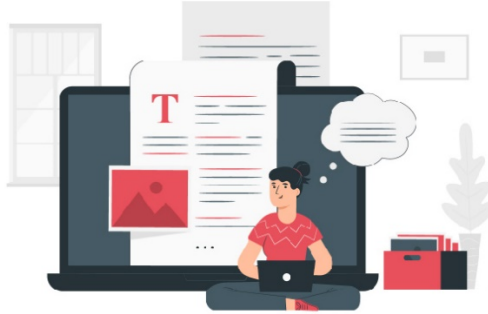


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## **Kamala Markandaya's Concept of Womanhood**

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### **Abstract:**

Kamala Markandaya regarded man and woman complementary to each other. She is unique as an artist because she painted contemporary women with the context of historical events and answered the questions — Why did Indian women suffer numberless hardships for no fault of their own? Was there any hope for their betterment in a British Colony? How far could British education prove helpful to them? Did Indian women really start changing after Independence? What was the effect of contemporary socio-political and eco-cultural conditions upon their life? Well, through Sarojini, Nalini, Lalitha, Saroja, Mrs. Pickering, Mohini, Mira, Jaya etc. she asserted ethical values so much needed for feminine cause. She aptly felt that birth-rate has got to be checked for social reconstruction. She felt that Indian women have a long way to go to establish their identity. She herself worked hard throughout life to achieve her goal as a journalist and then as a narrative artist. She believed — Self-confidence, right kind of education, self-restraint, right conduct and positive approach to life are the qualities that women must cultivate for a decent life. Times were changing and after Independence things changed fast. Quite a few urban women came forward

to get higher education in India. It is important to note that she analyzed the situations in which the women of East and the West felt homely with each other. It is essential to study to analyze her rural and urban women with reference to freedom struggle of India.

**Keywords: Attachment; Detachment; Personal Tragedy; Impersonal Evolution; Social Reconstruction Nymphomaniac; Concubine.**

### **Introduction:**

Kamala Markandaya realized that struggle is the key-word to describe the personality of a woman. As a daughter, wife, sister, mother, mother-in-law, etc., she has to struggle against many oddities whether she likes or not. Sita had to suffer a lot due to the evil designs of Ravana who eloped with her forcibly. And then she had to leave the palace and live in Valmiki Ashram with her two sons. Devki, mother of Lord Krishna, had to live in the prison with her husband due to her cruel brother. Draupadi had to suffer a lot due to evil-minded Kauravas and ultimately became the root cause of the battle of Mahabharata. Joan of Arc had to suffer due to merciless Bishops and landlords though she aspired for the liberty of France from the clutches of England. Savitri had to suffer due to the untimely death of Satyavan though she finally succeeded in bringing him back from the hands of Death.

### **Struggle:**

Kamala Markandaya accepted all these facts about women and yet inspired her Rukmani, Anasuya, Ellie, Annabel, Nalini, Jayamma, Lalitha, Saroja, Vasantha, Mrs. Pickering, Mrs. Fletcher, Mrs. Bridie, Mira etc. to accept struggle as a part of life. A person can show her real self when she faces the obstacles of her way. Of course, these problems and tensions have been different with rich and poor women and no hard and fast rules could be laid down to help them during long period of sufferings. Major women of Kamala Markandaya don't lead an easy life and often feel depressed amidst socio-economic problems. But she asserted — Those who surrender before problems, are finally doomed. The heroic deed is to face the problem with fair means and then lead a balanced life. In A

*Handful of Rice* Nalini and Jayamma survive in a dirty house and the income of Apu is not enough to meet the expenses of the family. Yet they don't complain of their poor circumstance. When Ravi aspires to have high standard of life, Nalini advises him to cut his coat according to his cloth and become a responsible person. He need not feel attracted towards pomp and show and also ignore the high standard of living of his customers. Nalini is the symbol of simplicity like Rukmani, Mrs. Bridie, Savantha, Miranda as she adopts fair means for a life of peace.

### **Self-confidence And Identity:**

Kamala Markandaya pleads that self-restraint, self-analysis, self-confidence and self-illumination are essential to overcome the hardships of life. A woman is a coward if she purposely escapes from her duties and family responsibilities. In *Two Virgins* Lalitha gets a chance to play a role in a documentary film and eventually feels elevated. She aspires for town life and then for the glamorous life of a film actress. As ill luck would have it, she lacks wisdom and deserts her family and village to fulfil her dreams. In a short time, she becomes the victim of the lust of Mr. Gupta and returns to village as a pregnant girl. Had she consulted her parents, they might have provided her some security in town also. But she has no patience and self-restraint and can't wait for the appropriate time. She was not highly educated and as a village girl, failed to understand the tricky conduct of urban people. She had to pay a heavy price for her ambition. Even after abortion she decides to remain free from the discipline of family and village and asks Saroja to stay in the town — There is nothing in the village for modern women. On the contrary Saroja respects her family traditions and social norms and makes efforts to seek identity in the village itself. For Saroja, town stands for pollution and corruption. With this novel the artist admires village life to a great extent.

