Kamala Markandaya's Indian Women : *The Principles and the Principals* : A Feministic Elucidation

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I. Introduction

Literature has relentlessly been a dexterous contraption in scrutinizing the gender associations and sexual discriminations. And a re-reading of literature becomes all the more momentous and really priceless because it facilitates the reader to get the reconstitution of the female subjectivity. Everyone has now come to accept that disparity of the sexes is not a biological occurrence; neither is it a divine decree but a capricious cultural construct to maneuver the professional performance of the society for substantiating the advantages of men. Hence women writers center their creativity on two concerns a propos to women—smash certain hypotheses related to women which are all-inclusive in aspect and stand and design a female standpoint on matters involving the encounters of women and their inestimable and sustaining contribution to culture. Simone de Beavoir is therefore unswerving in his declaration: "One is not born, but rather a woman … it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature". (Beauvoir, 301) Anita Myles endorses the identical viewpoint and writes: "Most of the attempts to define what it is to be a woman, assume a universal connotation in that woman is considered more as a product of cultural norms and restraints rather than as a creation of nature".(Myles, i) She adds that woman is a quarry of financial and cultural hassles. Female scholarship deconstructs the social spin of gender and the corollary effect of that construct demystifying the cultural paradigms associated with it. The question now arises as regards the status and the liberation of women. It is therefore binding to re-interpret their status, revamp the entire social system and redefine their roles. As such, "if a woman is defined as a sexual being that exists for another, then she can be liberated only by redefinition of the very norms of gender identity—a process which requires a radical change in society that produced such norms". (Mackimon, 533)

The feminist discernment has given a fresh ardour and animation to literary studies and unveiled some of the prejudices at work in the time-honored fashion since the significance and clout of women relative to men's remains more or less inert. Elaine Showalter is vindicated in making the wrapping up: "The female literary tradition comes from the still evolving relationship between women writers and their society".(Showalter, 12) An all-embracing scrutiny of the women authors expounds the fact that these writers creatively and collectively react to an unexceptional social pragmatism. The humid wits of women in a 'patriarchal' society are due to their economic dependence on men. Such a conclusion leads to the portrayal mostly of women of just two kinds: women who are tame and the other extreme, who are ferocious, sexy and fanatical. The self-referential focal point of the post modern "inner sensibility" writers with self-presentation contests the earlier views and deliberation of most women writers. To cite an instance, the "neurotic" representation of a woman, like Maya of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, earlier misinterpreted as abnormal and erratic reaction to the assumed adverse environmental influences around the individual, has now become implicit as a strong and sustaining feedback, illuminating her sensitive and exclusive union with others and also the affirmation of her distinctiveness.

The trouncing of women in a patriarchal set-up also depends upon the class, caste or race to which they fit in and hence in order to prod the consciousness or the rejoinder of a woman belonging to a specific caste, class or race, the reader needs to take into account the ethnicity and the social constraints of the environment.

Such a debate should not hoodwink the reader to reckon that women are victims without even an iota of protest. They, in fact, emerge victorious, at least in most cases, though not in all, by their sheer resolve, standpoint and stoical stance of nourishment. Such a wielding of their power and influence and creating a tradition of their own, may, perhaps, be informal and invisible but integrated in accomplishment.

Gerda Lerner's deliberation is terse: "While men conquered territory and built institutions which managed and distributed power, women transmitted culture to the young and built the network and infrastructures that provide continuity in the community (Lerner 52)".

Even a perfunctory version of the significant creative production of the post colonial novels in English brings out the evolutionary formula clearly discernable in the Indian society and its women conclusively epitomize in the classic shift of the women characters from "feminine" to "female". This is an overtone of the theory expounded by Elaine Showalter regarding assorted phases of the twentieth century women liberation movement.(Showalter, 13) The first segment involves *imitation* of the current crushing tradition and *internalizing* its ideas and concepts. In the next stage, women begin *protesting* these crunching shackles and begin *advocating* for their autonomy. In the last and concluding phase, a turning-inward phase, the phase of *self-discovery*, women search their own minds seeking identity of their own.

II. Indian Literary Domains

Novel, as a genre, is central in proliferating the perception since it is closer and treasured by people and society. As A.S. Dasan writes, "the novel has often reflected the society in which it finds itself. It has also indicated that it has the propensity to make enduringly valid statements on life…..has sustained

a sense of contemporaneous till date all over the world."(Dasan, 17) He adds that the novelist has categorically certain empathy with identifiable humanistic perspectives in tune with the aesthetics of his ethnicity.

