

**A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS ON THE SHIFT OF PIVOTAL ROLE OF PROTAGONIST:
THE WOMAN QUESTION IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF
KAMALA MARKANDAYA**

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Abstract

From times immemorial women only enjoyed a supportive role in the writings of men. The heroines were viewed only in the connection to the male protagonist. Even the hero's mothers were often kept within a very narrow boundary. Thus, it is not an over statement that with the advent of the Indian women writers, women started to take major roles in the novels. The problems related to women are now being focused. They talk about the world from the perspective of a woman, thereby creating a world of their own. In these novels the women writers gave more emphasis to the females as their major concern. Among them the different women writers, who have made the female characters their main preoccupation, the very first name is of Kamala Markandaya. However, according to most of Markandaya's critics, though she is one of the foremost Indian English novelists, she does not exhibit a conscious concern with the status and identity of the Indian women. The present paper therefore puts forth the uniqueness of Markandaya and the exclusive way she has chosen to revolt against the existing norms of our male dominated patriarchal society with special reference to India as a country.

Keywords: *Connection, statement, protagonist, narrative analysis, patriarchal society, women characters*

Introduction: The typical male as a protagonist

For a long time, women enjoyed only a supportive role in the writings of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. For example, in Narayan's novel *The Guide*, Rosie, the heroine is viewed only in the connection to Raju, the main protagonist, and Raju's mother is kept within a very narrow boundary. Hence, it is not an over statement that it is with the advent of the Indian women writers, women have started to take major roles in the novels. The problems related to women are now being focused. They talk about the world from the perspective of a woman, thus

creating a world of their own where there is no interference of men directly. In these novels the women writers gave emphasis to the females as their major concern. Among them the different women writers, who have made the female characters their main preoccupation, the very first name is Kamala Markandaya.

Few critical aspects of Kamala Markandaya

According to most of Markandaya's critics, though she is one of the foremost Indian English novelists, she does not exhibit a conscious concern with the status and identity of the Indian women. Conversely, she explores themes of political, technological, socio-economic, cultural and intellectual importance (Indra, 1991; Pathania, 1992; Banerji, 1990; Mishra, 2000). K. Madhavi Menon explores Markandaya's fictional canvas thus:

Her fictional concerns range from economic changes as they impinge directly on the rural and urban milieu [*Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and *A Handful of Rice* (1967)], the impact of technology on an autochthonic social structure [*The Cofferdams* (1969) and *Pleasure City* (1982)], the silent upheaval of society and familial structure in the grip of Westernization [*A Silence of Desire* (1960) and *Two Virgins* (1973)], to the intercultural and inter-racial chasm manifest in personal relationships and social life [*Possession* (1963) and *The Nowhere Man* (1972)] and the disturbing effects of political milieu on the lives of individuals yearning for self-fulfillment [*Some Inner Fury* (1955) and *The Golden Honey Comb* (1977)] (Menon, 1993)

Another critic of Markandaya, K.S Narayan Rao writes:

Markandaya's novels deal with the contemporary Indian society in a state of flux and change and reveal a spectrum of moral attitudes on the part of the characters that people the fictional world, which include traditionally moral, the immoral and the amoral attitudes. Although her women characters are never relegated to the background, and are, in fact, better drawn than their male counterparts, it is usually the men who get away with their delinquent sexual conduct (Rao, 1973)

However, such a complete denial of feminist perspective in Markandaya can be made only out of a surface reading of her novels. Markandaya is not an extreme feminist and her novels do not outright condemn the repressive measures taken by a male dominated society so that there should be changes in the roles of men and women. Her novels are not also naturalistic accounts about the victimization of women. On the contrary, she is not public, political or polemical but rather personal, analytic and exploratory in establishing her attitude to feminism. Woman's world is not created entirely of their own but it represents the real world, sometimes raising serious questions about contemporary attitudes to women and their roles in family as well as the emotional and social bonds that shackle them.

In her novels, women really define themselves by a set of relationships and modes of conduct in a created society are the elements that define women in her novels. The twin whips of heritage and modernity along with that of a tradition-oriented society are what they are confronted with. Despite the changes in norms, the impact of Western culture and the economic and social progress, they remain essentially 'Indian' in sensibility, but show enough courage to

raise their heads and ask a few awkward but pertinent questions whose responses would definitely determine the shift towards new development strategies in the postcolonial Indian feministic movement.

