



SOCIAL REALISM IN THE NOVELS OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *NECTAR IN A SIEVE, POSSESSION AND A HANDFUL OF RICE*

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ABSTRACT

*The term 'Realism' in art or literature refers to the presentation of things accurately in real life. Authors use their own style in presenting things that happen accurately in art and add moral values to their presentation. Many writers such as Bhabini Bhattachariya, R.K.Narayan and Ruth Prawar Jhabvala have presented realism in their fictions. Like Kamala Markandaya, the other writers had portrayed the different types of realism in their works. There are different types of realism in literature. They are classified as follows: Social realism and Cultural realism. These types of realism are well portrayed by Kamala Markandaya in her novels, especially in Nectar in a Sieve, Possession and a Handful of Rice. The common social element found in all these three novels is hunger. In her first novel, Nectar in a Sieve, Nathan the head of the family died due to starvation. He was unable to earn bread for himself as well as his family. Valmiki was also sent along with Lady Caroline because of his poverty. This has been clearly portrayed by the author in the words of Anusuya, the narrator of the story, in the novel Possession. Ravishankar, a learned man, becomes a smuggler in order to provide food and clothing for his family, but he fails in his attempt. These different types of realism are brilliantly described by the author. In Nectar in a Sieve, several incidents have been quoted from the lives of Rukmani and Nathan in order to show that they suffered a lot due to hunger and how the East – West conflict ruined their lives. **Key words:** East – West conflict, cultural interaction, exploitation of the weak, industrialization, resultant identity crisis.*

INTRODUCTION

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It is confidently affirmed that Indo-Anglican Literature has made remarkable progress, particularly in the field of fiction, after the attainment of our freedom in 1947. During the post –independence period, the Indian novel grew in variety and stature. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan revealed in their own manner the various possibilities of Indo-Anglican fiction.

The emergence of women novelists in Indo-Anglican Literature took place as early as in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But it was only after independence that they could make solid contribution to Indo-Anglican fiction. The post independence has brought to the forefront a number of well-known women novelists who have enriched Indo-Anglican fiction by their feminine sensibility. Krishna Rao (1972) says, “In the development of Indo-Anglican novel, the feminine sensibility has achieved an imaginative self-sufficiency which merits recognition in spite of its relatively manifestation”. Indian women writers in recent decades have produced abundant literary output. These writers probe into human relationship since it is closely connected with the mind and heart. In order to make the process of change smooth and really meaningful, women writers have taken upon themselves this great task of their crusade against established traditions. It is only after the Second World War that women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian fiction in English. Of these writers, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala are unquestionably the most outstanding.

About the author

Kamala Markandaya, an Indian by birth, married an English man and settled in England. Born in an aristocratic Brahmin family of South India in 1924, she had travelled widely and thereby developed a keen power of observation of life. She is also very familiar with the East-West confrontation and the resultant identity crisis. As a writer, hailing from a colonial country, it is quite natural that her sympathies should be on the side of human and life, against machinery, against exploitation of the weak, against war and violence.

With her output of eleven novels, Kamala Markandaya is one of the distinguished and established writers in India today. India is a country of her birth and England, her country of her abode, and hence her writings reveal the cultural interaction and synthesis of both the countries. She is one of those writers who have made aware of their Indianness as well as of the differences in the two systems of values: one rather required, the other inherited and often taken for granted. In her works, she deals with various social problems relating to unemployment, rural society and the urban India. As such, she merits special mention by virtue of her achievement and feminine sensibility. Among Indo-English women novelists, Mrs. Kamala Markandaya enjoys a remarkable position because she presents various themes in her novels.

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Kamala Markandaya's concern with the cultural upheaval in India consequential to the modern West impinging upon the traditional east is quite understandable. In the words of Prof. Dhawan (1995), "The encounter between the diametrically opposite East and West in the context of human relationships and cultural values constantly engages her attention". As she herself is the product of both the oriental and the occidental cultures, it is clear to see her experience filtered through the consciousness of her fictional characters.

***Nectar in a Sieve* –Reflection of rural India**

Her first novel, '*Nectar in a Sieve*' discusses the problems of rural India, in details to the Western students. She tries her best to manifest the common problems connected with Indian farmers. Nathan and Rukmani represent Indian farmers who face unlimited trials and tribulations of life. This novel based on the traditional pattern of life in countless villages all over India is a passionate cry of protest against social injustice.

Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya (1996) is a relatively short novel that introduces to the Western students the life in rural India and the changes that occurred during the country's British colonization.

Although easy to read, the novel is lyrical and moving and can be read on a variety of levels. On the most basic level, it is the story of an arranged but loving marriage and rural peasant life. On another level, it is a tale of indomitable human spirit that overcomes poverty and unending misfortune. Finally, it is a novel about the conflicts between a traditional agricultural culture and a burgeoning industrial capitalistic society. The novel touches on several important social phenomena: the importance of traditional cultural practices, people's reluctance to change, and the impact of economic change.

