

# Realistic Portrayal of Female Characters in the Fiction of Kamala Markandaya

**Dr Jyoti (Assistant Professor)**

**(English Department)**

**C.R.M.JAT COLLEGE (Hisar)**

**Email-dr.jyoti09@gmail.com**

## **Abstract:**

Kamala Markandaya is a well-known female novelist in Indo-Anglian fiction. She has deftly delineated fully developed and charming characters in her work. Most of her female characters in her famous novels are devoid of individuality. Actually, the remarkable feature of her female characters is the realistic portrayal of them in a comprehensive manner. She has a deep and firsthand knowledge of South Indian villages, the real condition of women in rural life with their sufferings and miseries. She has depicted all the hardships of rural women faced in a traditional social structure. However she does not take sides with any of her protagonists; but she feels the pain of women protagonists and believes in their better mount. Her intention is to awaken the polite society. That is why; the realistic portrayal of women characters is the favourite subject of her novels. In this context the present research paper highlights a picture of realistic portrayal of female characters in the fiction of Kamala Markandaya.

**Keywords:** Realism, Protagonist, Rural Life, Peasant, Hardship, Sufferings.

## **Introduction:**

Most of the novels of Kamala Markandaya show a woman's quest for identity and refining herself. The novelist depicts a realistic canvas of contemporary woman through her characters such as; Rukmani, Nalini, Ira, Mira, Roshan, Helen, Lalitha, Mohini, Usha etc. in the novels like 'Nectar in a Sieve', 'A Handful of Rice', 'Inner Fury', 'Two Virgins', 'A Silence of Desire' & 'Possession'. In the novel 'Nectar in a Sieve', Kamala Markandaya has

presented the life and travails of a peasant woman, Rukmani, who faces many odds of life. Likewise, in the novel 'A Handful Rice', Rukmani's plight resembles that of a carefree girl, Nalini who pulls her family from all hardships. In the novel 'Two Virgins' Kamala Markandaya has presented a realistic picture of the problem of growing up in to an average woman of an average contemporary Indian family. In the novel 'The Golden Honey Comb', the novelist deals with the woman belonging to the royal families. Moreover, there are so many others female protagonist who face many problems in life. To conclude Kamala Markandaya has been successful to highlight a vivid and realistic portrayal of female characters in her fiction.

Kamala Markandaya's novel '**Nectar in a Sieve**' is a heart touching and mind blowing novel dealing with the theme of hunger and starvation. The novelist has highlighted the theme through the character of women protagonist, Rukmani. Here Rukmani is a peasant woman and she is able to endure all sufferings. Moreover she is an idol of an Indian woman. Kamala Markandaya has subtitled the novel as A Novel of Rural India to disclose the very characteristics of rural India through the life of countless Indian villagers living in dire poverty, hunger and exploitation. She has not named the fictional locale to make a village microcosm of rural India. Kai Nicholson in Social Problems in the Indo-Anglian and Anglo-Indian Novel says,

**“With her impeccable representational realism and innovative description of Indian arcadia, Markandaya achieves a perfect poise between the rural reality and the disciplined urbanity of art.”**

The novelist has made Rukmani, the protagonist; narrate the tale, in order to show the subtle intensities of the emotional fabric. She has made a woman the central character because she knows that woman is at the centre of the socio-economic structure of the Indian peasant families. Rukmani is a symbol of an Indian rustic woman. Her views are reflections of typical socio-cultural ethos which is designed to make an Indian woman tolerant, submissive, innocuous and easily satisfied with her lot.

She is quietly illiterate and she bears six children after marrying with Nathan. Nevertheless, she is superior both in heart and mind. She also differs from other peasant women and despite the difficulties she could not involve in evils and keep her path clean while Kunti and Era involve in prostitution. Ultimately she proves to be a good-wife and a good-mother.

However, her marriage with Nathan was a mismatch as it had been thought by her relatives and her village people. Even her mother was not happy with this marriage because in a village community, in case of marital relations, it should be accordingly higher standard of bridegroom than bride's family. The marriage of Rukmani's eldest daughter Era and married life of Kunti also tell tales of woe. But Rukmani never lost faith in a life or love for husband and children. A.V. Krishna Rao remarks; **“The real truth of the novel is the spiritual stamina of Rukmani against such formidable enemies to her culture; the draconian landlord, and the soulless industry. She knows work without hope draws nectar in a sieve and hope without an object cannot live and this mother of rural India lives in her children”**.

