Interrogating Women Identity in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract:
Women have been forced to occupy a secondary-place in the society since the patriarchal times. In spite of the fact that women constitute almost half of the world, they are thought to be inferior to men. Simon de Beauvoir is of the opinion that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is the civilization as a whole that produces this creature. The subjugated position of women “is not imposed of necessity by natural ‘feminine’ characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men”.

Male-dominance in the family and society has led to growth of certain customs and rituals that ensure the continued subjection of women. Her social life is confined to the home, to the temple and company of women relatives. She is expected to be obedient and loyal to her husband even though he is devoid of any virtue or seeks pleasure outside home: This male-dominance has resulted in the general failure of woman to find a proper niche for her in society as well as literature. Whatever images of woman prevail in literature, they are the male pictures, whether in Indian or in British or American literature. She is often viewed either as a Madonna or a Whore. It is only in the twentieth century that with the changing values, women have emerged in literature. It seems that hardly any systematic study has been made of women, especially in Indo-Anglian literature. We get only an idealized-stereotyped and eulogized image of women which is the hallmark of the classical literature.

Keywords: Women, Identity, Feminine sensibility

In the classical literature, the Indian woman was what the artist made her, expected of her and asked her to live according true idealism. The early writers wrote mostly historical romances so they turned to the prevalent stereotypes like the protective mothers, the Sita-Savitri-Pativrata, the Kali-Shakti, which had become the cultural ideals imposed upon women. Though fettered by domestic injustice, or tyranny of customs, women have been placed on pedestals and worshipped as goddess in literature and society. The heroines are shown to have classic virtues. Their commitment to religion and the social institutions and
rituals such commitments entail, has made the writers to portray them as the guardians of culture and religion. They have been presented as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power on the one hand and viewed as weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man as their lord on the other hand. The objective of present paper is to explore feminine sensibility and women struggle for establishment of their identity in the novels of Kamala Markandaya.

Kamala Markandaya occupies a special position among the women novelists of post-Independence era. Her novels seem to be grounded in Indian reality but when read closely they offer a critique of the existing socio-cultural norms:

“Her novels, in comparison with those of her contemporary women writers, seem to be more reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India as she attempts to project the image of the changing society”. 1

In Indian life and literature it has always been the self-effecting, self negating woman that has been idealized and glorified. From her earliest childhood to old age, the woman is expected to suppress her natural spirit of self-assertion. In every Hindu family, boys enjoy a position of superiority, and their sisters are always taught to submit to their brothers. In everything, in food, dress, education, the daily commerce of life, boys receive a preferential treatment, with the result that the girls develop a permanent inferiority complex which they are not able to shake off all their lives. In upper class society attempts are made to treat boys and girls on the basis of equality, but whenever the traditional Hindu sentiments assert themselves, all such attempts prove futile. A highly advanced Indian English writer like Raja Rao romanticizes the picture of the self-sacrificing woman. The same ideas occupy the heads of his little mother, Rama’s orthodox uneducated mother, and his Savithri, a foreign educated girl of an aristocratic family, who smokes and drinks. There is likeness between the two following quotations:

“She looks happy. After all, Rama, What more happiness does a woman need than a home, and a husband? The temple needs a bell,” Little mother, quoted some proverb,” and the girl a husband to make the four walls shine”. 2

In two letters addressed to Rama, Savitri, who submits to her marriage to Pratap whom she does not like, says: “No woman who’s a woman can choose her destiny. Men make her destiny. For a woman to choose is to betray her biology… Surajpur palace, this evening at four forty-seven, I entered into the state of matrimony. I married Pratap at last. I shall be a good wife to him. Bless me”