Nectar in A Sieve: An analysis

Nectar in A Sieve (1954), Markandaya's first novel is often observed as "a vivid record of hungry rural peasantry...under the pressure of industrialism and landlordism" (Mishra, 2002). 'A Novel of Rural India' is a subtitle for the novel and is sometimes compared with *The Good Earth* of Perl S Buck and *Cry, The Beloved Country* of Alan Paton. Critics like Landow, in the character of its protagonist, Rukmani, notices the suffering of a docile Hindu Woman:

No pain or in justice can cause her to rebel or seek revenge, (Londow, 1989)

As Gajendra Kumar writes:

Nectar in a Sieve articulates the village life in which Rukmani becomes Kernel who suffers from pillar to post. The details of Rukmani's suffering highlight the truth of Coleridge's doctrine "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve" (Kumar, 2001)

Views like this actually degrade really Markandaya's perspective of feminism in the novel.

The role model of primary feminism under the restrictions of patriarchy does not go for a loud protest but would rather do so in a silent manner (Menon, 1993). This category works for Rukmani. Existence of Rukmani is depicted by the commercialism and nature's irrational forces throughout the novel. She has to face tyranny of many kinds as her question of life is reduced to outer search for freedom. Rukmani's mental agony becomes truly reminiscent as she was not given economic, social and individual rights only as she is a woman and that too a poor one. As she is unable to produce a child, she is branded by the society. Her tradition does not permit her to visit and ask for the consultation of the problem. Thereby Rukmani has to accept her 'fate'. But however, for medical aid she goes to the Western doctor Kenny by asserting herself and her own individuality. But she has to maintain this as something she has to keep secret without hurting her husband's male-ego. Therefore, deep enough are the novel's learnings and in spite of the tolerance and acceptance that is shown by Rukmani, she is in reality a woman who is protesting the culture and tradition failed to curb the independent thinking to tempt and having guts to defy the 'fate'.

In the narrative style of first-person, the novel is written and the narrator-protagonist is Rukmani. Her subjugated knowledge of victimization is pulled out while enjoying the authority. Rukmani plays the role of an interesting narrator because, "she has a firm grasp of details, a phenomenal memory, the capacity for imaginative rendering of atmosphere, a stark austere vocabulary, a respect for others who crossed her life, and the detachment of a dramatist" (Indra, 1991). Her life story is narrated by her starting from that of marriage till present day in a simple manner. The story of her puts forth the common facts of an average Indian woman's struggle in a world dominated by men.

Rukmani's received little education from her father on which her comments are as follows:

It was my father who taught me to read and write...'Practice hard', he would say, watching me busy with slate and pencil, 'for what knows what dowry will be there for you when you are ready!'

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‘What use, my mother said, ‘that a girl should be learned! Much good will it do when she has lusty sons and a husband to look after. Look at me. Am I worse that I cannot spell my name, so long as I know it? Is not my house clean and sweet, are not my children well fed and cared for? (Markandaya, 1954)

Certain facts become clear from this discourse. In this novel firstly, simple man-woman binary opposition is subverted by Markandaya as a novelist. Here the rationalist male reformer is Rukmani’s father. Rather her mother is depicted as an embodiment of patriarchy and therefore women’s cause is harmed by her. Secondly, at the very beginning of the novel, it has been made clear that Rukmani faced the twin pressures of tradition and modernity while she is brought up. Like an average Indian woman Rukmani began her life with Nathan and hardly expected anything more than this:

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before and you have good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more a woman asks for? (Markandaya, 1954)

The following shows the typical psyche of an Indian woman when it comes to producing a girl child since the essence of fertility lies in a male-child production only:

I turned away...tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what a woman wants a girl for her first born? (Markandaya, 1954)

We can see that Rukmani pays her visit to Dr. Kenny driven by the urge to have a son in her life. However, she is changed by the Westernized approach of the doctor which is quite significant in her life. Here a specialty is observed in the writing of Markandaya, who uses an English agent as a cause to change Rukmani’s point of view towards life unlike any other post colonialists.

It is seen that the meeting with the doctor is kept secret by Rukmani not out of fear of patriarchy but as an outcome of sheer love for Nathan to stop him from being upset as a result of this happening. Moreover, this made Rukmani essentially an Indian woman whose relationship with Dr. Kenny did not affect the marital relationship of Rukmani and her husband. Thus, when Kunthi tries to blackmail Rukmani, she has her own way of defending herself which acts as her feminine resistance.

Rukmani’s eldest daughter, Ira, comes back to her as “she is a barren woman” (Markandaya, 1954), but her husband supports the action of their son-in-law, as like any other man he believes it to be justified. “He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient” (Markandaya, 1954), Rukmani is seen to be submissive yet quite strong in her assertion regarding her disagreement on the issue:

Not patient enough...Not patient like you, beloved.

