

# Feminine Identities in the works of Kamla Markandaya and Kiran Desai

## Abstract

This paper is humble attempt to study the feminine identities in the novels of Kamla Markandaya and Kiran Desai. Kamala Markandaya, and Kiran Desai are expatriate novelists, chiefly regarded the most gifted Indian English Women Novelist .

They are concerned with the plight, status and attitude of woman in India under the stress of changing social, economical, global, modern, spiritual and political forces. They tried to awake the consciousness of Indian Woman against the traditional oriented society and communicates the real existence of woman. They are the most outstanding modern novelists who concerns with "Feminism". In the context of present day, women are being independent. Markandaya and Kiran Desai have tried to raise the condition of woman in India. Keeping an optimistic view, they show their humanism. Kamla Markandaya and Kiran Desai are such a novelists, who try to show different types of woman in the context India and England. Different novels present different figure of women - as Peasant woman, Traditional woman, Lustful woman, Glamorous woman, Westernized woman, English woman, Spiritual woman and Motherly woman. they show greater power and insight in portraying different types of women characters. They are a typical representative of the feminine sensibility. In comparison with other novelists, they are the most gifted and the greatest novelists, who show remarkable skill in portraying women characters.

**Keywords** femininism, plight, peasant, globalization, consciousness, traditional orientalism, cultural restlessness, identity,

## Devendra Singh

Research Scholar  
Govt. Girls' P.G. College,  
Rampur

## Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand, greatest social reformer and novelist, creates the figure of lower and poor class but lacks in portraying such women characters. Other women novelists like Anita Desai, R.P. Jhabvala, Jane Austen have drawn the figure of female characters. Anita Desai, R.P. Jhabvala's women characters belong to the upper - middle class and city life while Markandaya's characters belong to the rural life. Markandaya's keen observation combined with critical acumen and the feminine sensibility brought her international fame with the very first novel. "Nectar In A Sieve" 1954. Her other novels are - "Some Inner Fury" 1955, "A Silence Of Desire" 1960, "Possession" 1963, "A Handful Of Rice" 1966, "The Coffor Dams" 1969, "The Nowhere Man" 1972, "Two Virgins" 1973, "The Golden Honeycomb" 1977, and "Pleasure City" 1982. The description of different types of women in India creates a women's world. They are natural characters. Today, the victim of these women as described in the novel. Being traditional women like Sita, Savitri, Gargi and Anusuya they denote the qualities of contemporary modernism and struggle for their real existence.

Markandaya portrays the picture of mother only in four novels. Her mother characters have the motherly qualities like love, affection and modesty. Her mother is fortitude, facing difficulties and problems in life but never hopeless. Rukmani, Ira and Kunti are the main female characters. Rukmani is mother of six children. Being a mother, she takes care of children, teaches them as what she knows. She thinks - "When my child is ready, 'I thought now, 'I will teach him too; and I practiced harder than ever lest my fingers should loss their skill".<sup>4</sup>

In India, the birth of a male child is a joyous event. A male child is an asset to a family, growing up to work the land. The birth of a male child especially a first born is perceived by many Indians as a reflection of the father's masculinity. Being a conservative, Nathan wanted sons because sons would help him to work on the land. Rukmani, an Indian mother, bore a daughter Irawaddy. She remarked :-"She was a fair child, lovely and dimpled with soft, gleaming hair. I do not know where she got her looks; not from me, nor from Nathan, but there it was; and

not only we but other people noticed and remarked on it: I myself did not know how I could have produced so beautiful a child, and I was proud of her and glad even when people pretended to disbelieve that I could be her mother".<sup>6</sup> As a caring mother her tender heart could not bear Ira's infertility and she took her to the doctor for medical treatment. Ira's husband remarks: - "You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a barren woman".<sup>7</sup> Nathan said, "He is justified for a man needs children".<sup>8</sup> Rukmani's approach was, "My thoughts went to Kenny. He can help, I thought; surely he can do something. My crushed spirit revived a little".<sup>9</sup> Rukmani in "Nectar in a Sieve" is the Mother Earth. Her integrity is never on the brink of collapse. On the face of all calamities, she unfolds her lap to take in everything and everybody around her. She is the eternal mother figure. Rukmani, the mother figure has positive attitudes while in "Two Virgins" there are women who are losing their motherly feelings. They are advanced, they don't like to suckle their babies and sent them to Manikkam's wife. Manikkam's wife is provoked. "I sell it, it flows, see how it flows: and she opened her bodice and squeezed the nipple between finger and thumb".<sup>11</sup> Manikkam's wife bargains her own milk. She knows better that women "Don't want to spoil the shape of their breasts, which suckling did. They wanted to keep them round and firm for their husband".<sup>12</sup>

