



## KAMALA MARKANDAYA AS A COMPELLING INDIAN WOMAN NOVELIST WITH A WORLD-WIDE REPUTATION THROUGH TREATMENT OF THEMES

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to examine how the novel is considered to be the most powerful form of literary expression when compared to literary genres with a focus on Kamala Markandaya as a compelling Indian woman novelist with a world – wide reputation through treatment of themes. It further studies in depth how her works have received critical acclaim for their themes, crisp style and rich texture.*

**Key Words: Novelist, Reputation, Theme, Literary Expression, Genre, Women.**

Today, the novel is considered to be the most powerful form of literary expression when compared to literary genres. Though this literary genre has been implemented in the Indian soil from foreign shores as a consequence of western contact, it has fixed its firm roots in this alien but fertile soil and has stood the test of time and criticisms. Before the first World War, Indo-Anglian Literature was comprised mainly of poetry, religious literary essays dealing with social and political issues etc. But after the First World War, Indo-Anglian writers too experienced its aftermath, which shook their consciousness to writing more realistically and touchingly. But most of the Indo-Anglian writers were at the beginning, initiating the literary English models before them.

Gandhian thought and actions also contributed largely in revolutionizing the attitude of men and women and in altering the very social set up of Indian life and society. As a result, woman too started zooming to the forefront in all spheres of life, including the literary front. Bibliographical records show that women novelists in India have been producing fiction, as early as the 1890's. From Toru Dutt's Bianca Serbia's Love and Life behind the Purdah to EI Sen's Darkening Days, there is a sizeable volume of fiction writing by women.

Significantly enough women, after the Indian Independence found it an easy and colourful medium to express their thoughts and advocate their ideals by focusing and bringing to light their real plight and established a real breakthrough to convention and morality. They found their real savior in fiction writing, which also pushed them to the time light of the intellectuals whose talents had till recently been latent. To mention a few such women writers of fiction writing, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhavalala and Nayanta Sahgal of whom, Kamala Markandaya deserves special mention due to her unusual ability in exploring and exhibiting a true-to-life picture of the anguish of the humans in society. Today, irrespective of religion, caste, colour or race, one is totally taken off one's feet at the insight she has of foreigners and Indians. The reader is truly shocked and taken aback at her dexterous skill in probing the heart of the matter of all humans alike with their heart-thorbing problems.

Kamala Markandaya occupies a significantly niche in the pantheon of Post-Independence Indo-Anglian fiction and in the commonwealth scene. She is also one of the foremost women novelists of India who is ranked with Anita Desai. She is no doubt, a compelling writer with a world-wide 'reputation achieved through her epoch-making first novel', **Nector in a Sieve**. As fiction is the most characteristic



and powerful form of literary expression today, it has attained a place of pride in Indo-Anglian literature. In fact, it is the latest of literary forms to be evolved and most dominant in the twentieth century. “It corresponds in our civilization to the epic in the primitive stages of some races, to the drama in the Athens of Pericles, to the essay in the Age of Queen Anne” (Dhawan 6).

Markandaya was born in 1924 in a well-to-do aristocratic Brahmin family of Mysore in South India. According to her own account, her family has hailed from a rich ancestry of landed class running back to the seventeenth century from the princely State of Mysore in India. Her original name was Kamala Purnayia which links her with the Dewan Purnaiya family of Mysore. As she belonged to the rich westernized upper class Society of India, she had a thorough western upbringing. As a teenager, Kamala Markandaya participated in the Freedom Struggle in 1940’s by carrying the tri-colour flag and decrying the British. She had her higher education in Madras University. After the flag-waving phase, she began her career as a journalist writing for a weekly newspaper in India. Being one of the most popular Indo-Anglian novelists with a vast concourse of readers in India and abroad, in fact, she is one among the four women novelists, the other three being Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahal and Anita Desai who dominate the contemporary Indo-Anglian scene. Internationally known as the author of **Nectar in a Sieve**, she also enjoys a wide reputation as an author of such extremely readable novels as 1) **Some Inner Funny** (1955) 2) **A Silence of Desire** (1960) 4) **Possession** (1963) 4) **A Handful of Rice** (1966) 5) **The Coffee Dams** (1969) 6) **The Nowhere Man** (1972) 7) **Two Virgins** (1973) and **The Holden Honey comb** (1977).

