

# Women's Agonies under Social Restrictions in Selected Novels by Kamala Markandaya

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to investigate women's agonies under social restrictions in *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Two Virgins* by Kamala Markandaya. Both novels reveal women's suffering in a village, deal with several social phenomena as the traditional cultural practices, the impact of economic conditions and people's trails to change but in two different perspectives. *Nectar in a Sieve* deals with women's sufferings to overcome poverty and survive facing many inherent conventions whereas *Two Virgins* discusses women's sufferings in their attempts to balance between heritage and modernity. Markandaya with her feminine sensibility is one of the greatest Indo-Anglican writers who takes upon herself the task of crusade against established traditions about women but still rejects any odd moral change. Krishna Rao (1972) confirms that "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". This paper also reveals different consequences of social injustice according to ill traditional practices in traditional oriented societies.*

*Keywords: women's suffering, heritage, modernity, social injustice, traditional oriented societies.*

## INTRODUCTION

Women have been forced to be inferior to men in any patriarchal society. Simon de Beauvoir is one of the effective figures who rebels against this status by asserting that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (1989, p.301). In almost all traditional oriented societies, male-dominance leads to the growth of certain traditional attitudes and conventions that affect and determine women's position. Woman is always expected to be obedient and loyal to man: her father, husband or boss in work. In such circumstances, woman fails to find a proper niche in society as well as

in literature. In the twentieth century, woman began to emerge in literature, especially in Indo-Anglican literature to change the idealized-stereotyped image of women in the classical literature. In the classical literature, woman is placed to live according to true idealism. This view is opposed by many of women writers who were able to reflect the true image of women realistically. One of those women is Kamala Markandaya who occupies a special place among the women novelist of Post-Independence era. Rao Krishna (1984, p.1) describes Markandaya's novels by saying: "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”.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to analyze two of Kamala Markandya's novels, *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Two Virgins*, to show her unique treatment of different real social issues and deficiencies that women face in India and other traditional oriented societies. Markandya is realistic and clear in her treatment since she expresses these problems explicitly without offering any ready-made solutions to give their readers the space to live the experience and think about it as human.

### POST- INDEPENDENT INDO-ANGLIAN NOVELISTS

After Independence, a new generation of Indian English women novelists appeared as Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee and Shobha D with a high standard of education. Those novelists with their sharp observation of Indian society and their creative skills are able to portray different key issues as race, class, education opportunity wealth and social restrictions in this male-dominated society. They highlight the role of women as the cultural backbone of the family as a wife, a daughter and a mother. The role that has been shaped by the old traditions is asked to be changed and developed to give women their rights as partners not as dependent followers. Meenakshi Mukherji (1974) says:

Many of the Indo-Anglian novels written in the fifties seem to participate in the all-India trend. The serious Indo-Anglian novelist no longer seems interested in simply documenting or hopefully improving the country, but in trying to depict the individual's groping towards self-realization. (p. 52)

In this line Shashi Iyer (1976) also asserts that:

The women novelists have made a definite contribution in their intuitive and clear perception of a woman's role in the present society. Jhabwala gives a

penetrating analysis of domestic friction, Attia Hussain writes powerfully about the intense life of a Muslim girl in purdah and its collision with the modern world; and Kamala Markandaya in her “A Silence of Desire” presents a subtle study of the husband wife relationship. Her novel “Two Virgins” (1973) gives a sensitive portrayal of girl's growing awareness of the adult world, and the irrevocable loss of childhood. (p.3)

### BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Kamala Markandya was born in a small village in southern India in 1924. She began her life in India where she learnt the traditional Hindu culture and values. She worked as a journalist in her university stage. Then, she immigrated to London where she married a native English man. Her experience of being a product of both oriental and occidental cultures is clearly reflected in her works. Markandya is deeply affected by her “Indianness as well as the difference in the two systems of values: one rather acquired, the other inherited and often taken for granted” (Mukherjee, 1974, p.66). She published eleven novels; all of them highlight the Post-Colonial themes in modern India. Although she died in 2004, due to kidney failure, her voice is still heard through her novels. In her works, she always handles the issues of social classes; the differences between people living in poverty and wealth in India, and the suffering of women in this social hierarchy. According to her father's work in the Indian Civil Service, she travelled widely (Montgomery, 1963). This experience is clearly reflected in her works. Although her duality of vision, she deals with both cultures in an objective way. She shows different images of women in the context of India and England. Narasimhaiah (1985, p. 1302) asserts that “Markandaya's novels reflect the strong penchant for Indian values against the spiritual impoverishment of English society but Indians are not spared. Actually her good men and women come from both the cultures”. Markandya was particularly interested in dealing with female characters and showing their suffering due to external, social and political circumstances. She cleverly shows the real existence of