Rukmani is a loving and dutiful wife who is completely devoted to her husband and children. Being a sagacious and prudent wife, she manages her home well. She is very amiable and gentle and soon she has a number of friends among the women folk of the village community. But she is very close to Janki and Kali. However, she does not like Kunthi, nevertheless, when Kunthi gives birth to her child, Rukmani serves her to the best of her ability. She is also prudent and farsighted and she saves money for hard days. Her concept of life is very simple and elemental as it does not require seeing much happy. She ponders on bare necessities consisting basic needs. She is very keen observer of nature and she believes that nature has some cosmic power constructive and destructive. When a tannery is set up in the village, she feels that the crows, kites and other scavenging birds have taken the place of paddy birds and flamingoes. She describes the pathetic plight of her family as: **“This home my husband had built for me with his own hands in the time he was waiting for; brought me to it with a pride which I used to better living, had so very nearly crushed. In it, we had lain together and children had been born. This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us for it stood on land that belonged to another and the land itself my which we live. It is a cruel thing, I thought, they do not know what they do to us”**.

The woman protagonist, Rukmani is very caring mother when her daughter Ira is deserted by her husband, she is shocked. Her sorrow crosses all the limits when she comes to know that Ira was involved in prostitution. She tries to stop her daughter but in vain. Rukmani's helplessness has been presented in the following lines: **“We had tried everything in our power; there was nothing more we could do. She was no longer a child, to be**

cowed or forced into submission; but a grown women with a definite and an invincible determination. We forbade, she insisted, we lost.” She becomes shock proof as she comes to know that her son Raja has died. She shows herself spiritually and mentally strong when her husband Nathan tells her about the death of their last child Kuti. She also muses over the death of her old granny. She remarks that time is a great healer. After the death of her husband she comes back to her village with a renewed faith with her adopted son Puli. Thus Rukmani’s character symbolizes the realistic vision of rural peasant women who represents the place of women in rural India.

Kamala Markandaya in her novel, ‘**A Handful of Rice**’, presents the character of the female protagonist, Nalini who is very opposite to the character of Rukmani. However, Nalini is very virtuous, decent and comely with bright eyes and thick glossy hair. Her voice is soft and low which is an excellent quality in women. Ravi falls in love with her and her charm makes Ravi to adopt a honest job of tailoring. Regarding the personality of Nalini, A.V. Krishna Rao remarks: “**It is the magic of her personality that attracts him to be gentleman. She symbolizes the subtle fragrance of life, a clean, healthy and traditional life. She promises sweet life but demands hard and honest labour.**”

Nalini is also very helpful to her sister, Thangam. She helps her sister in need and gives new dresses to her daughters. When Ravi condemns Thangam for the act of stealing, Nalini opposes him. Moreover, she is also a good-daughter. She looks after her mother, Apu in illness and passes sleepless night for him. To conclude, she plays well her traditional role of a good mother, an affectionate sister, a dutiful wife and a loveable daughter. On the contrary her sister, Thangam betrays her father and she is a mean, callous and incurable woman character in the novel.

In the novel, ‘**Some Inner Fury**’, Kamala Markandaya’s Mirabai is woman protagonist with her sensitivity and imaginative sight. She is more modern than traditional as she is brought up in a westernized household. Nevertheless, she has Indian heart and she poses tolerance fortitude like traditional women in Indian culture. She shows the vastness of her heart in loving Richard. In spite of this, she prefers duty for the sake of her country. Premala is another female character in the novel. She is by nature shy and conventional and basically Indian in nature. When she comes to Mira to borrow her shorts which she puts on only to satisfy Kitmay (Premala’s Husband); but Kitmay has nothing to do with it. On the

contrary, Mira loves Premala and remarks: **“A lovely face, tenderly moulded, which never lost its tenderness because she could never learn to be tough. In her heroic efforts to please her husband and abiding her concept of Dharma, she thinks of abnegating her identity. She is deeply religious and is in accord with the religious part of the ceremony. Several times I saw her praying eyes closed, forgetful, of the crowd, with that expression of desperate entreaty you sometimes see on the face of a small pleading child”**. Actually, Mirabai represents the rebellious young blood of pre-independent India.

