

Social Consciousness in Select Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya has occupied an extrusive place among post-colonial writers as one of the leading Indian woman writers in English both because of her deep insight into eastern as well western society. But what is most striking is her wonderful and realistic depiction of Indian society in its true colors and complexities. The main focus of my paper is the representation of the Social Consciousness in select novels of Kamala Markandaya. She is blessed with an unexpected exposure of life. As a writer she has a practical feel of life in rural areas as well as in urban centers. Initially, in her impressionistic years of life, she lived in a south Indian village and closely observed the traditional ways of lifewhich gave her in depth consciousness of village life in India. She spent her later part of life in London. This firsthand experience of both the societies, culture and tradition. This filled her writing artillery with clear consciousness of Indian life, she presents the prisms of tradition and modernity, cultural dualism, the assimilation and confrontation of eastern and western culture, continuity and transformation in Indian spiritual stance and the pragmatic western culture. The present paper is an endeavor to highlight the kaleidoscopic view of Indian life in its simplicity and its continuous clash and coalesce with the forces of the west. But the main attempt is to highlight the profound consciousness of Kamala Markandaya about the swiftly changing society, as depicted in her exemplary novels 'Silence of Desire' and 'A Handful of Rice'.

Key Words: *Social Consciousness, post-colonial, Modernism, Traditionalism*

Social Consciousness forms an essential part in the volume of Indian post-colonial writing, since the writers themselves were a part of a swiftly changing social set-up. They were conscious of the social changes – the west and east coming together and its consequences that the Indian society was facing, so it is an essential part of their psychology. Like the major pillars of Indian Writers, Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan, Raja Rao, Ruth JwalaPraver, and Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya has made a remarkable contribution

through her realistic portrayal of Indian society. They were greatly influenced by the plight and misery which Indians were facing due to the lasting impact of the colonization and modernity. Her work chiefly discussed the social issues prevalent in the society-hunger, poverty, deprivation, east-west encounter forms the major themes of their novels which made the presence of Indian novelists stronger. Kamala Markandaya has successfully added her niche to the Indian Writing in English.

Like several other distinguished post-colonial writers who were standing at cultural crossroads, the themes of cultural clashes of the east and west figures prominently in the novels of Kamala Markandaya wherein the east is symbolized by its strong adherence to the deep-rooted spirit of spiritualism, religion, traditionalism, sacrifice and endurance: and west is presented as urbanization, industrialization and modernization. Markandaya has herself witnessed the colonial period and started writing in its twilight period. She seems to have an un-flagging interest in representing the cultural clash between the two modes of life the western and the occidental and the consequent actuation of the effects of western ways.

Markandaya's realistic depiction of east and west is possible because of her firsthand experience of both. She got an insight into the conflicting ideologies and traditions of both east and west and she made this conflict and interaction recurrent themes of her novels. Her novels also attempt to bring about a synthesis between the contrasting values systems of both east and west. She brings forth this contrast by interaction of western modern ideologies and east's traditional value systems. She contrasts urbanization and industrialization with agriculture, urban setting with rural, spiritual faith and passive acceptance with questioning scientific outlook to bring forth the present cultural dualism.

In her very first maiden novel *Nectar in a Sieve* she sets up kaleidoscopic vision of Indian life and its clash with western culture, by vibrant and realistic life portrayal and characterization; throughout the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, she has pitied east's traditionalism with west's modernism. She has also done this in her third novel 'A Silence of Desire' by contrasting the modern husband Dandekar with the traditional wife Sarojini. Markandaya has contrasted east traditionalism and

west's modernism by making both husband and wife the symbols of these opposing cultures. Sarojini is the symbol of spiritualism core aspect of Indian traditionalism whereas her husband, Dandekar is her reverse, symbol of modernization and scientific thinking. He is of questioning attitude; he even refuses to worship tulsi because there is no proof of it being god. He in his office often criticized traditional hindu concepts of idolatry, worshipping of snakes, cows, plants, idols and painting ranked as god incensed him. Markandaya uses him to depict the assimilation of western ideologies in east whereas Sarojini is a very embodiment of east's traditional culture. Lalan Prasad Singh rightly pointed out:

A Silence of desire is built around spiritual faith which is the intrinsic ingredient of Indian life and skepticism which is a fall out of westernization. It is the story of Dandekar and his wife both of whom represent diverse view of life – one drawing from past, another emerging from the new and contemporary. (Singh,4) In the very beginning of the novel, it is mentioned that Sarojini fulfills all the qualities of traditional concept of good Indian wife.

Sarojini's husband Dandekar who is a clerk in the New India Centre considers himself to be lucky for his wife is an excellent domestic manager, an excellent cook, good with children and above all always succumbs to his will. She is not at all demanding for luxuries and is quite satisfied with what she has and builds the building of sweet home. She does all which a virtuous Indian woman is supposed to do, because of her silence of desire the cubit of their domestic life has perfect symmetry but this perfect harmony is broken in fragments when Sarojini goes to meet a swami for cure of her growth, that is tumor without taking her husband into confidence. This gives birth to suspicion in his mind which increases when Sarojini lies to him

and when in her absence he sees a man's photograph in her trunk.