While consoling Ira, she clearly expresses her opinion that infertility is not a fault of woman:

Did you think we would blame you for what is not your fault?

Her progressive and liberal approach to the problems of life again leads her to Kenny.

Ira is, however, another type of Markandaya’s portrayal of womanhood.

The desire of nurturance is embedded within her. She cannot bear to see her younger brother starving. Hence, in spite of strong resistance from her

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father, she takes to prostitution to keep away hunger. There is a resonance of determination in her voice:

Tonight, and tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need, I will not hunger any more (Markandaya, 1954).

We find Rukmani remembering the incident of claiming the right of body as a radical feminist, thus:

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. We had for so long accepted her obedience to our will that when it ceased to be given naturally, it came as a considerable shock; yet there was no option but to accept the change, strange and bewildering as it was, for obedience cannot be extorted (Markandaya, 1954).

In spite of the under-current of frustration, there is a conscious denial of Rukmani in terms of making the girls obedient according to the patriarchal demands. Along with Ira, Rukmani faces the birth of Ira's albino child with a lot of boldness.

Rukmani is depicted as a strong woman. She is not at all dehumanized by poverty and starvation. She is able to withstand the problem of drought with more of courage than that of her sons. Stoicism is practiced by the people of West for forbearance but this proved to be else. However, the way she accepts is typically Indian in form and style, uniqueness and has been labelled as a passive character by a critic Myles, which is as follows:

In the character of Rukmani there is a steady progression from the innocence to experience as also from rebellion to acceptance (Myles, 2006)

Myles quotes below the words of Rukmani to prove her point:

Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as seasons of the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change? (Markandaya, 1954)

The knowledge of her husband's extra marital relationship with Kunthi has been accepted by her as 'onslaughts of fate which cannot be avoided' (Markandaya, 1954).

But Markandaya's portrayal is not just a revolting woman but how as a real human being Rukmani has shared her particular situation and that of the predicaments of the same. It is not the defeat of Rukmani that she accepts life as it comes. Myles has failed to notice this. Like mother earth, Rukmani regenerated and sustained her own inner energy. Rukmani actually in a very silent manner has learnt to raise herself from her emotional dependence on her husband when she finds that he has fathered the sons of another woman in the following manner:

Disbelief first; disillusionment; anger, reproach, pain. To find out, after so many years, in such a cruel way... He had known her not once but twice...

And I in my innocence did nothing...

At last I made an effort and roused myself...

"It is as you say a long time ago", I said wearily "That she is evil and powerful. I *know myself. Let it rest.*" (Markandaya, 1954; Emphasize mine).

Western readers may find here Rukmani's tolerance as sheer weakness but actually it is not so. Rukmani owned rather incredible strength to outgrow these bonds. We find her as a traditional

Indian woman to accept the traditional role of an Indian Woman, but therein lies her spiritual strength and the accommodative breadth as a human being. Rukmani indeed represents Markandaya's vision of the ideal Indian woman in the given Indian context.

Some Inner Fury: An analysis

In her second novel, *Some Inner Fury* (1955), Markandaya however moves from a pastoral setting to an urbanized environment which gives her an opportunity to share the life and experience of the sophisticated upper-class section of the traditional Indian society. Here she concentrates mainly on three women characters, Premala – the quiet, shy and unassuming housewife, Roshan – the fire brand freedom-fighter, and Mira – the narrator. Each of them is like a pilgrim on a journey, seeking answer to their questions on the meanings of life. And this is what binds all three of the seemingly different characters together. As Mira, the narrator, explains:

It was more an instinctive understanding than a reasoned one; if anyone had asked me for an explanation, I should have been hard put to it to supply a coherent one. But then none who belonged to my generation would have needed to do so; and to those who did not belong to the sense and spirit would alike have been incommunicable. It is this shared understanding, this common awareness, diffuse in the atmosphere, yet not absorbed by all, which makes the ground split and the crevice to appear, between one generation and the next (Markandaya, 1955).

Self-fulfillment becomes a distant and unattainable goal to these women who were better equipped with education and wealth than their counterparts.

Premala epitomizes the upper-class woman's traditional concept. Her husband being modern and anglicized in taste, she tried to remold herself as she came from a conservative Hindu family. But "though tried desperately, she plainly found it difficult to adapt herself to him" (Markandaya, 1955). Finally, in spite of sacrificing a lot she fails to bridge the cultural gap between her husband and herself. We find her sister-in-law, Mira feels sorry for her:

If she had not loved Kit so much, she would not have tried so much to please him (Markandaya, 1955).