woman in the context of struggle between tradition and modernism. Uma Parmeshwaran (1976) describes Markandaya's talent as a novelist by saying: "Markandaya's strength as a novelist comes from her sensitive creation of individual characters and situation which are simultaneously representative of a larger collective; her prose style is mellifluous and controlled."

### NECTAR IN A SIEVE

*Nectar in a Sieve* is a short novel that discusses women's suffering in a traditional agriculture society especially in India. Not only is the conflict between this kind of society and the industrial capitalistic one highlighted but also the catastrophes of nature affected the life of this society are mentioned. The impact of the economic conditions on the human spirit that tries to overcome misfortune and poverty caused by nature and economics is also discussed. It is Markandaya's first novel published in 1954 and is always compared with Pearl S. Buck's masterpiece, *The Good Earth* (1931). Its title is inspired from Coleridge's sonnet "work without hope":

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,

And hope without an object cannot live.

The title describes the case when one works without hope of success to show the endless struggle in rural India in which peace and happiness cannot be achieved with social evils.

In the novel, Markandaya presents different models of women in village who take the family and society for granted. Women are in fact victims of social traditional rules and restrictions as being in an inferior position in a society where women are dependent on men. In this section the focus is on only two models; a mother and her daughter: Rukmani and Ira. The only familiar thing which is common to the two characters is that they never show any superiority over men at the beginning. They surrender before the negative social forces. They are simply the portrayal of womanhood in Indian family. At the end of the novel, we notice two

different ways of their reactions to their suffering as we will see at the end of the paper.

- **Rukmani**

Rukmani is the protagonist and the narrator of the novel. She tells the story of her life and other characters' with her direct observation honestly. She finds herself at the age of twelve a wife of a poor farmer leaving her father's world to live in her husband's under the same condition of inferior position. The young lady moves to her husband's mud hut set near a paddy field. She learns the life of farmers and begins to help him facing all difficulties and harshness. Her happiness is in her husband's satisfaction as she says: "be all and end all" of life. Markandaya highlights the issue of illiteracy and ignorance and how they shape the women's life in this society. Rukmani is literate but she is never aware of her rights. She is disappointed with her first child as a girl because her husband as any man wants a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land. Rukmani sheds "tears of weakness and disappointment, for what woman wants a girl for her 'firstborn?'. It is male progeny that elevates the status of a woman in our society and not a pooling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind". She is a part of this Indian patriarchal system. Time passes and she becomes the mother of five sons and a daughter. She has scarcely any means to feed them. She works from dawn to dusk for her family.

- **Ira**

Ira's parents were very sad when she came to life as any girl in Indian society. At the age of fourteen, her parents manage to find a man who accepts only hundred rupees as a dowry of her. After five years, she is rejected by her husband because of barrenness. She is also rejected after curing. She begins to help her family and sells her body to get money to feed her youngest brother. She is another case of victims who is driven to be a prostitute not only because of poverty but also because of her husband's rejection as a model of man's dominance. Her parents try to prevent her from continuing her immoral actions, but Ira does not accept their advice saying "tonight and tomorrow and every night; so long as there is need. I will not hunger any

more” (p. 137). Her mother at the end supports her saying:

She was no longer a child to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and invincible determination. We had for so long accept her obedience to our will that when it ceased to be given naturally, it came as a considerable shock; yet there was no option but to accept the change, strange and bewildering as it was, for obedience cannot be extorted. (p.138)

As Markandaya always shows the tragic consequences of her highlighted issues, Ira becomes pregnant of a fatherless child as a logical conclusion to her new way of life. Rukmani receives the child saying “I held him, this child begotten in the street of an unknown man in a moment of easy desire, while the brightness of the future broke and fell about me like so many pieces of coloured glass”(p. 117).Nathan comments “as a cruel thing in the evening of their lives” (p. 118). Ira was happy with her son and decided not to leave with her parents when they decide to go to the city due to the crisis of hunger: “I will not be a burden to you. I am happy enough here, people are used to me and my son. I cannot start a new life now” (p.137).Markandaya presents Ira as a model of woman whose suffering reshapes her new identity. Her change is accepted by her parents and she is responsible of her life and choices whatever the end will be.

