

The East-West Encounter and Feminine Superiority in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to make an analysis on the theme – the east-west, the binary which though exist simultaneously but this apparent affinity is virtually the innate racial animosity, love-hate relationship and the cultural clash. Women in Kamala Markandaya’s novels prove themselves to be as resilient and resourceful as the mother earth. Rukumani, who is the key architect, sustains and nourishes her family shows the indomitable tolerance, who bends but never breaks. As an insider outsider Kamala Markandaya delineated the inner psyche of human being, quintessentially the intercultural encounters and women in diverse life-roles. My objectives are to study the tragic vision of life in the novels and the dichotomy between East and West and Cultural alienation, the search for identity.*

Key Words: *Animosity, confrontation, dichotomy, dominance, identity, occidental, oriental, sensitivity, superiority.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Being a woman novelist, Kamala Markandaya expresses all feminine aspects, the inner voice, sentimentality of a woman, depression, frustration, feeling of domination over someone, the hope of achieving aim, the happiness and sorrow, the patriotic feeling, the maternal instinct and all feminine qualities. Influenced by the western culture, strongly believing in the power of science she wants to improve the material conditions and promote progress and equality among all men and women. Though she has adopted the 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.

Kamala Markandaya is probably the most outstanding example of the kind of author writing Indian novels in English. She is a product of East and West and conveys a heightened sensitivity to cross cultural problems in her fiction. She writes with equal competence about village and city, poor and wealthy, and her subject matter evokes comparisons with that of E.M.Froster, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya.

Most of her novels deal with the East –West theme. Her first novel, “Nectar in a Sieve” (1955) is a woeful tale of the trials and tribulations of a peasant couple, Nathan and Rukumani of a South Indian Village and their contact with the English medical missionary Dr. Kennington, affectionately called Kenny by the villagers. The author brings out the opposite view points of the simple and fatalist creatures of the soil, who endure their miseries with calm resignation and the enlightened Englishman who has been nourished on the noble, ideals of liberalism and has no patience with the passivity of the starving and suffering villagers for the amelioration of whose miseries he works indefatigably. S. Indra has noted:

“Kamala Markandaya’s major theme has been the cultural clash between the western and oriental modes of life. All her novels have the backdrop of east west encounter and she explores the impact of change in terms of human psychology. “The No Where Man” her seventh novel, underscores in artistic terms, the need for racial integration and cross cultural understanding.”

Kenny has been described as “tall and gaunt, with a pale skin and sunken eyes the colour of a kingfisher’s wing, neither blue nor green.” He is a philanthropist and great humanitarian. Out of his pity for the poverty stricken and suffering people of India, he has left his country, his wife and children and has come to stay among the people who are not his men and in a country which is not his own. He has identified himself with the Indians so much that he does not feel himself an alien among them. He does not even think that he is living in a country which is not his own. He says to Rukumani, “My country, sometimes I do not know which is my country. Until today I had thought perhaps it was this”.

In “Some Inner Fury”, Kitsmay is just, the opposite of Govind in his attitude to the west. His education at Oxford University in England has westernized him in everything except his name. He is sophisticated and holds the high position of a District Magistrate in the Indian bureaucracy. Western culture has gone deep in his blood and he has

a genuine respect for it. Contrasting him with Govind in his attitude to the way of life, his sister Mira remarks: "But Kit did not merely participate in it. He was part of it; his feeling for the West was no cheap flirtation, to be enjoyed so long, no longer, to be put aside, thereafter and forgotten or at best remembered with a faint nostalgia, it went deeper. It was understanding and love." His westernized outlook makes him an alien in his own country. He is unable to understand and appreciate the aspirations not only of his countrymen but also of his own wife who has been bred on oriented values of love and humanity.

Kamala Markandaya's approach to the problem of a mixed marriage is more realistic. Like E.M.Froster in "A Passage to India", she thinks that lasting and intimate relations between Indians and the British were not possible as long as India was ruled by Britain and the two races remained locked in political conflict. At the time of parting from Richard as Mira decides to join the procession of political agitators, she reflects- "Go? Leave the man I loved to go with these people? What did they mean to me, what could they mean more than the man I loved? They were my people those others were his. Did it mean something then all this your people and my people. For us there was no other way, the forces that pulled us apart were too strong."

Both Kamala Markandaya and E.M.Froster thus emphasize that intimate relationships between the Indians and the English could be possible only when India was free and both the races could meet together on an equal level.

Kamala Markandaya's characters are torn between loyalties, their ambivalence is seen not only in the love-hate relationship the Indian develop for the British, as lady Caroline points out in possession but in the love-hate relationship that Indians have for India. This relationship is more marked in Balachandra Rajan's "The Dark Dancer". Pramod Kumar advocates. "The conflict of East and West comes on the surface through the mutual relationship of a Hindu woman Mira and an English man Richard who have fallen in love with each other. Their love become gradually stronger and also the struggle of the Indians and the Britishers become more intense in the political arena. Increase in intimacy on one side and breaking off in other side is the basis of conflict in the novel."

In "A Handful of Rice" political history is alive in the ruins and monuments of foreign dominance. "A Handful of Rice" is what the vagabond Ravi is striving for in the city. K.R.Srinivas Iyenger draws attention to the fact that Ravi's predicament can only be understood after knowledge of "the spiralling grain prices in India. Bad monsoons have caused havoc in the lives of millions and bad governments have proved incapable of effectively holding the price line." The fusion of an Indian government with a western mind proved disastrous. Ravi is a victim of this English nemesis.

