SHADES OF FEMINISM IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA’s NOVELS NECTARE IN A SIEVE and A DESIRE OF SILENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to highlight various shades of feminine voice projected in the novels by Kamala Markandaya. She is also famous as a feminist novelist since her early novels. With time, her novels became more of realism but one thing that didn’t change in her artistic approach is the prominent presence of the voice of her female characters throughout the plot. This is not because she is a female who supports liberal or radical feminism but she wants to introduce real Indian women to the world. She has utilized the podium of literature not to narrate a story with Indian locale but to echo the world with strong shriek of over-dominated women. Through her novels, she has foregrounded the capacity and capability of an Indian woman to balance the firm, outspoken modern perspective with traditional-moralistic essence that marks the very existence of each and every conventional woman in India. Her women characters are a deep blend of docility and valor. She is coy at times and also a fighter at others. Her female characters are in lead even after they keep on following their respective male counterparts. They follow their fathers, husbands, brothers or sons obediently but without losing their own cognitive analytical power. They are active even in their passivity; present in their absence and audible even in their silence. They know how to carry out their duties without hurting anybody’s ego and they also know how to be a torchbearer to all during tough times. Kamala Markandaya has not presented male and female as opposites or enemies but as counterparts complementing each other; in which female part is stronger, not in physique but character-wise or psychologically. Explanatory- descriptive method has been used throughout the paper to derive the point that to be a strong voice, one needn’t to fight politically or physically but to be firm and decisive in the times of trouble and that’s exactly what her female characters are. Their journey from self-negation to self-assertion is eminent in almost all her novels. The awakening at the part of women is not to disturb the equilibrium but to empathize the situations more efficiently so that they could be an active participant in the functioning of the male-dominated society; the foundation of which is actually womenfolk. Her characters evolve with the current of the plot especially females. They become wiser and bold with time but never forgets her ancient roots and customs; they free themselves from the shackles of orthodox society but never degrades her sanctity. She is a pious soul and does not waste her time in proving that to others. She is justified in her steps and
does not care for certification from the society. She can sacrifice herself and her dreams for loved ones and can also desert her family for right things.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Indian woman, Female characters.

**Introduction**

Mythological India presents a picture of power-laden, strong, bold, skillful and decisive women who knew to lead herself and others in the journey of life. Women has not been presented as an object or prized possession in Pre-vedic or Vedic era. Female not only ruled like male but also ruled male. She received equal opportunities and utilized those chances as well. In Ramayana and Mahabharata, women has been highlighted as the ones enjoying freedom like men. They received education; freedom to select their life partner through swayambar; decision making power to fight in wars etc. They were amalgamation of fierceness and feminine qualities. As a woman, they know their limitation as well as how to obligate those limitations when required. With time, such equality vanished as the society turned into a male autocratic society and women turned into a display of power and possession for men. Like land, she too became an asset through which a tradition of trading was also initiated. This caused in the imposition of many conditions and obligations that transformed womenfolk into subordinates to men and somehow deprived them of their fundamental rights even.

Pre- Independence India was a nation where women had always been given a status of goddess but denied of any power. She had been labeled as a commodity to be decorated and to decorate within the premises of the household. Men restricted her to the inner courtyard of the house and this ideology is prevalent in the sayings like ‘women are to be seen in the house and not heard’. Such narrow thinking forced women into many social evils like purdah system, sati pratha, child marriage, infanticide etc. As a result, women almost lost zest of life. She became a puppet in the hands of others. They became dependent, undecisive, vulnerable and subject to man’s discretion. Post- Independence times didn’t mark any constructive change in this scenario. Women were made to realize that they are nothing without men. They cannot do anything developmental in life. Their contribution in Independence struggle was also ignored.

In such time period, Kamala Markandaya dared to craft novels in which women characters are stronger and mature than their male counterparts. They not only care for their family members but also for their own life. She is a dutiful wife or mother but does not hesitate in abandoning them. They are not fighting on the basis of gender or because they want to challenge male dominance but for best interest of her family and sometimes only for her own betterment. This journey of hers, is basically of evolution from domesticated being to wise and courageous person who can even take drastic steps for one or the other reason. Unlike other feminist writers, Kamala Markandaya has made her woman more realistic and intelligent. She does not count man as her master or enemy or other but as her loved one who needs her in bad times more than any other thing. She understands the weakness of men and sacrifices her wishes for them but she also knows when to stop. Her females are neither goddess nor holy characters but a real face of feminism. And the author has focused on strengthening this voice to let the whole world listen to. This voice powerfully awakens the world from its deep slumber to introduce to the need of the hour i.e. to put limitation on sick psyche and mentality leading the world to death every day. She has presented real Indian society without any filters to give real account of different shades of feminism in the world of chauvinism.
Shades of Women in Her novels :