Kamala Markandaya’s woman, like their sisters in real life, finds themselves caged in a steel frame-work, and whether they know their ultimate plight or not, they struggle to assert themselves, to give themselves an identity. Her woman in Nectar in a Sieve belong to the peasant class, in Two Virgins, to a class a little higher, but to whatever class they might belong, they are faced with similar problem. Markandaya’s women assert their identity in two ways. Some of them accept their fate, and within the cage try to stand up for the fulfillment of their urges and desires, the other rebel against their position, and are deluded into thinking that they are carving out their destiny in their own way. To the first category belong the women of Nectar in a Sieve and to the second category belongs Lalitha of Two Virgins.
In *Nectar in a Slieve*, Rukmani, Ira and Kunthi, being village women, take the family and society for granted. As members of the family, they know that their lot is to work hard and face hardship; as members of the society they know that they have to depend on men, and assume as inferior position in society. There is much compensation which mitigates the harshness of their lot, but there are occasions when they do not find themselves docile enough to accept them. Rukmani’s sense of pride and self-respect is thwarted from her childhood. When she is a little girl, all her three elders sisters have been married, with varying amounts of dowry in a descending scale. She has learnt to look upon her father through the timid eyes of her mother, as the man on whose sole resources the girls had to depend for their marriage; When her mother would ask her, “what for you, my last-born, my baby?” She would say, “I shall have a grand wedding ... For is not my father the head of the village?” But this pride and confidence in her father is shaken when her brother rudely says, “Don’t speak like a fool, the headman is no longer of consequence”. She feels as if a prop on which she had leaned has been taken away and she feels frightened with vague defames of married life. She finds herself at the age of twelve the wife of a poor tenant farmer. This starts the long series of disillusionments that are in store for her and her heroic struggle to save her identity from being swamped by them.

She leaves her father’s protection to live under the protection of her poor husband. When she reaches his house, she is-shucked to find that he has nothing but a mud hut set near a paddy field. She wants to cry. Her knees wobble and she sinks down. But she is young and her husband whose name she cannot, as a Hindu wife, utter, gives her love and affection. She also finds some respectability in the fact that her husband is a tenant farmer, and not a landless labourer, though probably he is worse off and subject to greater vicissitudes of nature and life than the labourer. Her husband owns at least two bullocks and a goat. She is at first of not much help to him, because she has not known the life of a farmer, but soon she learns things and begins to take her life in right earnest.

Her first child is a girl who disappoints liar and her husband, but soon the little girl attracts all and for the time being they forget the burden she has brought with her on the family. As time passes, Rukmani becomes the mother of six sons. Two ordinary but grim natural happenings, failure of rainfall and excess of it, ruin her financially and psychologically, and the revelation that her husband had illegal relationship with Kunthi, which ought to have resulted in a fierce outburst, also leaves her resigned to her fate. In the final analysis, she presents the image of a women fashioned and patterned after a socially acceptable and traditionally legitimate model of a person oriented by nature and circumstances towards self-effacement. She unconsciously establishes her identity with the women fashioned traditionally by Hindu society.

Rukmani’s daughter Ira is very differently constituted, and so is Kunthi. Ira is a victim of another misfortune: she fails to give any child to her husband, with the result that after waiting for five years, he brings her back to Rukmani. Nothing can be done about it and no appeal made to anybody, because Ira has violated another unwritten code of society. Ira shows greater independence than Rukmani in sexual matters, which brings about greater degradation. She sells her body for money which she requires to feed her youngest brother whom she loves with a motherly instinct. She becomes the mother of an albino, who finds himself lost and unclaimed as he
grows up. He asks her one day what a “bastard” is. She is surprised and says that it is a child-whose birth his mother did not wish for. When lie asks if she had wished him to be born she replies “yes, of course darling”, and all the guilt of her efforts to have an abortion was in her voice”.

“Some days later, the boy tackles her again.
“Mother, have I got a father?”
“Yes, dear, of course?”
“Where is he?”
“Why does he never come to see us?”
“He will when he can.”
“But why not now?”
“Because he cannot. You will understand when you are older”.
“How old?”
“I do not know myself. Now run away and play”.
“You must not ask so many questions”.
The first lie; many to follow. The distressing inescapable need for lying”.

Kunthi’s case is very different. She has broken loose from all traditional restraints, and cannot be judged by any established standards. She has a husband, who overlooks all that she does. Even her sons are no obstruction in her adventures. She asserts her sexual freedom with a boldness that would have been tolerable if it had not been banal. Her assertion only leads her to her identification with a whore.