Kamala Markandaya’s western upbringing and the particular atmosphere she lived in is in many ways revealed in her novels. As a woman novelist, Kamala Markandaya represents, “the creative release of the feminine sensibility” in India. The feminine consciousness is central to all her novels. One can easily note the importance and pre-dominance of women in her novels. Four of her novels like **Nectar in a Sieve, Some Inner Fury; Possession** and **Two Virgins** have women as narrators of the stories. Her being a woman has also influenced her narrative art as “Women are natural story-tellers” (Iyengar 1). This accounts for the dominant female-point of her novels. The first and the most popular novel of Kamala Markandaya owes its title to Coleridge’s sonnet “work without hope”.

“Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,  
And hope without an object cannot live” (P 15)

Based on the traditional pattern of life in numerous stages all over India, the novel is a agonized cry of protest against social injustice. It is a powerful depiction of patience in the face of suffering, of labour even when there is no hope. The narrator, Rukmani, a rustic middle-aged woman, tells us of her marriage with Nathan, a tenant –farmer at the young age of twelve. Nathan is rich in nothing except the love with which he cherishes her. Their village is violated in the name of progress by the building up of tannery owned by an English man. Its busy industrialism swears the peaceful countryside with its polluted hand. Diabolic in its effects, it indicates a new way of life. Nathan and his family are assailed by one trouble after another. Two of their sons die. Two others leave the soil for good to work in the plantations of Ceylon. Their only daughter abandoned by her husband takes to prostitution to save her dying brother. She becomes a mother of an illegitimate child, an albino at that. The couple, now elderly, go in search of their son who has gone to the city. Instead of finding him, they lose their meager possessions and are compelled to become stone breakers in a quarry. Before they save enough money to return their village, Nathan dies of illness and exhaustion. Rukmani returns with a little leper



boy who has been their guide in the confusing city. She hopes that doctor Kenny will be able to save him. The novel justifies, the title of Shaming the suffering caused by injustice, the theme being not only the calamities wrought by nature but the clash between traditional ideas and the force of material progress.

“If **Nectar in a Sieve**, recalls Venkataramanils **Murugan the Tiller**, Markandaya’s **Some Inner Fury** recalls his **Kanden the Patriot**. Where Venkataramani is political and masculine, Markandaya is suggestive and feminine. There is a world of difference between Rukmani and Mira, the heroine of **Some Inner Fury**. Mira is an a creature of imagination and memory, and in her naturalness and sophistication are in uneasy partnership. **Some Inner Fury** is a tragedy engineered by politics, even as **Nectar in a Sieve** is a tragedy engineered by economics and in both the novels, the chief characters transcend the bludgeonings of economic or political mischance and assert the unconquerable spirit of humanity.

Her third novel **A Silence of Desire** leaves economics and politics behind and enters into the “imponderable realm of spiritual realities” (P 19). Here in this novel, the theme is the clash between faith and reason. It provides the immediacy of a contemporary problem in India. “But the real achievement of the author lies in the projection of this theme through the awakening of a mind developing from the thoughtless complacency to tremulous introspection”.

**A Silence of Desire** presents the clash between tradition and modernity, husband-wife relationship and psychological adjustment. It also presents the Swamy who is one of the stock character’s in Indo-Anglian fiction. Referring to the suggestive nature of the title of the novel, Dr.A.V. Krishna Rao says, “ultimately, all desires are silenced, whether realized or not: Dandekar desires to win back his wife; but Sarojini’s desire to resort to faith healing is silenced by her acceptance of the surgical treatment; and the dwarf’s desire to be attached is also finally silenced by the Swamy’s characteristic detachment, and his departure” (P 21). P.P. Mehta says, “The story is more attractive and moves at a faster pace than in her other novels because Kamala Markandaya spins her crisis and tension round the eternal topic of jealousy and blind religious trust” (22).

Thus, her works have received critical acclaim for their themes, crisp style and rich texture ;and with each successive novel, Kamala Markandaya seems to have achieve distraction as an important and compelling Indian novelist. R.S. Singh extols her “sense of involvement in the social life of India, her keen observation combined with critical acumen and feminine sensibility” (P 136). No doubt, with innovative style and method, Kamala Markandaya shows an extraordinary richness of subject matter and wide range of themes.

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