‘Karta’ of the family

Male dominant society could only digest a man as head of the family and it is quite herculean task for any man to do it without a helping hand. Women are not even considered as secondary help in making a home but considered to be someone doing nothing and just enjoying her household life. Husband recognize her as a way of satisfying his physical needs; a worker to do his routine chores; a way to get his lineage; a caretaker; in short a servant or a bonded labourer. In Kamala Markandaya’s novel A Desire of Silence, Dandekar thinks of his wife Sarojini. For him, her physical presence is important because that satisfies his bodily needs. Otherwise she is of no importance to him as she does nothing apart from giving him a full sense of possessing her. He owns her and she is like a slave who is duty bound to her master. Dandekar fails to understand the reality till the end of the novel, where he actually gets enlightened after the process of catharsis that indirectly Sarojini is the real head of the family as she is the real one who has always maintained decorum in the house. She is the one who has arranged everything in such an order that he never faced any mismanagement in his married life of more than one decade. She not only managed everything so well in the household but also relaxed him of office troubles and tensions with her positivity. Even when she falls ill of tumor in her womb, she keps that to herself and runs everything in best possible way. At this point too, Dandekar never fails to warn her that he is the head of the family and house must run as per his wishes and knowledge. Its finally at the conclusion of the novel that he realizes that and says, “My wife is a part of me now…”.

In her another novel Nectar in a Sieve too, we come across a couple but with different form of male attitude. Here the protagonist Rukmani and Nathan shares a different kind of bond. Nathan is not like any other typical Indian husband. May be because of his deteriorating health but since the beginning, he has been shown as a caring and loving husband who loves hi wife alot. He dominates her but not like a stereotype husband but as a life partner does for benefit of the other. Bad health and hunger transforms Rukmani into a strong woman with strong decision making power. She takes decision for her kids with support of her husband and this helps them to face each and every adversity with a hope of ray, let it be loss of yearly yield; loss of land because of a new tannery in the village; return of their beloved daughter; death of a son; daughter’s entry into prostitution for the sake of youngest brother or revelation of Nathan’s extra marital affair. They went through all of this with ray of hope that things will turn to good. This journey of theirs witnessed a shy and debilitated Rukmani into a firm and mighty household head who sailed her family through the toughest times.

In both the narratives directly or indirectly, a woman has worked as torchbearer for the family. Where Sarojini foregrounds the docile yet eminent side of a woman in creating and steering the family as a karta, on its contrary, Rukmani examplifies the direct and adamantine role of woman as the leading one in the family. Both of the characters are different in their approaches but are the shades of feminism as real meaning of being a feminist is not in putting forth a fight with the opposite gender by taking them as warriors from opposite army but to strengthen all without referring to their sex and gender. Both Sarojini and Rukmani highlight how moralistic and spiritual strength of a person could lead to changes in other people as well.

Strength In Sacrifice

On the other hand, Kamala Markandaya has also represented the wrong notions of chastity as the basis of measurement parameters of a woman’s character and morality. As per the novelist, indulging in extra-marital affair or in sexual intercourse out of wedlock is necessarily not to be the outcome of a woman’s indecent behaviour. Sometimes, a woman gets involved into any such activity for the sake of her near and dear ones. She has showcased such a pious character in her novel Nectar in a Sieve, Ira is the eldest child of Rukmani and Nathan’s. Her husband left her alleging her of barrenness. She tries her bets to cure this and Kenny helps her as he did years ago. But all goes in vain as her husband has already taken another wife and refuses to take her in. She lives with her family and is totally depressed but her birth of her youngest brother, Kuti, gives her a silver
lining in darkest clouds. For him, she restarts living and its for him that she does not hesitate in indulging in prostitution and she is never ashamed of that. This tint of her feminine nurturance takes over her hurt self. She with a proud gesture nurtures her son-like brother.