Moreover, though Kit himself has an extra-marital relationship with an English lady, but he suspects that his wife has an illicit affair with his step brother, Gobind. In fact, Kit never tries to understand her. Naturally, in her increasing alienation from his world, she associates herself with the missionary work of setting up a school for children in a village. In nurturing an orphan child, she finds a kind of outlet to her unfulfilled maternal feelings. By this she resists the patriarchal oppression: "Her silence is stronger than all rhetoric; her seeming capacity for resignation is the true measure for her unfathomable strength" (Iyengar, 1985). Kit himself observes:

And from each visit she came back glowing, revived, as if her parched spirit had at last found a spring at which to refresh itself (Markandaya, 1955).

Therefore, she rises from the state of weakness and not knowing what to do to that of a strong woman doing her best to save the school from fire without thinking of her own life.

Indian traditional society really does not allow women to cross boundaries of role much, and yet Roshan merchant withstands the conflicting social factors and seeks independence more

assertively than Premala. She is quite different than the other heroines of Markandaya to show her unique qualities in comparison to the other sisters around her. From a columnist of a paper, she turns into the owner of the same paper. Her personality is magnetic and dynamic and is very attractive to Premala, who is very conventional minded. Her desire for national independence is inseparable from her quest for identity and autonomy. She does not restrain from sounding in support of Gobind although she is not an advocate of terrorism. Rather she told the court that he did spend the night in question with her only. She has the ability to control a violent mob with her simplicity, calm and composure. She instills the need for personal as well as national freedom and hence her foreign education did not distance her from her own people. To other women she becomes a role model and we find in the novel, she is easily followed by Mira, Anusuya, Vasantha, Mohini, Sarojini and Usha. Mira is greatly indebted to her:

She gave me a chance to go and I took it... I discovered 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, 1955).

In Mira another woman has been depicted who is between the tensions of tradition, modernity, romanticism, relation as well as aspiration for personal freedom and patriotism apart from Premalata and Roshan as portrayed by Markandaya. She is a mixture of two cultures and therefore can take the best of both Indian and British culture. She is actually torn between her brothers who are anti-British and that of her passionate love for the English official Richard. However, at the end she realizes the impediment between their union. Here love suffers the problem between two different races. She understands the rigidity and orthodoxy of her own society. However, Roshan rises above the narrow bonds of culture while Mira fails to attain her personal happiness in the patriotism. She says Richard quite clearly:

You belong to one side – if you don't, you belong to the other (Markandaya, 1955).

There is no in-between and hence, she shows immense courage in her decision. In fact, through Mira's character, Markandaya insists on the fact that one cannot survive without roots. Mira returns to her cultural hearth after realizing the impermanence of negative freedom. She says:

And yet it is our life, by our own choice, even if one were so minded, by destiny. We created it, as much as she created us... This other living... was an escape, an interlude, set in a definite limited span of time... To keep our peace, we would have to go back then to the world from which we came, to which we could return because it is a part of us even as the earth was of those who stayed (Markandaya, 1955)

Mira's return to her route is never a defeat, rather an indication of her maturity. She is, in fact, a true representative of Markandaya's vision of new-Indian womanhood. Unlike that of Roshan and Premala, Mira is full of determination and indomitable trust which enabled her to survive in her battle for life.

Possession: An analysis

In *Possession* (1963), however, Markandaya portrays the character of Lady Caroline Bell is totally opposite to that of all the women characters of earlier novels written by Markandaya. She turns into a monstrous woman ready to possess everything whether it is a living being or an inanimate object. This shows a kind of inversion of sex roles. Markandaya has depicted all kinds

of patriarchal male features into this woman in a form of a kind of reversed roles. Caroline is taken by money and strength while Anusuya by means of her kindness and sympathy and on the other hand Ellie and Annabel by means of their charms of youth. Here we can see that in the woman's world males are manipulated, purchased, commanded and exploited to the maximum. Of all the characters she is the only one who defies all the female traits and is devoid of the feminine traits like sweetness, modesty, submissiveness and humility. On the opposite it is Valmiki who is endowed with all the female traits like sweetness, modesty, subservience and humbleness. In the opinion of Raman Selden, it is not the "waiting ovum" of Caroline that lacks identity and is given by Valmiki's "sperm as the active seeds", but vice-versa. Here the ovum is daring, independent and individualistic, while the sperm is passively conforming and panic-stricken (Selden, 1985).