Markandaya's other novels "A Handful Of Rice" and "A Silence Of Desire" cover the maternal instinct of a woman. Nalini and Thangam in "A handful of rice" show their inner feelings and attachment towards their children. Nalini has two daughters and a son and when her son suffers, Nalini a mother feels, "He is no better", she said worriedly, indicating the sleeping child. I think a doctor.<sup>15</sup> and what happens when her son died, she "felt only a stiffness, she had nothing to offer him except her stiffness".<sup>16</sup> Jayamma in (A Handful of Rice), is a worthless lady - neither a good mother nor a good wife. She is selfish, greedy, cruel, mean and a lustful woman, who only cares for her joys and comforts. Mother must be able to feel the pulse of all her family members - husband, in laws, children, their friends, servants and others. She must specialize in the art of holding the family together. The relationship between mother and child is so pure that no body can think negative, but few of them have negative views between the relationship of Mother - in - law and Son - in - law. A mother is a mother whether it is ones own or in law and a son is a son whether it is ones own or law. Markandaya's novel "A Handful of Rice" indicates such negative relationship between a Mother - in - law and Son - in - law. Jayamma is a lustful woman who often admires Ravi's masculinity and is attracted towards him "But going deeper which she could hardly bring herself to do, she knew that what really troubled her was the lust that had risen in her like a tide, the surging exultation that glugged her as she felt her blows falling on his flesh".<sup>23</sup> Jayamma liked her 'handsome son - in - law'. "Jayamma at first was concerned for her daughter, but when she realized there were no real injuries she held her

peace. In all the years of their married life Apu had never once raised his hand to her, but then, she thought, with the faint contempt. She still bore her husband, which even his death had not expunged, in that way Apu had never been much of a man. She shivered a little thinking of Ravi's masculinity; and there was even the seed of a thought in her mind, though she would not let it grow, that in her daughter's place she would have welcomed her wounds".<sup>24</sup> Ravi knows about it and one day he tries to rape her. Jayamma refuses him to do so, then he replies, "No, why should I? You've wanted it for months, for years. All the time you lay with your husband. Every time you looked at me - Do you think I don't know how you have been starved?"<sup>25</sup>

As a novelist Kamala Markandaya is a typical representative of the feminine sensibility. She shows greater power and insight in portraying women characters. Rukmani, the narrator heroine in her first novel "Nectar in a Sieve" is a powerful tragic character. She is elevated to the sublime dignity of a Mother of Sorrows. She suffers shock after shock but she does not accept defeat. Her husband Nathan betrays her, her daughter indulges in flesh - trade to save the family from starvation and her child Kuti, dies. She is forced to leave her village. Markandaya minutely and realistically portrays her psychic condition when Rukmani along with her husband, Nathan, leaves her village with a heavy heart. "This home my husband had built for me with his own hands — In it we had lain together, and our children had been born. This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us".<sup>26</sup> Ira in (Nectar in a Sieve) became a prostitute only to feed the child. But unable to see her child brother, Kuti slowly dying of starvation. Later she gives birth to an albino son, thus casting slur on the family's fair name. Commenting on the situation, K. R. Chandrasekharan rightly remarks, "The sad recourse of Ira in Nectar in a Sieve to prostitution in a desperate attempt to save her dying child - brother is a revelation of how immorality is born out of sheer poverty".<sup>31</sup>

In possession Dandekar was shocked that his wife worshipped before the photograph of an unknown man. "She kept a photograph of him in a locked trunk. She had set up a portrait of him and bedecked it as if it were some kind of God. Was this man, then, some kind of God to her? Physically, Spiritually?<sup>8</sup> the Swami wins the battle because he does not try, because he has reached that state where pleasure or pain, victory or defeat makes no difference. The identity of the Swami is ambiguous. Is he really a Swami or a Charlatan? This question arises when a reader reads this novel. Dandekar was puzzled at the relation between Swami and Sarojini. The faith of Sarojini in the Swami was too deep that she refused to go to the hospital to cure the disease. She says "To you the tulsi is a plant that grows in the earth like the rest - an ordinary common plant. And mine is a disease to be cured and so you would have sent me to hospital and I would have died there".<sup>9</sup> and "One did not worship by the clock God was there and one stayed until one had found some peace".<sup>10</sup> Markandaya has tried to show the difference between Eastern spirituality

and Western spirituality. In *Possession*, Caroline, an English woman remarks - "Spiritual, if you like. There's no place for it in England. He ought never to have been allowed in".<sup>31</sup>