Though Dandekar presents himself to be modern and as a man with skeptical rationalism yet he cherishes the traditional image of a woman. He even goes to the extent of calling her 'a soiled woman' and 'a thrifty whore'. He becomes rigid with his opinion and quotes his office colleagues:

'All women are the same. All women are harlots, if you give them the chance. Even respectable women with grown-up daughters and a respectable husband in a respectable job – even they, with their meanly mouth and their modest pretense are the same, and their virtues lasts as long as you watch them.

Dandekar is a very realistic and perfect depiction of cultural dualism. He represents that how modernism and westernization has made many of the traditional Indians hypocrites. His office also reflects the heterogeneity and cultural dilemma of contemporary Indian society. They together with Sarojini are symbols of diverse cultural stages formed because of confrontation and assimilation of eastern traditionalism and western modernism. It is evident in their views about women. While Joseph believed in free love and also advocated to practice it, Sastri who went to see films of Indian classical stories held a benign belief that:

"Wives are faithful, virtuous creatures, prepared with their classical sisters to follow their husbands barefoot into jungle, if necessary."

He represents traditional Indian thinking that women should be like 'Savitri' who can bring the soul of their 'Satyavan' from Yamraj. To the contrary Mahadevan, the strong adherent of western films said: "No marriages are safe unless, in her husband's absence, a wife was locked in a chastity girdle."

Like a skillful novelist Markandaya builds up a host of characters with varying attitudes and makes them integral part of the fictional design of her novel. If Dandekar is a character born out of the cultural cross currents of east and west, standing in the twilight zone where both cultures come to meet, Sarojini is positive image of traditional Indian life. Her belief in spiritualism goes to the extent of blind faith. Yet, even she could not escape the effect of westernization.

Sarojini is chaste, spiritual and a true Indian woman – according to the traditional standards - no doubt, but still her hiding her visits to Swami puts a question mark on the intimacy of husband wife relationship. Sudhir Kumar Arora remarks:

Sarojini cannot trust her husband in such minor thing, after such long period of marriage. . . . if she cannot trust, she has no right to expect his. It is here that Kamala Markandaya makes her commonplace because she fails to keep the fundamental thing on which marriage is based, and that is trust.' (A Study of Kamala Markandaya's Women)

Arora's remark is true to an extent. However, it can be interpreted in another way. It might be Sarojini's fear of breach of domestic peace because of the cultural difference between her husband and herself. Though differences arise with the revelation of truth, finally their intimacy reasserts itself. However, the cultural clash between them remains unsolved till the end. Though Dandekar; with the help of his colleagues, succeeds, in turning the Swami out of their lives. He remains a loser and develops a sense of inferiority complex with the Swami, as Nandini becomes ready for operation, but because Swami said so.

A Handful of Rice the central protagonist Ravi becomes a victim of westernization or

urbanization. He represents the individual caught in the spirit of cultural dualism not knowing what to choose. He is like Bakha of *Untouchable*, belongs to the generation of those youth who rebel against fatalistic attitude of subservience.

The protagonist of her novel *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi is also isolated from his roots. He leaves his village and goes to the westernized world of a city but unlike Valmiki of *Possessions*, this reallocation is done willingly. Ravi is a child of transition who is attracted by the apparent possibilities which city seems to offer. Paravati Mishra compares this novel to *Nectar in a Sieve*. She asserts:

Nectar in a Sieve is the story of the rural poor; *A Handful of Rice* is that of the urban poor. In both the novels Kamala Markandaya has delineated the story of migration from the rural to the industrial urban centers. As Rukamani's sons shift to the city for their sustenance Ravi, the protagonist, also joins the exodus of the city as the village has nothing to offer him. (Mishra, 7)

Ravi is frustrated by his plight and hunger and he is allured by the possibilities that the city seems to offer. However even in the city his situation remains same the shadows of hunger follow him over there as well. As he reflects: "It is the drag around the streets and the searching and the wait and the frustration and bearing the pinpricks that the haughty rich always had in plenty for the poor which he had not been able to endure." (27)

In his attempts of survival Ravi is further distanced from the traditional Indian values and he goes and millions of youths who leaves villages in search of a better life and ends up being further disillusioned. The serpent of poverty binds him tight in his grip and leads him towards the gang of anti-social criminals, led by Damodar. Being tired of his poverty Ravi drowns his morality in drinking.