Nectar in a Sieve shows that in the traditional Hindu society a woman’s position as a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and mother, and later grandmother is pre-planned for her, and she has only to live with in the given framework to carve out a respectable position for herself. The moment her rebellious spirits lead her to free herself from her hidebound position she finds herself in trouble. Nevertheless with the change of social condition, the woman continues to make attempts to gain her selfhood and also a respectable position.

The women in Nectar in a Sieve are illiterate village women, and their desire for self-assertion is instinctive. Two Virgins, as the title indicates, describes the adolescent awakening of two sisters belonging to a lower middle class family of a south Indian village. The two sisters are poles apart from each other in nature and temperament, and both start early on their search for their individual identity, with the difference that while one finds her way through rebellion and non-conformity, the other achieves her end through conformity to social morals. The unique achievement of Kamla Markandaya in the reactions of the two sisters to similar circumstances. The constant juxtaposition of the reactions of the sisters brings into clear light the fundamental dissonance between them, and while making the novel dramatic, it also arouses us to a clearer awareness of the issues involved. According to Meena Shirwadkar, “The change from girlhood into adolescence is the awkward age for a girl. The vibrating sensitivity breaks the cocoon and enters into the thrilling excitement of youth; the min travels from innocence to experience.

The significance of the change in this stage of a girl’s life could not have been ignored by the women writers because it is at once a remarkable yet a difficult period in the life of
girls growing into womanhood. The novel has been written from the point of view of Saroja, the younger sister, who observes, bears, sees, thinks, comments on, and tries to judge all that happens in the novel. It is her impressions that constitute the staple of the novel. In Two Virgins, “Markandaya explores the problem of the growth of a girl’s awareness, the change in her as she gets caught up in the swirling events around her and returns to the family fold and code of conduct, but with her childhood innocence forever gone …. It is the child Saroja who looks on the members’ f the family, the village and the city around her. Her natural curiosity and shrewdness are tempered by her gentle good nature”.7

Though daughter, of the same father and mother, Lalitha and Saroja are differently constituted, and they start early on their quest for individual identity. The stages in their growth are conditioned by their inherent temperament. The elder sister, Lalitha is more beautiful than the younger. Saroja. More conscious of her beauty, more knowing about sister, more free in her responses to life, she, is easily lured by visions of her conquests, which materialise in the opportunity of her becoming a film actress. The younger, Saroja, being a plain country girl does not respond as sensitively, vibrantly and thrillingly as Lalitha does to the shows of art or wealth.

Saroja’s opening out to life comes to her through various sources, through her observation of her own body and her parents’ bodies and their actions, through Manikkam’s wife, Chingleput, Lachu, Miss Mendoza and others, and through her close association with, and participation in the life of her sister, Lalitha. Saroja has an irresistible ‘curiosity’ to know things and she is also a close observer of persons, actions and events around her. She had seen her mother “bare from the waist down she stood on a plank and washed …. She liked Amma’s body which was plump and soft and as comforting as a cushion Appa’s body was hard”.8 After a quarrel in the night, Appa and Amma make love…it disturbed her…9

Lalitha is her father’s favorite, and shares most of his advanced views. She is admitted to Miss Mendoza’s Three King’s School, where she learns to love Western ways and to look down up the Indian ways of life. She learns music and dancing. Her father is proud of her talents and admires her for her high class tastes and opinions. The family is occasionally invited to school functions, where Lalitha proudly shows her talent in maypole dancing and other festivities. She has status, which means that she is wanted in marriage by many young men of the village and their families. But her sights are higher. She does not want to waste her beauty over some village young men.