Universality of individuality entails In "The Coffin Dams", the English technologists and Indian engineers close their ranks after the accident at the dam site when the lives of Indians and a few English are lost. When two Indian bodies cannot be traced, the other laborers strike work. Rawlings, the quick - tempered Englishman, cannot understand why the fuss is made. But Clinton's wife, Helen, has tried getting under the skins of the Indians and reasons with her husband: "They believe the spirit will not be freed, until its body has been revered". Neither can Rawlings understand what Krishna means by saying they will suffer "Spiritual torments", If the body is deemed nothing. When the spirit is gone, the body indeed is nothing. "It is the spirit that matters". Krishna asserts, but it is a matter of equal respect for their beliefs as the English wanted for their own. Helen has imbibed the spirit of understanding and love for kindred souls Markandaya's other novel "The Nowhere Man" is depicted with the spirit of Indian vegetarianism. In this novel, Srinivas and his wife Vasantha domiciled in England for a long time, are still strictly vegetarian. After Vasantha's death, Srinivas invites Mrs. Pickering to share his home but does not yield to her non-vegetarianism. His companionship with Mrs. Pickering is based on compassion. It is alien to his spiritual make up and he cannot endure it. When Vasantha dies of tuberculosis in England he cremates her in the electric crematorium but according to his religious beliefs he takes a casket of her ashes to immerse in the river. While spilling it in the Thames, she is chided by the English policeman for polluting the river but he pathetically explains that it was only his wife. His association with Mrs. Pickering brings in him an understanding of the Christian religion and he helps her to decorate a tree on Christmas to place by a window for the neighbors to see.

In "Two Virgins", Saroja and Lalitha grow up in the Hindu tradition and imbibe a respect for all living beings. They believe that "You couldn't destroy soul" though Lalitha was told by her Christian teacher Miss Mendoza that "souls did not enter other bodies. They went straight up to heaven or down into hell or were cooped up in purgatory which was an in-between place for doing penance in".<sup>43</sup> Markandaya's "Lalitha" (Two Virgins) is a modern girl who has all these qualities. It is often observed that an individual's background plays a significant role in the formation of his attitudes and beliefs. His family, school, neighbourhood, level of education, type of occupation and the income derived there from all determine to a great extent, the type and quality of his attitudes and values. Markandaya is the novelist of rural India but her characters could not escape themselves from the glamour of city and modernity. Her characters dazzled to see the glamorous life whether they are Murugan, Arjun, Thambi, Nathan, Rukmani, Saroja, Lalitha or Govind. In "Nectar in a sieve", Rukmani the narrator of this novel presents

the picture of both rural and glamorous life. She is a peasant woman, keeps faith in traditional way of living but at a time she turns to the city where she sees the other aspects of life. The doctor whose dress "Under the thin shirt, The trousers". Rukmani "saw the figure of a woman" and whispered "Be careful - it is a woman".<sup>2</sup> shows the modern woman. When the time changes, old views and thought are gone and new thinking and views have taken place. People's modesty shakes and manners and behavior have no grace. Rukmani and Nathan go to the city in search of their son and when they want to ask the peon where their son worked. The peon replies, without hearing "No Beggars are allowed here".<sup>3</sup> They are shocked to see the disgrace and shaking culture and manners in the city. The temple is the center of worshipping God but now - a - days it is becoming the center of robbers and thieves. Rukmani and Nathan sheltered in a Temple with their bundles. When they went out their bundles had been stolen. "There are many Thieves and strangers about these days". "What, even in a temple! We did not think" - "Yes even in a temple, of course. Many kinds come here, there can be no guarantee of their honesty". "It appears not," Nathan said heavily. "Our possessions have gone."<sup>4</sup> Kunthi was much pleased to see the changes in the village, she said to Rukmani, "Are you not glad that our village is no longer a clump of huts but a small town? Soon there will be shops and tea -stalls, and even a bioscope".<sup>7</sup> Kamala Markandaya's Indian character Lalitha, is just like modern oriented girl. She expects for standard, advance and modern society. She is ambitious to involve in film world. Modern society likes it while a traditional oriented society opposes it. Her mother and aunt are traditional women and oppose it while her father and Christian teacher favour in Lalitha's attitude. Our Indian tradition does not recommend a woman will be a dancer or an actress. A woman belong to the middle or upper class is not respected if she intends to be a film actress. In "Two Virgins" Aunt Alamelu calls it a cheap and lower category and "you, a respectable girl, a girl from a respected family, cried Aunt Alamelu, you want to be a nautch girl, a devdasi such as no one in our line not for twenty generations has ever descended to being, is that your ambition. A film star, said Lalitha, these days girls from respectable families act in films, can I help it if an old fossil like you hasn't heard".<sup>16</sup>