The East-West encounter is, however depicted in the novel on a cultural level through the conflict between the Indian spiritual faith and modernism born of India's contact with the west. The crisis comes to the surface when Dandekar, a government servant, who has suffered a great mental agony owing to his wife Sarojini's mysterious absence from the house in the day, learns that she goes to seek faith cure for her tumour from a swamy. Whereas Dandekar suggests scientific cure through operation instead of risking her life by relying on superstitious faith. She knows that faith and reason do not go together and is confident that without faith she shall not be healed. Her cousin Rajan also finds fault with Dandekar for having lost faith in religion because of his training by the British. Passing between violent trust and extreme mistrust and feeling deep concern for his wife's safety, Dandekar decides to seek the help of his officers, Mr. Chari and Mr. Ghose, to oust the swamy from the town.

Madhusudan Prasad remarks,

"Kamala Markandaya evokes the twin theme of colonialism and colonial confrontation deftly through her characters, the interactions, of certain events serving symbolic suggestions and in an almost direct expressiveness in the frequent confrontation between Caroline the imperial English lady and Anusuya, the self respecting westernized yet truly Indian narration."

Tagore made first effort to create a new culture by fusing the East and West together in his "Gora" in 1923. Markandaya's major theme has been the cultural clash of the two modes of life she has seen so closely. The Indian mind was dominated by the feeling that the English mind was pragmatic and the Indian idealistic, and that England was the Exploiter and the India Exploited. "The Golden Honeycomb" proves once more the problems of socio cultural economic adjustments between the East and the West.

Markandaya has constantly been preoccupied by the East-West conflict of codes and convictions of which she herself is a living example. The clash between the Eastern and Western values leads to an inevitable quest for identity.

Raja Rao an Indian novelist in English recreates the archetypal images of woman in his novel,

"Women is the earth, air, ether, sound; woman is the microcosm of mind, the woman is fire, movement, clear and rapid as the mountain stream. To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is

Radha. Woman is kingdom, solitude, time, woman is growth, the woman is death for it is through woman that one is born; woman rules, for it is she, the Universe,”

Feminist trends appeared on the horizon and they came into conflict with the conventional moral code. In fact, a set of new paradigms related to a woman's life came into existence – tradition and modernity, self-assertion and self-effacement, economic dependence and independence and so on. Post-Independence literature in India portrays all these trends and voices the clamouring of women for a new and just way of life. There is a view, may be of a small minority that the concept of the new woman “is a western import born of western compulsions.”

Three of Markandaya's novels “Nectar in a Sieve” (1954), “Some Inner Fury” (1955) and “Possession” (1963) are presented in reminiscential mood. All the three narrators are woman and the plots are circular. Rukmoni narrates in “Nectar in a Sieve” her life story beginning with her marriage in such a way as to depict concurrently the agony of the Indian peasants. After returning to the village she cast a longing glance on the expanse of time that had elapsed between her marriage and the death of her husband. Generally it regards woman superior in heart and inferior in mind but in present day this preamble is changed. Woman is successful in all walks of life. In regard of feminine superiority, different types of woman as peasant, English, westernized, spiritual woman have their own superiority. Rukmoni is a peasant woman and able to endure all sufferings. Living in a village, she is literate and bears six children. She is superior both in heart and mind. Despite the difficulties, she could not involve in evils and keep her path clean while Kunti and Ira involve in prostitution.

In “Some Inner Fury”, although this time the family, unlike Nathan's is westernized and the central concern of the novel in the clash between passion and patriotism. Mira, the narrator strings together the experiences of some important moments of her life here in again, but the novel is more than a romantic biography of a young girl who had fallen in love with an English youth. The love Mira experienced in the arms of Richard was ardent, honest and guileless but it was a cursed relationship; besides being lovers they were also representative of two nations, one ruler and the other ruled.

In “Possession” the narrative is managed once more by a woman, but this time it is not the heroine of the novel. It is a writer friend of the heroine, hence interested in observation and analysis of her experiences. Valmiki was Caroline's discovery and therefore her “possession”. Caroline is English, westernized and a modern woman who traps Valmiki and brings him from India to England. She had rushed back to Madras to claim him back in return for the satisfaction. She had given him; she was spider like, a perfect schemer. She manipulated the destinies of those who came in contact with her Valmiki, Ellie, and Annabel. One by one each was made a victim of the traps laid by her. Even Anusuya was commandeered to cooperate with her. Anusuya herself confessed “not only Valmiki but I also had come within the orbit of her powerful influence.”

What is commonly viewed as feminism today is largely a movement influenced by the ideas postulated, popularized by thinkers and authors like Alice Walker, Judith Fetterley, Michele Wallace etc. However the masses compelled to reach to a perfunctory conclusion soon tended to overlook the fact that feminism is much more than a violent protest by women against everything which has been traditionally associated with them by men. A woman is a supporter of man in all aspect whether she is mother, wife, sister and friend. She suggests, guides, and nurses him. “A woman must be companion as well as wife to her husband”. Markandaya is an Indo-Anglican novelist and she shows Indianness in her novels. Indianness shows dignity and feels superiority.

2. CONCLUSION:

To sum up the achievements of Kamala Markandaya, she well expresses the Indian Sensibility through her novels. She is one of the most outstanding novelists on the canvas of Indo Anglian fiction. She is undoubtedly one of the major novelists on the commonwealth scene. A.V.Krishna Rao's summing up her achievement: “Markandaya's contribution to the Indo-Anglian fiction lies essentially in her capacity to explore vital, formative areas of individual consciousness that project the images of cultural change and in her uncanny gift of inhabiting the shifting landscapes of an outer reality with human beings whose sensibility becomes a sensitive measure of the inner reality as it responds to the stimulus of change.”

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