In the novel, ‘**A Silence of Desire**’, the novelist portrays Sarojani, the woman protagonist as a good mother, good wife, an excellent cook, as a good housewife and a religious woman. However, her life is full of sufferings and miseries, nevertheless, she spends much of her time in prayers because she is a traditional woman who values her chastity above all and thinks it to be the precious ornament of her life. She is more emotional than her husband Dandekar. She is a traditional woman who does not rebel against traditions. Sarojini is a religious woman who sees nothing outside her world of mysticism. For her „tulsi“ is not an ordinary plant, it is the plant in which she observes her god but for Dandekar it is just idolatry and superstitious beliefs of a person like Sarojini. The walls of her kitchen reveal the religious faith of Sarojini which is full of decoration with the pictures and portraits of gods and goddess, “These were all of gods and goddesses singly and in groups, tableaux that showed them holding court in their heavens, or worrying, or being miraculously born of the earth or the sea.”

Sarojini is trained to be the ideal traditional Indian wife. A special note of the above paragraph “less from the warmth of her response than from her unfailing acquiescence to his demands” speak volumes about their preferential attitude. According to R.K. Dhawan, “Dandekar is the male chauvinist for whom the wife is a robot or some sophisticated mechanical device for the fulfillment of his needs.” Dandekar is a senior clerk, married and blessed with three children. He is like most of the men, desires just the monotony of common existence. From their pattern of living which is like any other family, one learns that dependability is crucial.....

For instance, now that she heard his step in the country yard, she would be putting the potatoes into fry. The agreeable hiss would last until he has washed and changed and by them she would be ready for him and so would be evening meal.

‘**Possession**’ is another remarkable novel of Kamala Markandaya which deals with the story of a traditional woman character of Ansuva. Her character remains any enigmatic to the end, and hence, is the frail bridge between Kamala Markandaya’s eastern and western world. Ansuva is a well-aware of Indian tradition and her culture. When her friend Caroline comes to India, she feels his feelings for Valmiki. She becomes very sympathetic, kind and merciful to Ellie (Caroline’s friend). On the contrary Caroline is also representative of her race. Caroline thinks that Valmiki is a means of success in society and loves her. She thinks Valmiki her possession and she truly represents the traditional image of those people who do not easily give up what they think are their possessions.

Kamala Markandaya’s novel ‘**Two Virgins**’ is related to the story of two village girls Lalitha and Saroja. Saroja is the elder sister running after a film director and coming to grief, and the younger moving from innocence to experience by living through the family traumatic experience. On the contrary, Saroja is a traditional role model for young girls whereas Lalitha is a beautiful girl. In spite of this, Saroja is never jealous to her sister and she is morally strong and she stops her sister to commit suicide. She is quite satisfied with the life of her village and comes back to the village. She is a stream of thoughts and she saves herself from Devraj as she recognizes his evils intention of sexual exploitation.

The novel tells the disadvantages of city life for the innocent rural girls. The industrialization and film city has a mechanical and spurious life and this life is different from real life. The urbanization and Western culture makes the life of these people different from the people who live in villages: In Two Virgins, Kamala Markandaya touches to the traditional ways of Indian rural life and the damage brought by the impact of urbanization. The story centers around two sisters – Saroja and Lalitha, the former being rooted in Indian tradition and customs and the latter being influenced by the western ways of living. Saroja is a Godfearing village girl. Generally the villagers acknowledge God’s mercy and love by giving offerings to God in the temple.

## Conclusion:

To conclude the discussion, it can be traced out that all the women characters in Kamala Markandaya's fiction feel the warmth of changes and struggle in their minds whether they should reject the old ones and welcome to the new ones, find out a possible solution out of vote for transformation. Her women characters are caught in the whirlpool of tradition and they seem struggling for change. Her woman protagonist, Rukmani has to fight a heroic battle against unfavorable circumstances. Likewise, Mirabai has to sacrifice her love for country. Female protagonist, Premala dies for noble cause. Ansuya makes Caroline realize of the Indian culture and the traditions. Saroja controls her passions and remains virgin. Thus being an ideal novelist Kamala Markandaya has a repertoire of women characters of her fiction and she has been successful to depict some bitter truth of life in a realistic manner. She has highlighted the male dominance and female subordination in the traditional society where the kitchen culture is preferred and women are talked to be submissive and they have to sacrifice for the sake of family. Nevertheless, we can't ignore the fact that there is good combination of tradition and modern values in some of her novels and female characters in her fiction are in search of something positive in their life. In essence, Kamala Markandaya's novels trace out a journey of woman from self-sacrifice to self-realization. Moreover, the novelist proves that the plight of the women in traditional society has a meaningful role in the changing scenario of Indian society and she shows her awareness of female consciousness.

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