The Indian literary customs have loose story-telling narratives in fictional designs for ages as part of Indian civilization. Indian fictional narratives, in general, sculpt happenings in life into stories, and such narratives are one way of perceiving ourselves and the world around us. Indian fictional faculty is familiar with mimetic imitation and aesthetic evaluation of the stimuli and the inferences of what life consists of and what it vindicates. Using language as a synchronic machination, it transports substance by indirection and allusion. The mind behind an Indian work of art is a sanitizing and critiquing mind. It appraises human contemplation which is the groundwork of human passions and actions. It assists the reader in yearning towards consolidating the resolution between the material and spiritual even in the midst of disjointed experiences and impaired civilizations. A.S. Dasan writes: "While embracing life experiences within its narratology, Indian literature in general, has maintained a holistic approach juxtaposing the surface features of the text with a sense of interiorization."(Dasan 22)

III. Indian Women Novelists

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's axiomatic expression is quite curt and justifiably authenticated: "Women are natural story tellers even when they don't write or publish."(Iyengar 435) The first cohort of Indian women writers in English dwelt on specialties, with explosive indulgences, such as the co-existence of post colonial reminiscence, the neo colonial perception and also the post modernist revivalism. The succeeding age band of women novelists has adjusted their voices to the altered psychological pragmatism of Indian life after independence. Women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shoba De, Bharati Mukherjee and Ruth Prawar Jhabvala go well with this group. They aver through their exposé that to assuage the affliction of women, the society needs a mammoth transformation. These writers also take up cudgels against a multitude of cultural, political and social trepidations. Their mission and vision are based on the convergence of their consciousness and the world at large. Therefore the women characters symbolize subsistence and progress as well as debility, alienation, putrefaction and mortality. Though egalitarianism and autonomy are their tenets, these Indian women are clued-up that there is no clear-cut single solution or a smooth way out of the humiliating state of affairs.

The women writers are also sensitive that there are deep-seated dissimilarities in predicaments relating to women belonging to developed nations and those belonging to underdeveloped nations. While the former women's issues relate to uniqueness, job equality and the sexual roles, the latter's distress is mere survival. Even the few well-settled and reasonably better placed individuals are fatalities of the detrimental centuries-old traditions. But the most common sought after benchmark is the mission for deliverance of women irrespective of the outcome.

Hence the examination of the post modern Indian women novelists impinge on the feminine insight of the women characters, their progression towards a stirred consciousness that leads to fortification of their inner self in a male dominated society. This self introspection leading to self judgment leads to their conception of the implicit inner potency. This vigor protracts them throughout when they adorn different dimensional roles in society—mother, sister, wife, daughter etc. They are rendered as cultural backbones of the family. Such an attitude and analysis leads these writers to conceive protagonists who belong to one of the following clusters: women of the first brand are hyper sensitive individuals inept to cope with the environment around them and the tussle and the mismatch drag them to the inevitable catastrophe—entry into the blind and the no-return path of neurosis. Women of the second set are mute victims and their throbbing transforms them into idealists. Women belonging to the third breed are adept in identifying and admitting the new and important knowledge about themselves as a consequence of their suffering and this awareness or realization make them 'sober' in outlook and thus they reach a kind of 'fulfilment' in their relationship with the planet. These women could fine-tune well within and outside their bounds by developing value systems of their own and moreover, their inner resources empower them to defy the irrational social system.

IV. Kamala Markandaya's Main Indian Women

The impression of Indian womanhood is as assorted as the country itself and has undergone dramatic and sweeping makeovers from era to era. Despite the fact that the antique styles of persecution such as child marriage and sati are on their way out, "the air of 'freedom' which touches the women is like the kite flying yet, being stringed into the manipulative and maneavouring hands of their men."(Singh, I.P. 8) Kamala Markandaya has vividly presented the scuffle and also the muscle of the Indian women ranging from peasants to the royal families. But the fusing imaginings that associate them are the search for the sovereignty of the self, familial commitments and the fellow feeling towards men and women in society. But such a fellow feeling forces these women to challenge several obstacles because of the imperfect and incompatible social evils and corrupt practices coupled with economic difficulties. But such altercations lead these women to mellowness in stance and revelation. They never become cynical at any stage in stumbling upon the battle between the pursuit for independent lifestyle and the nurturance and, in fact, never lose hope.