Manikkam’s wife unravels the mysteries of childbirth and suckling children and gives Saroja a faint inkling of her own body and its possibilities. Lachu is another source of her knowledge of sex. She is afraid of falling into his hands, but her companions know how he dallies with girls by putting his fingers inside their skirts. Jaya has experienced it. Lalitha is also not afraid of him and flicks his eyes at him. When on one occasion, her mother objects to it she says, “He is a simple man, he wouldn’t harm a fly, he just dallies with girls, didn’t Krishna dally with girls”.10

Lalitha impresses Miss Mendoza so much that the latter pays a visit to her house and asks her father if would like Lalitha to go in for a career like teaching or nursing’. The father sees no harm in it nor does Lalitha but Amma and Aunt Alamelu do not approve of it. Another course, however, opens for Lalitha, when her dancing is approved by the film, director, Mr.
Gupta, who comes with his Assistant Devraj to attend the school function. The film, director stays on to shoot a documentary film on an Indian village. They film “the village market, and the funeral of a young man who had obligingly died before his time, and the beggars who queued at the temple, and the monkeys that were plaguing the countryside”. They film the school with Miss Mendoza standing welcomingly on the top step. There are several shots of Lalitha. “She danced one of the Indian dances she had been assiduously practicing, and posed gratefully besides the well to which she hardly ever went, and there was to have been a picture of her tending the buffalo, but Lalita refused, said it would render her a cowgirl, which she was far from being”. 12

When the film is made, Miss Mendoza takes Lalitha and others to the city. Lalitha is dazzled at Mr. Gupta’s life-style and the bright atmosphere of the city. When she comes back she talks only of Mr. Gupta and the films. She dreams of herself as a film actress. When Saroja asks ‘what the city was like, Lalitha says that it was her spiritual home.

Lalitha tells her father that she has accepted Mr. Gupta’s offer to work in his film. She waits for Mr. Gupta’s call and frets. She repeats many sentences spoken by Mr: Gupta. It is with great difficulty that she passes two months time. Mr. Gupta has three telephones, but she riot even one. “It is so primitive, Lalitha said, not being on the phone. It hampers one’s career. It would have been simplicity itself for Mr. Gupta to have kept in touch, if only...... “. 13 The. next day she disappears. Appa goes to the city in search of her but returns after week without finding her. A few weeks later he receives Lalitha’s letter: She is all right, living in a three-piece suit, with satin cushions, and an arbour covered in grapevines. Mr. Gupta himself has gone to America, but has made these arrangements for her. She is to be available for the film; It is no good her sitting miles away in a village, Lalitha does not give her address.

Though Lalitha is brought up in the conservative society of the village, she asserts her right to follow her own path. She makes herself free with Lachu, she goes near the haunted well, and she avoids tending the buffalo and leaves the task to be done by her younger sister. She does not submit to her mother’s discipline, and answers back when she is rebuked. She is determined to leave the village and make her career in the glamorous life of the city. After the first abortion her fear of sex disappears and she makes the bold decision of facing the: city life with all its snares and vile temptations. Sex is no longer a taboo for her. She considers herself to be free from all restraints, and advises her sister also to follow the path she has chosen. She loses her virginity, but she considers the sacrifice worth the freedom she has gained.

The reason for Lalitha’s strong will power lies in her constitution, and the affection and strut support of her father. Even when she is a little girl in the village, she develops the notion that she is an out-of-the ordinary person cut out for a life different from that of ordinary people. Consequently she becomes condescending in her attitude to others. This privileged position helps her to have her own way right from the beginning. She openly floats the tradition of village life. She is an artful little minx, and knows how to manage people and explain away difficult situations. She is irrepressible in her sexual urge. On one occasion, when the rains come, and she and Saroja are asked to bring back the buffalo from the river, she puts off all her clothes and dances naked in the rain. When later Manikkam’s wife tries to report this matter to her mother, she says that it was the ghost of a naked dancing
woman which she and Saroja had both seen. Manikkam’s wife has her suspicions, but she is no match to Lalitha.

Lalitha has developed the psychology of a rebel. She hates the eventful lack-lustre life of the village and wants to live in the glamour and the lime-light of the city. We pity her because we find that all her noble qualities of courage and spirit her beauty and artistic sense, her craving for a life better than that of sheep, ultimately lead her on to identify herself with a whore, and remain contented with it.

