



Depiction of Female Characters in the Select Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract

Historically and culturally, men also went through a transformation when India entered the modern era. During this transitional period, men had granted women greater freedom, and this shift in perspective was influenced by European norms. The patriarchal society that shaped Indian men is conservative, traditional, orthodox, severe, and prejudiced toward women. There are two polarized perspectives on female and male characters in the text. Presenting this ambiguity and contradiction has a political goal of depicting contemporary Indian society, culture, and philosophy accurately.

Key Words: Conservative, traditional, orthodox, prejudiced, ambiguity, philosophy

I. Introduction

The female police guard in Markandaya is shown as fiercely autonomous and questioning of stereotypical gender roles. She aggressively seeks to disrupt patriarchal rule because of her strong dislike for it. Patriarchal society places heavy burdens on women, with the expectation that they will alone be responsible for domestic duties, child care, and dishwashing. Females have been reduced to "objects" with no individual identities as a result of centuries of patriarchal tyranny, while males have been elevated to the status of "subjects," or the self with individual identities. This radical female cop is determined to change the force culture by eliminating the preponderance of male officers. It seems that she feels a strong sense of obligation. She is so overcome with wrath that she can't even speak. She agrees that we shouldn't have waited to call the police and that mercy isn't warranted in this case. She's proof that bold and fearless women do exist. Any issue may be handled by a policewoman as long as she is willing to challenge gender norms and prove her manhood.

Markandaya portrays Nalini, a stereotypical Indian woman, as obedient, kind, and caring. The novel's main characters, Nalini and Ravi, are a young married couple. Despite living in Nalini's home, Ravi has no qualms about establishing his power over Nalini. He threatens Nalini every time she brings up the issue of the missing money. His anger boils over and he starts hitting his wife repeatedly in the face. She states:

I lose to him.

I have no idea why he keeps beating me. In exchange for nothing But it keeps happening; why does it keep happening? Can it be I? The hell am I doing? Where have I failed?

I swear to you, I try my hardest, but it's to no avail. He blames me for his ire. Always, and I can't explain why. I simply can't take it any longer. (264)

Ravi appears to take out his frustrations on his helpless wife. Despite this, she persists in her efforts to alter her husband's alcoholic and irresponsible behavior.

He has the same goals as everyone else: to get a job, find a girlfriend, and get married. He had no choice but to associate with criminals in the dangerous city he lived in. The introduction of Nalini into Ravi's life marks a turning point. He can make a fresh start with her love and encouragement now that they're married. He decides to reform his dishonest ways after experiencing Nalini's pure love. Nalini plays a key part in Ravi's life, and he credits her with shaping his moral character. Varma and his family have been very kind to Thangam and his wife, Puttanna. Nonetheless, Varma and Puttanna treated him like a servant before they got married. It's a new beginning for him in that family.

Ravi, a drunk who has found refuge at his father-in-law's house, has mixed feelings about his marriage. He acts as one would expect a man to act. Nalini is continually reminded that he should have a son rather than a daughter so that he may pass on all of his wisdom to his offspring and raise a manly son who will one day call him dad and run up to him with open arms. What Nalini wants or needs is of little interest to him. Nalini has no choice but to be a housewife and submit to Ravi's desire to start a family.

Nalini's husband has doubts about her. She then proceeds to fan him with the newfound object, prompting him to ask, "Who gave it to you— one of your admirers?" (258). Their marriage has ended because of the separation. He says "you bitch" to her as a threat (258). She tried to run away, but he hit her and said, "You get out, get out" (259).

Nalini has finally made up her mind to stand up to her slobbering hubby. At home, she is absolutely at a loss for words. Her lips shaped into a smile, but she said nothing. After regaining consciousness, however, she plans to fight against the status quo. She divorced her husband to seek out her own "self" or "identity" and challenge his power. For her, this is a dramatic shift. Nalini, who is typically reserved and moderate, starts to act more and more on the extremes.

But then she had a change of heart and goes back with Ravi.

His words, "Come, she rose at once obediently" (265), were precisely what Nalini needed to hear. Nalini's ambivalence may be fully displayed here. Nalini first rebelled against her domineering husband, but she eventually came around and accepted her subservient role in the home. When it comes to women, Nalini staunchly defends the existing quo. Nalini isn't portrayed as either a militant feminist or a conventional Indian housewife by Markandaya. The author places her in an awkward midway ground, suggesting internal conflict.