Kamala Markandaya's novels are in search of affirmative resolution for unenthusiastic state of affairs. It is true that she pictures the negative or gloomy facets in Indian women's lives, but there are positive signals that togetherness and mutual understanding could work wonders in making a meaningful existence.

Rukmani's character in *Nectar in a Sieve* is intended in such a way that there is a gradual emergence from the plane of innocence to experience and in

other words, from mutiny to concurrence. When Rukmani reached her husband's place, she could see only a mud hut: "Rukmani wanted to cry. Merely a mud hut and nothing else…and she sank down."(Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 50) But better sense prevails upon her when she learns that the hut was built by Nathan himself with his own hands and began to admire him. She had the maturity to say, "A woman, they say, always remembers her wedding night, ….but for me there are other nights….when I went to my husband matured in mind as well in body." (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 66) she was also a prudent and sensible housewife. Her friends Kali and Janaki taught her and made her well versed in all chores relating to a peasant's wife. Nathan was surprised enough to admire the vision of Rukmani when she produced so much store of money, rice and dhal for Ira's marriage. A true helpmate, she assisted her husband on the field. Rukmani's audacity, fortitude, ingenuity and the serene tolerance of her lot are well exploited. Regarding the scarcity of food, she says: "Want is our companion from birth to death, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change? (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 113)" Even at the greatest moment of physical and emotional crisis, Rukmani has the determination to console her husband: "Have we not been happy to-gether? Always, dear, always." (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 110) Time is a great healer and with the passing of time, Rukmani could review her life, "…with calm of mind with all passion spent. (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 135)" R.A. Singh writes: "Rukmani's spiritual stamina, heroic impulse, love-like simplicity, love for her children, tolerance and respect for traditional values make her an outstanding character." (Singh, R.A, 6) She is an archetypal figure figurative of the anguished soul of India through the ages. She is the accomplishment of India's consecrated convention and as A.V. Krishna Rao puts it, "the real truth of the novel is the spiritual stamina of Rukmani."(6) Thus Rukmani is an admirable picture of stoicism and resilience. Ira, the daughter of Rukmani, has also the reverberation of grit: "….to-night and to-morrow and every night; so long as there is need. I will not hunger any more." (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 137) Rukmani corroborates her: "She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination." (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, 138)

The social order shifts from the rural setting in *Nectar in a Sieve* to an urbanized culture in *Some Inner Fury*. Mira, the upper middle class woman, is torn between passion and India's independence. Though relatively free, when she grows rapidly, several boundaries are forced on her—not allowed to travel alone, cannot swim with Kit and Richard and cannot stay with Roshan alone. But Mira smashes them down and engrosses herself in many social dealings. But the unregulated independence could give her only a sense of restiveness. The aspiration for perspicuity makes her cross the bounds of the family and she now grasps the perils of rampant freedom: "It was out; the uncertainty, one's helplessness, the fear, the despair, never allowed into the consciousness but always existing there." (Markandaya, *Some Inner Fury*, 165) The deep rooted

forces of convention check her from trespassing. Markandaya's memorandum is clear—no roots, no survival. Thus the impermanence of negative freedom drags her back to the roots, a show of matured thinking: "To keep our peace we would have to go back then to the world from which we came, to which we could always return because it is a part of us even as the earth was of those others who stayed." (Markandaya, *Some Inner Fury*, 192) Roshan is all in one—forthright, erudite, endowed and progressive. Her conception of freedom is universal—national and global—and thus a role model for other women. Mira is so much refreshing to Roshan: "She gave me a chance to go and I took it….I uncovered at last the gateway to the freedom of the mind, and gazed entranced upon the vista of endless extensions of which the spirit is capable." (Markandaya, *Some Inner Fury*, 49) Premala champions the traditional Indian woman who fails to transmute her entreaty for brazenness into her daily life. A culturally nonconformist woman, she is an indecisive character.

In the words Shanta Krishnaswamy: "In Premala, the author shows the insecurity, isolation, bewilderment and vulnerability that the traditionally brought up Indian woman feels, when she has to adjust to western norms of living, when she has to accommodate to tastes and values of a culture in flux….she tries to be an ideal wife and companion to her husband. She ends up being a non-person and her death puts a stop to her desperate adjustments, to her soul shrinking compromises.(188)"

Thus Premala is a woman of customary Indian model, Mira, a modern woman with an insightful penchant for Indian culture and Roshan is a pictogram of enlightened progressive womanhood. The continual motif is conformity of tradition and a judicious espousal of progressive modernity.