Saroja’s reaction to circumstances common to both is different from Lalitha’s. She is subjected to the same temptation and passions, as her sister but while Lalitha is swept away by them, she resists them. She has the same sources for gaining sexual knowledge as her sister, but she is younger and slower to pick up. Lalitha dreams of going to the city, and looks down upon village manners and customs Saroja loves the latter, and both stick to their respective positions. Saroja has observed and learnt about sexual matters. She has natural desires like other girls of her age. Her test comes in the form of Devraj, Mr. Gupta’s assistant. When Saroja sees him first, he is dressed in white trousers and a flowing white cotton shirt over them. During Mr. Gupta’s stay in the village for shooting the documentary, Devraj comes occasionally to Saroja’s house with his chief, who generally brings presents for Appa and Amma and Aunt, and for Lalitha and Saroja. One day Devraj presents a box of Bombay hulva to Saroja, “he said he hoped she would like it, his eyes were brown and soft when he spoke to her”.

When the family goes to the city to talk about Lalitha’s pregnancy with Mr. Gupta, Saroja accompanies them. She is afraid of the city. By her mother’s talks about the city, she gets: “the impression of male prevailing through the streets like wolves, on the lookout for girls like her sister and herself to seduce”.

In spite of these physical, mental, and biological reactions, Saroja does not succumb to the temptation. When at later stage, Devraj lovingly comes near her, and touches her hand, she jumps up. She knows where it ends. The bloody pulp of Lalitha’s body comes before her eyes. “Take your hands off me, she cried, and Aunt Alamelu of all people loomed up, put words she was fighting for into her mouth. What do you take me for, she screamed, a virgin
in your wherehouse? She couldn’t stop screaming. They couldn’t stop her.”20. The city is associated with seduction and whoredom, so she returns to the village, knowing what she is.

There is a lyrical joy in her memories of the village, its fields, its seasons, “the tender green of new crops, the tawny shades of harvest, the tints of freshly turned earth, The wells, the fields, each had its name: the well beside the water meadow, the well by the banyan, the field next to the mill. You always knew where you were. You knew who you were”, 21 both the girls seek their identity and both are equally determined to follow the paths chosen by them. But Saroja has an edge over her sister. In the given-circ-umstances, her struggle to remain a virgin and keep within the traditional frame- work is harder than Lalitha’s.

According to Margaret P’. Joseph, Saroja is inclinend to day-dream; but at the same time is more practical and reliable than her sister. One aspect of her nature links her to other characters in Indo-Anglian fiction: the quest for identity. Saroja hates the city and yearns for her village. For there one had an identity of ones own....Lalitha, the beautiful flirt, is smart and shallow vain and selfish. She finds the village stifling and spark less at the thought of the city, for her soul belongs there. The sexuality she flaunts prepares us for her fate. Not only is she willing to be seduced... But in her abandonment of the family and all it represents, she sows her determination to reject tradition and follow her own star”. 22 the struggle each one faces in her own way in arduous, and it leaves its impact on their lives. They ultimately achieve their identity, one as a lost virgin, and one as a virgin saved by a hair’s breadth. Lalitha is the willing victim of a Don Juan, Saroja learns the lesson from her sister’s fate and saves herself.

Saroja’s character pervades, surrounds, the novel. Her vision and language retail and invade all the experience, and she is one of Markandaya’s finest and most attractive creations: innocence embracing knowledge, love embracing jealousy, and above all there is the girl’s deep love of the village including the widowed aunt, the patient buffalo, her bicycle, arid even the monsoon rain. In the city she can love only the sea... Rejects the urban hire and the sexual temptation of the sophisticated but kindly Dev Raj. She had an adoration of life and a deep involvement with nature and village life which makes her sister’s ghastly abortion an act which decisively drives her (Saroja) back to her village roots- back to that ancient bigoted, outdated loved life of the ‘Country Mouse’ while the other ex-virgin opts tragically for the fate of the ‘Town Mouse’.

Markandaya’s women have to face not only the apathy and arrogance of men, but also their own weaknesses and external circumstances. She has created dramatic pictures of life on the basis of this conflict and the woman’s struggle to assess themselves and achieve their identity with their true selves.

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