Markandaya cites Ravi's duplicity as an example. He is still on the fence about whether or not city living would be better for him. At first, he is very opposed to maintaining any ties to his hometown. His native land is a place of nothing but suffering, illness, poverty, disdain, malice, and death. He abandons his rural life for the bright lights of the city. Despite his skills, he was unable to secure employment there. He has a hard time relating to others, even in big crowds. He realizes that most individuals couldn't care less about his or her wants and requirements. He misses the community and ease of life he had in the country because of this. This resulted in him having many close associates. His conflicting emotions towards city and rural life are well-documented. Ravi has a new problem on his hands now that he has to decide between two job offers. His feelings toward his wife are ambiguous. It seems like he's a great partner and husband to Nalini. But as time goes on, his true colors as an alcoholic, immoral, and violent husband to his wife emerge. However, he was not villainous because he later apologized to Nalini and made amends. Ravi and the character are both ambiguous due to the author's presentation of his inner inconsistencies.

Markandaya paints an exceedingly poor picture of both Jayamma and Thangam. The seamstress Jayamma is well-known in the community. She asks rhetorically, "Do you really think I care about that?" No one has any business prying into your private life. (263). This is conclusive evidence that Jayamma and Apu's marriage is fake and that they are not truly in love with one another. She tends to other matters when Apu is sick instead of caring for him. While she nurses her spouse, it is more out of obligation than genuine affection. She does her job as a wife and takes care of him just as the doctor ordered, but she does it out of obligation rather than genuine concern.

The meaning of the word "thangam" is open to interpretation. She clearly cares deeply for her spouse, but she also occasionally picks fights with him and expresses criticism. After her husband comes home with a significant sum of money and gives her most of it, she becomes extremely devoted to him. When he is unemployed, she is displeased and holds him responsible. The relationship between him and his in-laws' parents is tense.

The failure of his company has left Puttanna penniless. Because he is unable to provide for his family, he is subjected to constant abuse from his partner and other relatives. When things were going well at his company, he was the man of the house in the eyes of his loved ones. As a result, Puttanna Thangam was given as a bride. As his condition worsens, they cease trying to help him. His in-laws, including his wife Apu and his mother-in-law Jayamma, consider him an idiot. The characters' inner turmoil is exposed.

During her lifetime, Markandaya penned 10 books that explored pressing topics in contemporary Indian culture, such as the legacy of colonialism in the country's urban centers and the tension between tradition and progress. Her sixth book, *A Handful of Rice*, is the one that made her famous. "Other works of fiction by this author include: *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *A Silence of Desire*, *Possession*, *The Cupola Dams*, *The Nowhere Man*, *Two Virgins*, *Pleasure City*, *The Golden Honey*, and *Shalimar*."

Nectar in a Sieve (1945), Markandaya's most famous work, is a moving storey of a rural Indian woman's trials and triumphs. This is the account of a little Indian girl named Rukumani and her experiences growing up in the present day. Rukumani sees firsthand the profound effect post-colonial forces have on India when a producer opens in her hometown. Colonialism's effects on rural and urban India are dissected in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Markandaya depicts two contrasting Indian communities in his work *Shalimar* (1982). During his formative years, Ricky, our protagonist, is exposed to both of these cultures. Rikki was raised in a fisherman family. His entire family tree included fishermen: his dad, sibling, and relatives. Unfortunately, his entire family perished at an early age due to the might of the ocean. A missionary family takes in Rikki. Rikki's new caretakers introduce her to a brand new world.

Markandaya demonstrates how the coexistence of two civilizations has created the stunning mosaic that is modern India. The struggle between the physical and the spiritual is also evoked in her possession, which presents this conflict in a dualistic way.