Sarojini of *A Silence of Desire* is a mainstream middle class orthodox Hindu housewife, having her own conventions of livelihood. The novel itself is about the longstanding dichotomy of head and heart, emotion and reason. Dandekar tries to wean Sarojini away from superstitions and sacraments, whereas she wants him to disregard western notions and see 'what lies beyond reason'. She is: "…good with her children, an excellent cook, an efficient manager of the household, a woman who still gave him pleasure after fifteen years of marriage…she did most things placidly…and from this calm proceeded the routine and regularity that met the neat and orderly needs or his nature." (Markandaya, *A Silence of Desire*, 6) Her rendezvous with the Swamy seeking a cure for her illness is within the sanctions of the tradition and society in which she exists. Sarojini proclaims: "Without faith, I shall not be healed." (Markandaya, *A Silence of Desire*, 82) Dandekar, her husband, becomes suspicious as regards her visits to Swamy, but at long last, while recuperating from his illness, realizes that he wants her because of a "spiritual ingrowing which made it impossible for him to be whole so long as any part of her was missing." (Markandaya, *A Silence of Desire*, 115) Sarojini, on her part, is happy to bring back together herself with the 'hard reality' of the family after she has recorded her voice of dissent against the repression unleashed by the institution of family. She becomes cognizant that within the ambit of society

and tradition, she could voice her protests without shirking her duties and responsibilities. She is an emissary of the 'new and revolutionary' Indian women in the making.

In *Possession,* two women, Lady Caroline Bell and Anasuya, warrant our interest. Anasuya, the traditional Indian woman is uncommunicative, civilized, gifted, beneficial and spiritually informed and in the words of Shanta Krishnaswamy, "Anasuya is capable of a decent respectable existence as a woman of means …in the ilk as Mira and Roshan, who prove that a decent existence is possible without a man…they have evolved a long way from the likes of Nalini and Rukmani."(Krishnaswamy 103) Caroline, the English lady, is chilly, fanatical, egotistical and mercenary. Uma Parameswaran writes: "Lady Caroline Bell is an autocrat, typical of the British Raj in India." (115) These two embody clatter of not only persona but also customs.

Nalini of *A Handful of Rice* is a vulnerable prey and the grounds are multifold in nature—economic scarcity, traditional mooring and the compulsory choice between morality and success ethics. But she plays the sheet anchor role in the novel. She gives a personality to Ravi, the renegade vagrant, by marrying him. She buttresses and nourishes him in times of adversity as well as prosperity and also counsels rightly when Ravi is not in a position to make his choice between fidelity and ferocity i.e. veracity and success ethics. But being a woman of tradition and bound by the laws of custom and manners, she cannot break free and thus, has to bear the tortures and torments silently: "Nalini never complained…but he had never heard her complain. Neither of the ills of her pregnancy, nor of him." She would say, "We'll manage." (Markandaya, *A Handful of Rice*, 165) For the sake of family and also its members, she favours forbearance and endurance.

It is germane at this stage to draw an analogy between Nalini and Rukmani. Both are impoverished and unsanctioned women meeting head-on calamities thrust upon them by discriminatory social order. But both are compliant and hence remain mute fatalities and do not even question the moral depravity of their husbands. By delineating these breeds of women, Kamala Markandaya seems to connote that only women should be drawn against the trials in families to nourish them irrespective of the twinge or abrasions they receive in doing so.

K.S. Narayana Rao says: "Markandaya's novels ….reveal a spectrum of moral attitudes on the part of the characters…which include the traditionally moral, immoral and the amoral attitudes…And her women characters…are, in fact, better drawn than their male counterparts…it is usually the men who get away with their delinquent sexual conduct." (69-70)

Hence Nalini's visible debility is actually her asset because she deems family bonds and personal relationships, more than anything else, to be absolute importance. This is also Kamala Markandaya's inflexible conviction.

Vasantha of *The Nowhere Man* is steadfastly fastened in Indian tradition. A staunch believer and disciple of Gandhi, she could pilot a modest life

eschewing opulence even in an alien land, England. Her strong religious belief makes her cruise through successfully the turbulences that include racial prejudices in England, sociological changes and rough feelings emanating from generation gap and thus develop a strong faith in mankind. Though a little traumatized because her son, Laxman, marries an English girl, she stoically bears all physical and emotional smarting. About Vasantha, Markandaya verbalizes: "Vasantha was a Hindu, born and bred in a subtle religion, whose concepts, being on the cosmic scale, made no concessions to puny mankind; a religion that postulated one God, infinite, resplendent, with a thousand different aspects but one: God the Creator, preserver, destroyer union with whom was the supreme purpose and bliss." (Markandaya, *The Nowhere Man*, 17) Her concept of happy life could generate in her contentment even in the last instant: "It has been a happy marriage." (Markandaya, *The Nowhere Man*, 35) That's why, Srinivas, becomes stranded and 'nothingness' creeps into him after Vasantha's death to transmute him crestfallen.