In the novel 'Inheritance of Loss' women character have been relegated to the same stock stereotypical positions woman have always played from an essential male point of view these female character are product of culture and belongs to all levels of the social sphere such as rich, poor, and elitist housewives, widows, virgins. There is subaltern Female character named as Leptcha, is a typical representative of the millions of poor, suffering, starving house wives living at the grass roots in India. Her husband became blind due to police torture and the wife sought help from judge sobbing .yet 'What use was a it for a women to protest and cry' the physical description of the woman exploits reality effects: "the women looked raped beaten already. Her clothes were soiled and her teeth resembled a row of

rotten corn kennels, some of them missing, some blackened and was quit bent From carrying stone-common sight, this sort of woman in the hill. some foreigners had actually photographed her as prof of horror.....". The cook's comment that she (a socially and economically insecure female) would be raped by them throws light on the fate of the poor, unfortunate women in the hands of police, and also on the police machinery in india. The judge having refused help, she was heared out like a cow. With her father-in-law, she squatted down on haunches "and didn't move, just stared emotionless, as drained of hope and initiative. (p.265)". She again approached for help on another day and was shooed away. There she noticed Mut, brightened up, and realized that a lot of money could be earned by selling that dog. They picked up Mut and sold it in the market. Kiran Desai has very skillfull encapsulated the agony and helplessness of the wife who is compelled by circumstances to turn to Crime. The mother of the judge was a typical house wife. She was quite distraught at the time of bidding farewell to her son "because she had not estimated the imbalance between the finality of goodbye and the briefness of the last moment (p.36)." She was upset that her frail son would never get her special 'Choorva' in England and was afraid of his catching a cold. She had knit a sweater for him. "in a pattern fanciful enough to express the extravagance of her affections. (p.36)". Being a typical mother and due to lack of experience she had given him "lump of pickle wrapped in a bundle of puris; onions, green chillies and salt in a twist of news paper. (p.37). The Judge's daughter is another important character as college student in delhi, she had fallen in love with Mr. Mistry. Before one year was over, Mr Mistry proposed marriage she accepted it because "this romance had allowed her to escape the sadness of her past and the tediousness of current girlish life. There was a time when every one wishes to be an adult, and she said, yes" (p.26) On her elopement, the family in Gujraat felt disgraced and disowned. Kiran sheds valuable light on the relationship of the father and daughter and an insight into the father psyche, "he had condemn the girl to convent boarding school, relieved when she reached a new height of uselessness and absurdity by eloping with a man had grown up in an orphanage. Not even the relative expected him to pay any attention to her again" (p.308)

Kiran Desai, in her maiden novel *Hullabaloo in Guava Orchard* paints an image of India which reconfirms the western notion of East as 'oriental'. Kiran Desai is not the pioneer of this tradition rather she is carrying on the tradition of the writers such as R. K. Narayan, Mulakraj Anand, and others who wrote about the 'exotic and eye catching' in India, Desai explores India through her writing but it is not something like Rusdie's 'imaginary homelands' which many expatriate writers recreate in their works. Desai, in her novel 'Hullabaloo in Guava Orchard' sheds light on Indian concept of Women. The Indian concept of complete women is almost opposite to the western concept. The concept of 'Adarsh Vhartiya Nari' is evolved in the novel. "the girl..... must come from a good family. She must have pleasant personality. Her character must be decent and not shameless and bold. The girl should keep her eyes lowered and, because she is humble and shy, she should keep her head bowed as well..." (p.57). The

description such as these are enough to anger the supporter of feminist moments but these are the grim realities of Indian life. The compensation of a dark complexion girl would include several wealthy items in an ironical tone; Desai presents the plight and predicament of traditional Middle class Indian women who are merely reduced to a commodity when it comes to their marriages. Their skills and talents take a backseat to their appearance and dowry. At this juncture Kiran Desai very close to Her Mother Anita Desai, the famous novelist.