Selden points out five areas in which woman under patriarchal value system is considered inferior to man. They are biology, experience, discourse, the unconscious and the social and economic condition. In the novel, Caroline has been depicted by Markandaya as confident and powerful enough in her owning of Valmiki. She has successfully outwitted others and puts "her arm round the boy, as it were, taking possession of him in full view of his family". (Markandaya, 1963) She is finally victorious over the Swamy, the headman and the resisting parents, that is; the authoritarians of the patriarchal society. Her taking possessions of a Palmyra fan, a fly-whisk and some cheroots indicates the fact that for her being animate or inanimate objects hardly matters. Moreover, after taking possession of Valmiki, she employs her full powers by denying him the freedom, which a man enjoys in a patriarchal society as his birth-right. Not only Valmiki, but the Swamy, who for Valmiki was the father, the mother and the friend, is also reduced to passivity, a trait generally associated with women in a patriarchal society.

Caroline's sense of possession over Valmiki is different from the association between Ellie and Valmiki who happened to be of the same age, and who being rootless, had joined together against the hostile world for the assertion of their respective identities. However, as Caroline's relationship is based on possessions, naturally it gets a jolt when Valmiki develops a relation with Ellie. She thinks it to be temporary and would be cured in the manner she managed him before. Anusuya's comments regarding Caroline's nature and relationship with Valmiki is depicted as:

"My protégé" – "my ward" – even "my pupil": these labels, with their imprecise ratios of age, she was willing to accept; but never one which floodlit with the possibility of narrow calculation the fourteen years' difference between Valmiki and herself (Markandaya, 1963).

Caroline regrets teaching Valmiki the art of dancing since it benefits Annabel. Not only this, Caroline in future also ensures that Annabel is not there in the party and the fact that she will not let Valmiki go:

People don't easily give up what they think are thin possessions
(Markandaya, 1963).

Thus, we can find that Valmiki decides to maintain relation with both. In the day time it is Annabel and in the night time it is Caroline. Hence here we find an inverted situation of Draupadi rather.

Uma Parameswaram thus comments upon Caroline's character:

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Lady Caroline Bell is an autocrat, typical of British Raj in India. She sets about getting possession of Valmiki with same dedication and ruthlessness with which the British subjugated India. She moulds him into a mass, an artist and a lover after the image which she has in mind, and in the process, ruins him, depleting him of dependence and spiritual strength; though in her option he gains more than he loses. (Parameswaran, 1976).

Even when Valmiki succeeds in extricating himself from her tentacles and departs to 'wilderness', she considers it 'a waste' (Markandaya, 1963). Her resilience can be traced in her words to Anusuya:

Valmiki is yours now, but he has been mine. One day he will want to be mine again. I shall take care to make him want me again: on that day I shall come back to claim him (Markandaya, 1963).

Hence, Anusuya, the narrator, is also a possessive woman but in a different way. As Ramesh K. Srivastava observes:

Being a writer and journalist, she captures certain objects and persons in her books and can be identified with Markandaya. If Anusuya succeeds in freeing Valmiki and Caroline's possession, it is Markandaya who has really done so because she is the father of her own text – "Owner/possessor of the subjects of his texts". (Srivastava, 1991)

Anusuya is really capable of a decent and respectable existence as a woman of means. She is of the same milk as Mira and Roshan, who prove that a decent existence is possible without a man, that a man-less life need not be dry and meaningless, that one can be completely independent and yet care for humanity. It is not that these women were unable to marry; it is rather that they do not seem to see any point in marrying. Therefore, these women characters have really evolved a long way from the likes of Rukmani or Premala. Such a feminine emancipation is emphasized by Markandaya in her later novels also. In *Golden Honey Comb* (1977), Mohini, the commoner beloved of the King, in spite of having promiscuous relationship with him, somehow refuses to marry. She states emphatically:

I don't want to be your queen, I want to be free (Markandaya, 1977).

Conclusion:

Therefore, Shantha Krishnaswamy is quite right when she says that the novels of Markandaya are "metaphorical elongations of the basic fact of awakening feminine consciousness" (Krishnaswamy, 1984). There is, in fact, a shift in Markandaya's attitude to love, marriage and women's position "from being women happy to surrender, to women doomed to conquer, like those distant sea creatures that took first steps onto land to collapse gasping upon the beach", to quote a passage from *Possession* (Markandaya, 1963). Of course, this simile pictures in the transition, the unhappiness of women but this is because of the ambivalence in the novelist's attitude, caught in the strenuous struggle between tradition and modernity. However, the analysis of the novels in this paper clearly reveals that there is a new awareness of fulfilment of feminine identities as a social and emotional and spiritual context, as represented by characters like Mira, Roshan and Anusuya. In Markandaya's novels there is, in fact, a reassessment of what the woman in the Indian cultural context aspires to be, but at the same time she is not willing about

her characters to cope with the ancient heritage of past. Thus, there is a fundamental dualism in her novels: she criticizes the tradition inherited by her and renewal of the same in a sense only.

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