At first, male and female relationships in *A Silence of Desire* (1960) are amicable. The trouble starts, though, when Dandekar, a male character, plants the idea of his wife having an affair in his head. Sarojini, the main female character, eventually realizes that men tend to dominate women. Their once-solid relationship begins to deteriorate as Sarojini gains awareness and Dandekar becomes excessively skeptical of her nature; this trend continues until the male character learns to shun illusion and accept the truth. Markandaya has therefore accomplished something important in his work *A Silence of Desire* by exposing the pressing problems inside Indian families, notably the dynamic between male and female family members. Markandaya's works reflect the Indian social and cultural context in which they were produced. Therefore, all of her works are molded around the concept of ambiguous character and topic portrayal. Because of this, the problem of dualism becomes the very framework through which Third World literature is formed.

A Handful of Rice has been the subject of critical examination from a wide range of viewpoints. Some have looked at the work from an existentialist perspective, while others have utilized a Marxist lens. *A Handful of Rice*, in the opinion of K.R. Srinivas, is a powerful tale of the triumph of the human spirit over poverty and hardship. According to him, "only persons who have observed the ballooning of grain prices in India can appreciate the importance of the novel's title" (446). It is a completely Indian narrative, realistically tied to the contemporary Indian economic condition," (445) adds Prema Nanda Kumar, who draws comparisons to Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*. He claims that the present economic situation in India is reflected in Markandaya's work.

Kamala N. Awasthi has a unique perspective on this book. One's identity and the events that shape it are articulated via language. He writes:

If for no other reason than that the logic of the language they write in, as well as the form in which that language is housed, makes this conclusion appear almost inevitable when applied to Indo-English writers. Kamala Markandaya has had much contact with Western culture as well. Her familiarity with Indian culture is as real. (43-44)

Kamala Markandaya exemplifies how learning the native tongue can help one establish a sense of belonging in a new nation. P. Geeta sees in Kamala Markandaya an authentically Indian perspective.

Although she had a significant impact on Indian culture, she changed the traditional role of women by having them perform the rite of Satis (Widow Immolation), although they did so out of protest. In the earlier paintings, for instance, the woman is portrayed in the conventional sati-Savitri pose. The modern woman, "active with her emancipation cries," keeps her distance from this self-sacrificing role of suffering (12).

Several reviewers and critics have examined this work from a postcolonial perspective. Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* depicts a clash between traditional Indian traditions and Western aspirations. The social and economic state of the Indian people after the British departed is unknown.

There has been a battle of ideals between modern Indians and traditionalists because of overpopulation, poverty, the breakdown of the undivided family, and government inefficiency. This issue is discussed by Sylvia Fratch in her article:

The ripple effect of Ravi's disobedience can be felt all throughout a world at war. He finally asks his father-in-law why they should hold him in such high regard. They (father figures) have done nothing but endure and reinforce the same awful lesson, and they are fed up. Ravi thinks the elderly are to blame for holding back today's youth because of their accepting mindset. According to Fratch (1144), Ravi is a postcolonial subject since he is on the fence about modern India's ideals. In addition to Marxist, linguistic, postcolonial, and archetypal perspectives, the problem of fatalism has been singled out by some critics.

The analysis is lacking and unfinished since the aforementioned critics focus on diverse aspects, topics, and issues. This means that the central themes of *A Handful of Rice* can only be understood via a Feminist lens. The novel is best understood through the lens of Third World Feminism, as both the narrative and the author have Third World roots.

Religious (hence not modern), family-oriented (hence traditional), unaware of their rights (hence ignorant), illiterate (hence backward), domestic (hence backward), and occasionally revolutionary (hence having to fight for their country) are all negative labels applied to all women from the Third World. Veiled women, strong mothers, chaste virgins, subservient wives, and more archetypes abound when it comes to portrayals of women from the Third World. All of these are typical features of depictions of the Third World. Markandaya wrote this play to combat sexist representations of women by giving a strong female protagonist a prominent role.

But she couldn't because that would go against Indian social standards. Nalini, for example, defies patriarchy by running away from home, only to be coaxed back by her husband. It's ingrained in the minds and works of authors from the developing world. This research attempts to tackle the difficult topic of Third World

literature by evaluating it through the lens of Third World Feminism, an approach that has been mostly overlooked up until now.

This analysis aims to shed light on the ways in which Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* presents female characters as either radicals or stereotypical housewives and moms. Notably, she shows how her protagonist changes from being mild-mannered and conventional to being radical and demanding. The writer's and Indian culture's ambivalent views on gender are reflected in the plight of the female characters depicted.

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