### **SOCIAL FORCES AGAINST WOMEN**

Markandaya highlights women’s independence attempts under social restrictions and inherent traditions. She deals with problems as poverty, hunger, flood, and starvation and focuses also on social evils and deficiencies that affect women. She tells women indirectly to fight for correcting their inherited position. She believes that woman deserves better position than the one shaped by traditional oriented thoughts. She highlights the following causes of women’s misery life and their ill sequences as examples of social instruction system in certain society:

#### 1. The social evil of child marriage

She explains how Rukmani gets married at the age of twelve and how Rukmani plays the same role of their parents and gets rid of her daughter at the age of fourteen. The daughter faces the same fate of her mother as it is an insistent rule. She also clarifies the hard life of these two young ladies after their early marriage and how they struggle to get money to feed themselves and their families.

#### 2. The social evil of dowry system in Indian society

Both Rukmani and her daughter face the same fate to marry a poor farmer because he accept law dowry. This issue shows how the freedom of choice for women is completely absent in choosing their life partners.

#### 3. The social evil of blaming only wives for infertility

After five years of Ira’s marriage, she is sent to her parental home as she is a barren woman. Nobody blames the husband. Ira’s father says “I do not blame him. He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient”(p. 50). Ira calls herself as “a failure” because she is unable to give birth. Even after her medical treatment, her husband rejects her because he gets another wife. Her mother tells her daughter: “You must not blame him. He has taken another woman”. She has no hope to get married again as expressed: “with a dowry it was perhaps possible she might marry again, without it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and reputedly barren”(p. 62).Even Rukmani is blamed when she gives birth of a daughter. Her mother gives her a small lingam stone to wear as a symbol of fertility to have a son.

#### 4. Modernity

The tannery as a symbol of industrial society and modernity leads to the complete dispossession of Rukmani’s family when their land which they have been cultivating for nearly thirty years has been sold by the land lord to the tannery owners for its development. Rukmani and Nathan receive the cruelest shock when they are asked to leave the land. Nathan

expresses this shock by saying “Where are we to go? What shall we do?” (p. 133) to show that land is their safest place. Nathan and Rukmani, after losing the land, migrate to the city for their livelihood where their sufferings take a new path. They search for Murugan in the city but they fail to find him. After spending a whole day in searching, they become tired therefore they go to a temple where food is free in the evening. There is a large crowd and the couple cannot get any. Nathan is very sick so Rukmani goes alone to the priest to beg him to give her the food for both. But she manages to get her part only and shares it with her sick husband. The couple is not welcomed by the gathered poor and beggars in the temple. Nathan expresses the bad conditions passionately, “Better to starve where we bred than live here. Whatever happens, whatever awaits us, we must return” (p. 168). In a very clear vision, Markandaya expresses the impact of modern life on those couple in the city where everyone thinks only of his life and ignores others’ request for help.

### 5. Different Reaction

Rukmani and Ira face many social forces against women in this society. These forces are considered as rules established and grown to be the social frame that determines women life in any traditional society. According to the analysis of these two characters, there are two different reactions of the two women according to their personalities expressed in the novel as follows:

#### 1. Acceptance of pain and misery as fate

This attitude is obvious through Rukmani’s way of dealing in different situations by saying “We are in God’s hands” (p.131). Even in her hard times she says “want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as seasons of the earth, varying only in degree. What profit bewails that which has always been and cannot change?” (p.131). She accepts all negative social forces without any cry of protest against this injustice. This picture of women is cleverly portrayed to draw attention of these passive women who do not know their right according to their inherited position in traditional oriented society. Even when she knows her husband’s extra-marital affair with Kunthu, she comments by saying: “I need you, I cried to myself, Nathan my husband I cannot take the risk because there

is risk since she is clever and I am not”. Her passivity makes her accept all his oppression and never see man’s fault. She only follows the way designed by her husband till he dies.