Amma, Aunt Alamelu and Saroja of *Two Virgins* hang about on one side demonstrating the dictum that while acknowledging the shifting social codes due to the contract of western ideals of life, it is only decent to linger ingrained in compliance to tradition. The moral codes and the individual conduct should never be sacrificed in the misconceived notion of modernization. But Lalitha is an atypical, inclined towards a western way of life. Her mind set that the traditional society is asphyxiating and her false ideas about modernity, coupled with obstinacy and fickle minded nature burst her bubble of misconstrued pride in her beauty, feminine desirability and sexual power. In fact, Saroja matures steadily from the bad practices and experiences of Lalitha and could only conclude that only the woman suffers more and has a greater share in bearing the burden of social evils but men remain as ever scot free, completely unconcerned and unaffected. Markandaya records: "There is no escape for them (women); they had to stand where they were and take it." (Markandaya, *Two Virgins*, 123) But Aunt Alamelu and Amma regard custom and social system above anything else. Margaret P. Joseph writes: "Aunt Alamelu is the rock of tradition, the norm of moral behaviour."(147) They are opposed to anything called liberal as typified by their strong censure of Lalitha's western education at Miss Mendoza's school. Kamala Markandaya's communication is patent—in the search for liberation, women should never be advocated to adopt unlimited and unfettered conduct by throwing to winds the social structure and principles of practice of tradition or convention. They need to be sensible and measure up to the ideals of the tradition bound society.

Queen Manjula and Shanta Devi of *The Golden Honeycomb* are moulded in the same principles but with a few minor diversities. Queen Manjula is gallant, advanced and mercilessly revolutionary in outlook. She is compassionate to her natives unlike the king, her husband. When he becomes incapacitated, she poisons him and against tradition, watches the funeral pyre. She advises her son, the young prince, to have relationship with a common girl, Mohini, to produce a male heir to the throne. But Shanta Devi, her daughter-

in-law is unforthcoming and timid and cannot fight against Manjula, when Mohini is thrust into her life. But, Mohini, even though a commoner, is not taken in by the riches of the royal style and does not surrender her autonomous existence by refusing to marry the prince: "I don't want to be your queen: I want to be free." (Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb*, 32) She is thus a foil to Shanta Devi who has no freedom at all. By making use of history, Kamala Markandaya juxtaposes freedom and responsibility and also the slavish submission even in the higher echelons of society.

Kamala Markandaya, perhaps, wishes to suggest in *Pleasure City* that by being strong, the problems of life could be faced challengingly and also overcome by women. Timidity and passivity, the negative traits of most women, need to be replaced with fuel and nurturance in all women. These women are capable of even creating vacuum in their men; Cyrus Contractor missing Zavera and others like Sitaraman, Hablekar and Tully comforting themselves by staring the photographs of their women.

V. Conclusion

Feminism is yet to attain the eminence of a resilient faction in India despite the increase in the number of urban working women. If feminism has the aim of achieving responsible status in society, in a limited measure, it is a success. But as a fight to achieve equality with men, it is too far away from success, at least in this sub continent.

Kamala Markandaya exposés the tribulations, eccentricities and attitudes that victimize Indian womanhood. But the defeat is not total in their struggle for existence or against the inequalities in the social order. The empathy and surrender are their vital components of strength. The two extremes, abject surrender on the one hand and the absolute apathy to death or separation may seem paradoxical. Yet these qualities underscore their inner stamina. Markandaya proclaims that the Indian woman is the pillar with endurance and stoic sense, showcasing a better future through preserving the tradition and guarding the culture. But mere conformity to traditions or a passionate following of modernity are incoherent or treacherous. Kunthi and Lalitha become victims by crossing the bounds of freedom but Mira, at the right moment, checks herself without straying too far. Kamala Markandaya suggests that freedom is to be necessarily tempered with responsibility to achieve advancement and evolution. Her women are branded, though not for making a comprehensive depiction but for offering an in-depth study of the human psyche enmeshed in the values of different hues—social, traditional and spiritual.

A.V. Krishna Rao is candid: 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."(67)

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