life due to the tyranny of custom – a person dehumanized by society, trying to endure all her troubles. Despite all this, she shows her spirit that is as strong as steel but quite humane. Her human spirit ensures that she endure starvation, remain employed even in the face of industrialization, and refuse to succumb to the vagaries of life. This seems to epitomize the power of hope and the willingness to adapt, to change, stick to family values;

endure conflicts between the traditional and the modern etc.

Rukmani and her daughter Ira endure blow after blow from beginning to the end of the novel, but it is Rukmani who endures more due to poverty, famine, divorce of a barren daughter, death of her sons, disintegration of family and her daughter's helpless condition which forces her into prostitution and ultimately her husband's death. In biological terms, a woman is treated as a receiver, who undertakes her journey from parental home to her husband's house in order to bear children for her man, and experience motherhood. Rukmani not only serves that purpose, she also maintains her poise, self-assurance, maintains her calm in the most critical of situations, and always tries to bring happiness to her family. She seems to prove the aptness of the dictum that "No burden is too heavy if it is carried with love".

Even Ira, like her mother Rukmani, is also able to survive against the difficulties that await her in the course of her life. In fact, she was born as an unwelcome child to her parents. Both Rukmani and Nathan are unhappy because they wanted a son but were blessed with a girl child. Nathan wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on land, not a daughter who would take a dowry with her and leave nothing but a memory behind. Despite this truth Ira grows up quite fast and when she is thirteen years old, Rukmani starts thinking of her marriage. Rukmani and Nathan impose a lot of restrictions on her and Ira is bewildered by it all. She is unable to understand the reason for the curtailment of her freedom but does not complain even once. When she is fourteen years old, her parents decide to marry her away and manage to find a boy who would not ask for a dowry of more than one hundred rupees. Motherhood eludes Ira for two years after her marriage and she is denounced by her in-laws as a barren woman and is sent back

to her parental home. But by staying at her parent's home she becomes great helpful to her parents. She finds it difficult to bear the sight of her younger brother, Kuti, dying of hunger and decides to take to prostitution to ward off his hunger. Ira uses the money earned from her profession as a sex-worker to bring food, fruits and milk for Kuti in a desperate attempt to save his life but cannot do so, and Kuti loses his life. Starvation compels even the most honest of the people to commit any small or great crime which may never have crossed his/her mind. Ira bears an illegitimate child which looks unnaturally white and fair, giving lie to the charge, as it were, that she was a barren woman. Rukmani, who detests Kunthi because she is a sex-worker, has no option but to accept helplessly the fact of her daughter Ira is one.

In her second novel *Some Inner Fury*, Markandaya has bestowed the mode of living of an affluent society in the background of the political upsurge of 1942. It is a novel set during the Quit India movement of 1942 and is, thus, a novel of violence and destruction. Here again the narrative is told by a woman Mira who is an affluent middleclass Indian girl whose family becomes tragically involved for and against the freedom struggle. Mira herself is torn between her Indian Patriotism and her love for an Englishman. Mira and Richard's love affair fails to come to fruition due to the fury of the Quit India Movement and the lovers are torn apart. It is a tragic commentary upon waste and futility with Mira sorrowing for her dead lover who died in riot and for the indifference of time and fate that stand in the way of some powerful social forces and juggernauts of change. So Mira says:

It is all one, I said to myself. In a hundred years it is all one, and still my heart wept, tearless, desolate, silently to itself. But what matter to the universe... if now and then a world is born, or a star should die... if here or there a man should fall, or

a head or heart should break. (p. 285-286)

Despite of the tragic departure of Mira and Richard, the novel ends with a note of patriotism as Mira sacrifices her personal happiness for the sake of greater national values.

*Possession* is a novel dominated by two striking characters: the beautiful, wilful and a young British widow Lady Caroline Bell who comes to visit India, and an illiterate, though gifted peasant boy, Valmiki, who is a talented painter. Lady Caroline comes to know of Valmiki from a sophisticated Indian lady, Ansuya. She goes to the village where Valmiki lives with Ansuya. No sooner does she meet Valmiki than she is able to discover talent in this boy. Her urge for power and possession leads her to take Valmiki away from his village. Valmiki goes to meet his guru the Swami who is aware of his talent. With the Swami's permission and blessings, he goes to London with Lady Caroline to be a part of what is said a better society. But he gradually becomes conscious that he is no more than a diamond in her necklace because the Lady's ultimate intention is to use Valmiki's talent and derive benefit from his art under the pretext of love. The peasant boy realizes this, and returns to the Swami in India. Indeed Caroline gives him freedom from want and poverty, but she stifles his spontaneous activities by demanding returns. With Caroline's bewitching power he feels uprooted from his soil and experiences emotional alienation and suppression. Caroline stoops to conquer and tries to get the possession of the brilliant boy but in vain. She makes a last, desperate though unsuccessful attempt to take him away yet again and says: "One day he will want to be mine again. I shall take care to make him want me again and on that day I shall come back to claim him." (p. 232)

In *Two Virgins*, Markandaya narrates yet again an unconvincing tale of Indian village life by contrasting between

two sisters, Lalitha, the "child of grace", who yearns to become a "town miss" and Saroja, the "child of soil" and the "country miss". The novel attempts to probe into the mental and psychological states of two young girls of upbringing middle class. The author portrays the questing outward of the two sisters: their lives are shaped by the influences of their childhood environment; they strive out towards the city, the larger life beyond the unknown, and they want to feel free. By imposing their growing awareness of their own sensibilities, the author shows how they, though sisters under the same paternal roof, develop differently.

Lalitha is born in a typical middle class family of Appa and Amma. She leaves her restricted village life and moves into the promising city life, thinking that her career may be crushed under the communal weight of the outdated social systems. Through her experiences the author projects the outcomes of new values, new social codes, cultural practices and life styles.

As Saroja grows, she observes her sister emerging from her rural middle class background and excelling her limitations rusticity and social barriers. She joins the film industry in the city but cannot succeed in her ambition to uplift her social position. Arnold Wesker, the champion of working class, depicts in his play *Roots* (1959) the dilemma of an educated girl Beautie who is from rural and peasant background and who struggles against social stigma. Lalitha like Beautie has been portrayed as a rebel against the existing social conventions which tend to resist any change and advancement that the youth aspires.

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.

In her novels Kamala Markandaya traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation. She has traced

a woman's transformation from self-sacrificing Rukmani in her first novel to self-asserting Mohini in her ninth novel. Though Markandaya is not alive today, she has made herself immortal in English literature by creating such great female figures in her fictions.

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