#### 2. Change and disobedience

Ira, who faces rejection of her husband about something she does not make and poverty as a member in Rukmani’s family, reacts this ill-fate in a different way of her mother who always forgives any flaw. She begins another life announcing her disobedience to the normal rules of society. She chooses the immoral path of life; the life of prostitution to earn money. Moreover, she gives birth to a fatherless child. Markandaya is keen enough of painting this picture to warn against this reaction of women and ask for social justice to help such these models who pay the price of ill social traditions not only in Indian society but also in any patriarchal society.

### TWO VIRGINS (1973)

Markandaya in this novel deals again with the conflict between rural and urban societies but at the level of values. She offers the story of two sisters called Lalitha and Saroja. Although they grow up in the same house under the same parental and rural restrictions, the impact of the urban influence on them take two different paths. The beginning was when their father dared the Hindu code of decorum and sent them to Christian to learn dance and music. Like this act is shameful in the traditional village but their father who belongs to a lower middle class with some modern ideas and behaviors, feels proud of them, especially the gorgeous Lalitha. Lalitha is attractive and is invited by Mr. Gupta, the film director to go with him to the city to become a heroine in films. As he is fascinated by ‘modern life’, she accepts his offer. In fact, Mr. Gupta exploits her for sexual purpose and she becomes pregnant of his child a few months later. Saroja has a different perspective of life and she is mature enough to keep away from the meretricious value system in the city. Poor Lalitha returns back to her village trying to commit suicide as Mr. Gupta rejects the responsibilities of her pregnancy. Lalitha, who admires the colourful temptations of the city, refuses the poor life of her

village, therefore, she returns back to city alone. Her parents and sister search for her but they fail.

In this novel, Markandaya offers also moral degradation as *Nectar in a Sieve* but in a different context. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, especially in Ira's case, degradation is the only option to survive and get money but in Lalitha's case, it is her choice. The reason behind this degradation as Markandaya portrays is the confusion resulted from the big difference between life in the city and in the village. Poor conditions and poverty also stand as one of the causes of this degradation, but not the only. The young girl, Lalitha, is exploited because she is a dreamer without limitations. She is fascinated by a fridge in Miss Mendoz's house which her mother describes it as a form of luxurious life. Lalitha believes that fridge is a necessity not a luxury as many other things. Like this attitude is another factor which moves Lalitha's consciousness to follow the illusion of modernism. So, she goes to the city to experience the life which she calls "modern". But as she does not used to live under the twin whips of heritage and modernity, she becomes a fallen woman. On the other hand, Saroja, the obedient and well-behaved girl, learns the lesson of her sister and resist the false pleasure in the city. She experiences the modern life without destroying her inherent notions of rural society. She returns back to the village, the safe place, accepting others in new perspective of life.

In this vein, Markandaya presents his vision clearly. Although she stands against the inherent traditions about women's stereotype image, she rejects the change of moral values due to modernity or other factors. She asks women to move towards freedom but not a negative freedom. Freedom of ill traditional practices is the wanted one. She explicitly highlights the balance of the moral values and material values

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practiced in life. She is simply against any traditional conventions that victimize women but also with all traditional conventions that keep women away of moral degradation.

## CONCLUSION

At the end, Markandaya in her amazing works declares that all horrible degradation affected life in this society is not always due to poverty, hunger and starvation. It may be caused according to misunderstanding of the word freedom. Freedom does not mean achieving dreams by anyway. In such traditional oriented society, although there are many negative social practices, conventions and attitudes which need to be improved to achieve social equalities completely and to deal with women as spirited companion of men, there is another aspect of heritage at the level of moral values of social code which has to be followed to achieve the principles of conformity for security and survival as human beings.

Markandaya explains clearly that help is a two-way communication process which begins with the needy asking for help and those needs require a receptive humanity to answer. She uses realism as main theme of her novels to express key problematic issues that face women. Women's reaction to their miserable life and bad conditions differs according to their psyche and social background. Rukmani and Saroja stand as models of nonchalance spirit who is deeply rooted in traditional values, whereas Ira and Lalitha revolt against old traditions and women's stereotype of life but in different dramatic ways. The two novels are invested with powerful insights into individual minds as well as into the attitudes and experiences of life which shape the endings.

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