He is once chased by police. This chase leads him into the house of a tailor where he sees Nalini, who is an embodiment of traditional eastern values. She pulls him back on the path of virtue. Ravi not only gets love in form of Nalini, her father turns out to be her benefactor who gives him a somewhat secure life. Like Dicken's protagonists *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* and *Pip* Ravi also depend on his benefactor. He gives Ravi, job of an apprentice in tailoring. Gradually he tries to make Ravi his successor. He not only trains Ravi in the craftsmanship and skills of a tailor but also took him to the bungalows of his rich western customers. Ravi was dazzled by the grandeur of their houses and his dreams grew with these visits. He felt jealous of them and wished to lead a luxurious life like the city people. Now when Ravi's basic needs of food, shelter, love and sex is satiated because of his love Nalini and Apu his dreams began to grow in dimensions. However, the love of Nalini who was just like Rukmani of *Nectar in a Sieve* possesses remarkable spirit of traditional Indian values of perseverance and endurance, keeps him on the right path. Ravi decides to live a respectable life terminating his previous associations. But he finds it difficult to bear with the heavy burden of in-laws' family on his shoulders. He dreams of having his independent house and separate family. He wishes to buy his own bicycle but his dreams were shattered by the death of Apu.

The responsibility of maintenance of his own and his entire family fell on his shoulders. He becomes the head of the house hold. In addition, the growth of textile mills and machines posed a threat to his source of living that is, tailoring. Apu's death was like a final blow which forced him to return to Damodar. Without his father-in-law Ravi could not fulfill the demands of rich western women. He became furious at the western women

whom he found rich and uncaring. He was left aghast to see the response of memsahib when he tells her the reason behind the delay in delivery of her gown was Apu's death. She thinks: "These people with their innumerable uncles and aunts and cousins who seemed to be forever dying – really they were quite impossible, impossible people inhabiting an impossible country.

He is so much affected by humiliation from the western women and his helplessness that he beats his love Nalini mercilessly. Nalini deserts him. Their son Raju dies because of lack of treatment. Debts keep piling up and once again the desolate and miserable Ravi turns towards Damodar, the representation of the negative influence of modernization. Ravi keeps on lurching to the side of his world and the urban world. He is caught in a dilemma between the two value systems. Prof. K R Srinivas Iyengar in his book remarks that Ravi is:

"Caught between the pull of the old tradition that all but strangles him and the pull of the new immorality that attracts as well as frightens him, Ravi lurches now on this side and now on the other side, and he has the worst of both." (Indian writing in English.

Prof. Iyengar finds this wavering of Ravi quite justified. He remarks:

In this urban atmosphere polluted by the poisonous fumes of exploitation in its myriad form, the best runs the risk of been corrupted: and the sanest could feel maddened to act wildly.

However, Ravi seems to be agonized by this ambivalence between the pull of fulfilling the basic needs of life or to lesson to his conscience and finally the moral traditional values of the east wins over the world of city. When Damodar discards and laughs at him, – I see nothing. You're empty. No heart, no spleen, no lights, no guts. Something's been at them." He accepts defeat by withdrawing

him from the impious world of glamour and luxury and finally his eastern consciousness takes over and he in spite of being devastated restrains himself from undertaking violent rebellious actions.

Markandaya with remarkable skills inter-mixes the theme of East-West Encounter in her several novels. In *Some Inner Fury* she mixed it with themes of political turbulence in pre-independence India, freedom struggle, varying relationships with the theme of east and west confrontation, and highlighted the consequent desolations and miseries. Even in her novel *Two Virgins* Markandaya has brought forth the theme of clash between eastern traditionalism and western modernism, and like always she has depicted west destroying the peace and harmony of east. Like Roshan of *Some Inner Fury*, Ravi of *Handful of Rice*, Dandekar of *Silence of Desire* Lalitha of *Two Virgins* is a character born out of the impact of westernization whereas her sister stands unwaveringly against the strong pulls of westernization, to which her sister falls a prey. In her another novel *A Handful of Rice* also Markandaya has presented city to be the cause of misery, strife and agony. Even Anita Desai in her novel *Voice in the City* has presented Calcutta not as a symbol of power but as a symbol of disaster.

This was because of the social and political situations of the time. In this regard K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar has rightly stated that – "The theme is the result of the controlling factors of history and geography and also to centrality of the influence of English language and literature." (Iyengar, 115)

Conclusion

Markandaya also affected by the society in which she was living. She has portrayed both traditionalism of east and modernism of west, but she seems to make an attempt in highlighting eastern traditionalism over western modernism. In

her novels she portrays the traditional Indian society which is changing. All the characters of her novels feel the warmth of change, their eternal struggle whether they should reject or except the new change, the new modernism results in re-evaluating and re-defining modernity, and in this wonderful journey they learn a lot, they see the western world outside their windows but never pull away from their roots from their soil of tradition. She seems to take pride in the culture, tradition, ideologies and beliefs of the region of the world where she was born. She, in her novels have pitied the east and west in several ways, through contrast between village and cities, through characters or by presenting modernization and advancement of technology as a western influence or possessiveness of western characters, but in all cases the western influence is the cause of destruction and peace is restored only in the lap of the east.

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