Kiran Desai and Kamla Markandaya have made use of explicit and implicit characterization. They have also resorted to the use of narrational characterization, the proliferation of minor characters include recognizable characters that are everyday and in common places. The novelist provides the glimpse into their psyche. For this purpose they have made use of physical description, dialogue, self utterance, and comments in painting their character. Their character hails from various classes of society, the identity, hopes, aspirations and emotions of myriads of identifiable Indian women proves elusive. All their characters struggle with their socio-cultural identity. Simultaneously the forces of Modernization, globalization, industrialization, and migration, affects them while they try to maintain their emotional bonds with one another. Yearning is perhaps the only thing that the feminine characters in their novels do best. They long for home, they long for love, they long for acceptance, they yearn for peace and normalcy, and yet rarely do they seem to find these in life

#### References

1. Nectar In A. Sieve; Originally Published in 1956, reprinted, Bombay : Jaico, 1973.
2. Some Inner Furry; Putam & Co., 1955, reprinted, New Delhi: Sagar Pub., 1957
3. A Silence Of Desire; London : Putam & Co., 1963, reprinted, New Delhi : Sagar Pub., 1968.
4. The Possession; London : Putam & Co., 1963, reprinted, New Delhi : Sagar Pub., 1967.
5. A Handful Of Rice; New Delhi : Orient Paper – Backs, 1962.
6. The Coffin Dams; Delhi : Hind Pocket Books, 1989
7. The Nowhere Man; Landon: Allen Lane, 1973
8. Two Virgins; New Delhi Vikas Publishing House, 1975.
9. The Golden Honey Comb; Landon: Chatto and Windus, 1982
10. Pleasure City; Landon: Chatto and Windus, 1982
11. Hullabaloo In Gguava Orchard; India Viking Penguin Books, 2006
12. The Inheritance of Loss; New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2006
13. Balachandran, K.; Critical Responces To Indian Writing In English; New Delhi: Sarup & sons, 2004
14. Bernarji, Niroj-Kamla Markandaya: A Critical Study; Allahabad: kitab mahal, 1990
15. Joseph, Margaret P.-Kamla Markandaya; New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann (Indian Writer series-17), 1980
16. Prasad Madhusudhan(ed)- Perspective on Kamla Markandaya; Gaziabad: vimal Prakashan, (Indo-English writers Series-5), 1984
17. Bakhtiyar, Iqbal-The Novel in Modern India, Bombay: P.E.N, All India Centre, 1964.
18. Clark T.W.-The Novel In India; Landon: George

- Allen And Unwin,1970.
19. Dhavan R.K.(Ed)- Explorations in Modern Indo – English Fiction:New Delhi Bahri Publication,1982
  20. Dodiya Jaydisingh- Indian Women Writers;Ne,2007w Delhi Swarup and sons
  21. Galbraith,Johan Kenneth: Galbraith Introduces India; New delhi: Vikas Publishing House,1974
  22. Harrex,S.C.-The Fire and the Offering: The English Language Novels of India (1935-1970);2 volume, Calcutta: writers workshop, 1977 and 1978.
  23. Hemenway, Stephen Ignatius-The Novel of India (vol. 2, The Indo-Anglian novel) Calcutta: Writers Workkshop, 1975.
  24. Iyenger, K.R. Shrinivasan- Indian Writing in English;Bomb : Asia Publishing House,1973.
  25. Kalinnikova,Elena J.-Indian English Literature :A survey; Gaziabad: Vimal Prakashan,1982.Krishna Swami, S. – The Women in Indian Fiction In English; New Delhi: Ashish Pub. House,1984.
  26. Mc Cutchnion, David- Indian Writings In English, Calcutta: Writers Worksshop,1969.
  27. Mehta P.P.-Indo Anglian Fiction; (Second Revised Edition) Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot.1979.
  28. Mukharji, Menakshi- The Twice Born Fiction: themes And Techniques of the Indian Novel in English; New Delhi : Arnold Heineman.1971
  29. Mukharji, Menakshi- Consideration;New Delhi :Allied Publishers Private Ltd.,1977
  30. Naik, M.K.- Critical Essay on Indian Writings in English,Madras: The Macmillan Co. of India,1977
  31. Naik, M.K.- Aspects of Indian Writing in English, Madras: The Macmillan Co. of India,1979
  32. Narasimhaiah, C.D.- Fiction and the Reading Public In India; Mysore: University of Mysore,1967
  33. Narasimhaiah, C.D- Swan And The Eagle; Simla Indian Institute of Advance Study,1969.
  34. Narasimhaiah, C.D-Indian Literature of The Past Fifty Years (1917-1967) ; Mysore: University of Mysore,1970.
  35. Nikolson, K.- Social Problems in the Indo-anglian and Anglo-Indian Novels; Bombay: Jayco,1972.
  36. Nimssarkar, P.D. – An Anthology of the Critical Essays, Creative Books Shanti ,CB-24 Narina, New Delhi
  37. Pandey, Deepty –Feminism in the novels of Kamla Markandaya,MPASVO Publication, Gopalkunj Nariya Lanka Varanasi