Similarly, Sarojini makes sacrifice at every point in her life. She lives her whole life as per the choice of semi-westernized husband and his hypocritic thinking. Dandekar is a clerk who lives a westernized lifestyle only and is a typical Indian husband by thinking. He does not consider his wife a person but a material for physical pleasure and other daily works. Sarojini never feels bad and obeys her dominating husband’s wishes as God’s. She keeps him as her priority even when she is diagnosed with tumor in her womb. Being a highly religious woman she thinks of taking refuge in God’s embrace but could not do so openly as her husband is an atheist. She knows his reaction and how hurt he might feel, so she keeps it a secret and starts visiting a guru ji without telling her husband the truth. Despite of her ailment, she continues to smile and behave nicely with everyone because she wants her family to be perfectly happy and content.

Both the ladies have made sacrifices for their families, as this gives them strength to work more efficiently for the ones they love. Sacrificing nature is also a strong shade of feminism because Indian society thinks that leaving one’s dream is obligatory for women. But they fail to understand the point that a woman gains power to fulfil other dreams by sacrificing one. This activity makes them achieve what a man could never understand i.e. serenity of finding happiness on the faces of her loved ones. She feels content when her family recognizes her contribution in form of sacrifice. Dandekar words foregrounds how a woman’s acts of sacrifice--

“ … I didn’t realize it in all the years it has been happening but I know now that without her I’m not whole. Being incomplete won’t kill me-- I know that-- but it’ll take away most of everything that life means to me.” (198)

**Feministic Tone with variations**

Feminism has had many definitions. Some writers believe that it is a political fight against ‘male dominance and sexism’ while others take it as empowering women by giving equal opportunities to women. Kamala Markandaya’s women characters also give various shades of it. Indian women is submissive since birth as they are conditioned in such a way but they are also equipped with mettle. If they are compliant of their husband’s order like Final decree then they too have the guts to follow their inner voice. Rukmani, Kunthi and Ira represents concept of ‘bold and beautiful’. All these female characters have not only made sacrifices for their family members at a certain point but they have also raised their voice for the benefits of others as well. Rukmani expresses her discontent over introduction of tannery in the village. She openly blames the outsiders for moralistic degradation of the village. She condemns the strangers for fueling prostitution and other immoral activities in the village. She openly retaliates when Ira’s husband leaves her and everybody takes her as a stigma on family’s name. She supports her daughter and encourages her to get treated for her infertility. Even when they leave for the city in hope of good, she doesn’t lay there idle but works hard with her husband to earn better. On return to the village after Nathan’s death, she moves back to the village and takes Puli with her and declares him as her adopted son. She is an empowered women in real sense who never let anyone restrict her voice and even her husband supported her in this always.

On the other hand, Sarojini is a silent feminist who didn’t fight openly to fill in the gap created by his stereotype husband Dandekar. She instead of raising her pitch or differentiating her tone, used an intelligent way of dealing with him. He is a man of duplicity with a difference in ideas and action. He claims to be a man of wisdom and modernity who does not believe in God; who believes in freedom to all but in reality he is a self-centered man. He is a man who has limited vision to his needs. Sarojini displays a polite yet smart tone of feminism when she makes her presence felt with her absence. She never fought with her husband; she didn’t
place her views in an outspoken manner but through her resilience and patience, she creates a conscious clash in her husband’s mind and soul causing him to change himself. In this way, she rebels in psychological way and brings harmony to her married life.

**Conclusion**

Worldwide various feminist writers have discussed this concept; some focused on violent aspect while others tried to derive a passive yet effective ways. Many writers like Toril Moi, Julia Kristeva, Elaine Showalter etc. have worked extensively on this topic trying to explain the right meaning of the concept to the people. Likewise Kamala Markandaya has tried to provide various colours of feminism in Indian society through her female characters. Their journey in life is a process of evolution showcasing the progress of them from traditional shy Indian women to traditionally elegant yet constructive womenfolk. Rukmani, Ira, Sarojini, Rukmani’s deserted daughter-in-law, Kunthi, Sarojini’s daughter Ramabai; all are one or the other hue of feminism. Some are dauntless while others are cautious. Though they seem meek to others but they are not so. They are wise enough to utilize their cognition for a permanent change as they know that permanent transformation is not possible with physical fight. It is an act of change at psychological level and for that complete patience is must. Kamala Markandaya is affluent in creating different types of feminists as her female protagonists. Her female characters are prominent in comparison to her male counterparts. She does all this without hurting the ego of a man. She portrays a logical background to her female lead giving her a strong character and personality influencing the lives of others as well. As Helen Cixous has discussed in her ‘death-dealing binary thought’ that ‘in patriachal value system, female is always seen as the negative, powerless instance’. (124). Kamala Markandaya’s female characters are an effort to prove this myth of negativity a lie and a mere misinterpretation of real world.

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