Feminism portrayed in village

Nectar in a Sieve is the sad story of a large poverty stricken Hindu family in a remote rural village in Southern India. Despite valiant efforts, the family failed to extricate itself from abject poverty caused by hardships of nature and economics. This poverty forced the only daughter into prostitution and caused three sons to leave the village to seek employment. With very little to eat, it was a miracle the family remained alive. In spite of their hardships, the family exhibited love, contentment, and hope that their situation would improve, but this hope never became a reality.



Plot and character are the most important elements in a work of fiction; characterization holds an important position. Mrs. Kamala Markandaya's characters reveal a tremendous variety. Her novels contain both the English and the Anglo-Indian characters. Her characters are realistic and convincing. Nayantara Sahgal (1912), a distinguished women novelist appreciates Mrs. Markandaya's art of characterization. She observes:

"She (Mrs. Kamala Markandaya) develops her characters very well, more so than men writers. I am not saying that because I am a woman, but her characters seem to be made of flesh and blood" (The Hindustan Times Weekly, 1975).

Industrialization not only mars the natural beauty of the countryside, but it also creates various problems. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the tannery owners invaded Rukmani's village with "chatter and din and had taken from us the maiden where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us". Kamala Markandaya presents South Indian life both in its traditional, conservative and rural aspects, with convincing sincerity and fascinating power. In the pre-independence era, Mulk Raj Anand presented the peasant's tale of woe and suffering in the rural society. Kamala Markandaya, with her capable representational realism and evocative description of rural atmosphere, achieves perfect poise between the rural reality and disciplined urbanity of tragic delineation of the effect of poverty natural disaster and unwelcome modernization upon a peasant family.

Origin of the quest

Kamala Markandaya has chosen the title for this novel from a sonnet "Work without hope" written by S.T Coleridge in the year 1825; the last couplet of the sonnet clinches the reflection and also reveals the deep – seated anguish of the poet.

To the poet all nature seems to be at work with hope. Even winter, unpleasant as it is, has the hope of spring following it. The poet, on the contrary, finds himself standing aloof from the rest because he feels that he has to work with hope. His life is a life of toil without any hope. He naturally thinks that his labours are most often without any hope of success. When one works without any hope of success, all the work becomes as useless as attempting to draw *Nectar in a Sieve*. The poet expresses his intense awareness of his personal loneliness and a note of despair in the couplet from which the title of the novel has been chosen.

Spiritual power of India

Possession (1984) is Kamala Markandaya's fourth novel; the others being *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury* and *A Silence of Desire* (Markandaya's 1996; 1957). This novel is in a

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sense, a continuation of A Silence of Desire. The Swamy appears again but he is a “modern” Swamy in the sense that he has admirers in the most sophisticated circles. In *Possession*, his antagonist is the formidable Caroline Bell –“rich, divorced, and well-born”; he has spirited away the Tamil rustic boy, Valmiki and made a painter and a paramour of him, Srinivasa Iyengar (1968) says.

In *Possession*, the author talks in the voice of Anusuya how Valmiki, the goatherd, was forbidden by his own family. He was a gifted painter and there is none to care about this poor boy, except Swami. Here also hunger plays a vital role in Valmiki’s family. The boy was taken away from the family by paying a little compensation (rupees 5000) to the head of the family. His father agrees to send his son with Lady Caroline in order to save his other family members from hunger. In the later part of the novel, the author speaks about the spiritual values of India in the words of Swamy. The peasant boy throws away the materialistic life that he got from Lady Caroline and returns to India.

Ultimately the Swami wins and Caroline suffers discomforts. All *Possession* is slavery or perilous precariousness. What we try to possess is taken away, sooner or later. Val loses Ellie, Annabel, and even Minou, the monkey; and Caroline loses Val. It is giving, not talking; it is losing, not possessing – that paves the way to fulfillment.

Though at the end of the novel Caroline authoritatively says: “One day he will want to be mine against shall take care to make him want me again and on that day I shall come back to claim him”. East and West remain as they are. The two entirely different cultures will never meet. This is the message that one gets after reading this novel. Kamala Markandaya herself an expatriate writer with understanding about the unique and at the same time vastly different cultures makes this dramatic story of contemporary east and west memorable.

Morality hides behind Hunger

A Handful of Rice is the natural sequence of *Nectar in a Sieve*. *Nectar in a Sieve* reveals the misfortunes that one normally encounters in village and *A Handful of Rice* does the same in the town. Like Rukmani, Ravi is also thronged by misfortunes (Markandaya, 1986). But Ravi’s misfortunes are mainly due to social injustice, and they seem natural.

When the novel begins, Ravi is chased by a policeman and Ravi breaks open into Apu’s house. From that moment, the course of action of the story advances clearly and smoothly. Though the whole novel is a long and continuous stretch of narrative, it is made interesting by the simple but crisp narration. The past life of Ravi is intimated to the readers only when he goes back to Damodar. Remembrances of the past and dialogues with Damodar are two of

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the secondary methods used to unfold the narrative. An attempted act of violence marks the beginning and the end of the novel. In both the cases, violence is averted in the beginning by forces beyond Ravi's control, and at the end by Ravi's own sense of goodness. But between these two episodes, Ravi has undergone a painful experience which teaches him to stick to the right side of the conscience even in utter poverty. On the whole, *A Handful of Rice* is a well told story which begins dramatically and progresses smoothly towards the end sustaining interest throughout.

Kamala Markandaya's fourth novel *Possession* and the sixth *The Coffee Dams* are full of obscure language. But *A Handful of Rice* which appeared in between them has a simple but forceful style. The sentences are not only short and crisp but also rich with metaphors. The novel records the experiences of Ravi and so the style of the novel is determined by his experience.

The description is realistic. The author is able to capture the actual moments of life on several occasions. Ravi's courting of Nalini and his marriage procession in the car is the best examples. Ravi's helplessness when he realizes that he is unable to save the life of his son for want of money and his inner temptations urging to join Damodar are all realistically described.

Like Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya has seen both East and West as she has lived in England and in India for a long period. In her novels particularly in *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Possession* and *A Handful of Rice* she has portrayed the conflicts and tensions between these two opposite ways of life. She presents the conflict of these two different cultures with a rare penetration, understanding and realism. Men, as well as women characters in her fiction, react in different ways to the Indian culture and Western culture.

Conclusion

One perceptible effect of growing westernization and urbanization has been the gradual collapse of warmth and sincere love and the birth of commercialized love. Nathan and Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* continue to remain models of loving husband and wife, but their daughter, Ira and son, Murugan – the product of industrialized nation – have no qualms in forsaking their spouses. Ira's Sacrapani and Murugan's wife's child are clear examples of the commercial love and sex.

Every writer's own vision is not only unique but also peculiar. His or her perspective is shaped by the experience he or she gets of the world around him. A writer's perception may also be influenced by national ethos. Writers like Markandaya who were born in India and

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settled in England are positioned at a vantage point which gives them the committed involvement. Kamala Markandaya, who married an Englishman, chose to live with him in a country which is not her own, is familiar with the East West tussle and the resultant identity crisis.

East and West never meet. Each has its specific and distinct features of philosophy, culture and way of life. Despite this fact, in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, the West is presented as something dangerous and harmful, wielding its evil power on East which is known for its purity and austerity. Love, which is beyond caste, creed and community, unites a man and a woman. When the question of identifying oneself with one's own country arises, even love loses its meaning and human consideration.

The most popular and much sought after and explored theme is East – West encounter. Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya Ruth P. Jhabvala and Anita Desai are the leading novelists who have employed this theme in their novels. But it is Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* that is probably the best novel dealing with the clash between East and West. The novel is an evocation of Truth and reflects the tradition of India and its vitality especially in its encounter with the West. India is seen not as an area on the map, but as an idea.

The conflict between the East and West is presented on the individual level and between industry and agriculture as the product of both the western and the eastern cultures. Kamala Markandaya reflects her own experience through the awareness of her fictional characters. There is no doubt about the fact that Kamala Markandaya is on the side of the human and life and she is against exploitation of the weak against war and violence.

It is worthwhile and not out of context here to draw a comparison between Kamala Markandaya and the Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. Both of them are expatriate writers. The former married an Englishman and settled with him in Britain. But the latter, who is of European origin, married an Indian. Thus both of them chose to live in a country alien to them. Again both of them show the committed involvement and at the same time keep the necessary distance in order to bring in the expatriate experience into their fictional focus.

Markandaya's handling of the British and the Indians deserve brief comment. She shows deep intimacy with the British as can be seen from her numerous detailed and vivid portraits. She does unmask their hypocrisy and arrogance and related faults in a bold and forthright manner, but does so as someone who deeply loves. Her partiality towards her own people is obvious, but she does not overlook the limitations and weakness. Though true to life in every way, her novels are not simple documentaries; they imaginatively recreate life and manners so that her characters and situations not only stand by themselves in their own right, they

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illuminate the culture and way of life of a whole people. Markandaya has created a body of contact literature par excellence.

To conclude, Kamala Markandaya, influenced by the western culture, strongly believes in the power of science to improve the material conditions and promote progress and equality among all men and women. Though she has totally adopted western ways of life, outlook. But a perusal of her novels throws the hint that the two diametrically opposite cultures, namely the oriental and the occidental will never travel in the same direction.

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