### **Birth-Control and Poverty:**

With her first novel *Nectar In A Sieve* Kamala Markandaya asserts the need of birth-control and rational approach to life. Excessive industrialization and pollution are condemned by her. Here Rukmani, her daughter Ira and others

members of family suffer a lot of financial problems due to drought, pollution, flood and other natural calamities. In the beginning of her married life Rukmani never expected that her family life would be so miserable in future. Every joy of her life slips through the hole of sieve as she never planned her family. How could a small plot of land support a family of eight people? Why don't they adopt methods for birth-control? How can every baby be a joy in a poor family? As a woman Rukmani is hard working, sincere, faithful and devoted but then she is not the least practical and prudent. She is a real woman and can be found in Indian villages even today. The large population of India in 2021 confirms this. This novel is valid even today as birth-control is one of the alternatives to eradicate poverty. Women may struggle hard with many children but realities are pretty hard in this complex, ugly and materialistic world. Only emotions of a lady like Rukmani will not solve economic problems. Ambitions of Rukmani are dashed to the ground and she fails to find the path of success. Nothing comes out of nothing. Nathan and Rukmani are shocked to see the miseries of Murugan's children after he left his wife and child to suffer in this tragic world. Here the artist's tragic vision is clear as she creates pity as well as fear with the following conversation:

"We are Murugan's parents", Nathan said gently. "You must be his wife."

The girl nodded, then recollecting herself, she drew aside so that we could enter, and came after us ...

"These must be our grand-children," I said, trying not to notice her attitude. "I have long wanted to see my son, too. He is not here."

"Not here," Nathan repeated, "I was told he was here! When is he coming back."

"I wish I knew," she replied. "I do not think he will ever come back."

"What do you mean? Are you not his wife? What makes you say he will never return?"

"He left me," she replied bitterly. (NIS 161)

Such baffling scenes of the miseries of Indian women can be seen even today in India. The artist wished to improve the fate of such helpless women. There is no limit to her agony when Ira becomes a prostitute.

### **Attachment And Detachment:**

In the novel *Possession* Kamala Markandaya condemns greed, sense of pride, shamelessness and materialistic approach to life through Caroline. Here the ideas are developed through Anasuya as the narrator of the incidents. Like Shakespeare's Enobarbus, she is a critic of life and people of the East and the West. As a journalist and script-writer Anasuya regularly records her impressions about possessive nature of Caroline who has no affection and mercy for poor people like Valmiki, Valmiki's mother, Ellie and rural people of Southern India. She is not satisfied with her material possessions as her father, a Resident in India, left a lot of assets for her. Like a hungry bird, she aspires for more and more money and yet remains dissatisfied. She behaves as a nymphomaniac when Valmiki succeeds as an artist in London and New York. On the contrary Anasuya has milk of human kindness in her heart and sympathizes with Valmiki's mother, Ellie and other poor people of Southern India. She helps the readers to have a thorough picture of Caroline, Valmiki, Ellie, Annabel, Swamy etc. and answers various questions such as — How does Valmiki go astray in England? How does he forget his interest in Indian mythology? How does he fail to follow the ethical lessons of Swamy? How does he take interest in sensual pleasures and enjoy sex with Ellie, Annabel and Caroline and paint their nude portraits for money? What is the difference between Indian and Western art? How is art sold for material gains? Why does Caroline arrange art exhibitions of the portraits painted by Valmiki? How does he become habitual of material comforts? Why does he not adopt fair means for real happiness? Swamy tells him the time of departure that he may be or may not be happy. He fails to analyze this statement of Swamy as good deeds bring joy and bad deeds lead a person to his doom.

### **Psychology:**

Following Virginia Woolf's theory of analyzing the 'impressions' that come from all sides at every time, Kamala Markandaya peeps into the conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious mind of Caroline, Valmiki, Swamy, Anasuya etc. As a feminist the artist inspires her female readers to concentrate upon positive ambitions and make regular efforts to achieve them. She does not approve the greedy lecherous nature of Caroline as the latter fails to control her obsessions. Here the artist points out that spiritualism is self-illumination i.e. look inside and think of the divine light, blessings of God and Nature, ultimate aim of life (liberation), good deeds to be done with love regularly, renunciation etc. Towards the end of the novel Swamy does not impose his ethics upon Valmiki and leaves him free to decide his future. As there is regular conflict in life between materialism and spiritualism, there is a gap between Caroline and Swamy. Swamy is never afraid of Caroline as he leads a liberated life in rural areas and hills. He is above every kind of physical attachment as he has controlled his five senses. Anasuya, a shrewd observer of life and people, understands this well and condemns Caroline's efforts to ever keep Valmiki with herself for financial gains. So, Kamala Markandaya approves Anasuya's approach to life and ethics.

### **Personal Tragedy and Impersonal Evolution:**

Kamala Markandaya deals with various female characters such as Manjula, Mohini, Usha, Vatsla, Bharati, Vimla, Jaya etc. in the novel *The Golden Honeycomb* Mohini plays a leading role here and remains the mouthpiece of the novelist. She is out and out a realist and a follower of Indian culture. She sacrifices her personal interests for the freedom of India. The plot revolves around her. Like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, she is the mistress of Bawajiraj and gives birth to his heir Rabi.

As a complex woman Mohini loves Bawajiraj but does not marry him. She purposely gets pregnant because of her devotion to the royal dynasty. She does not care for social hostile criticism — What people will say about her for giving birth to a child? She frankly shares her emotions with Bawajiraj and yet does not analyze the causes of miseries of woman:

She can not for the life of her understand why, when the pleasure her been shared, the burden should be single and borne by her alone. (GH 35-36)

Mohini stands for honour. She gives birth to her baby even without getting married. Her mental helplessness can be confirmed with the fact that she gives birth to the baby and yet does not become a concubine:

The womb, having received, embeds the child in its wall and closes its mouth. It is an organ of great purpose and tenacity. The plug with which it seals itself off will not budge until birth is imminent or obdurate cells are forcibly ranked out. There is no flow. (GH 35)

Generally, the cherished dream of a woman is to be someone's wife. Here Mohini is an exception and she like William Shakespeare's Cleopatra, remains an enigma. She refuses to be the legal wife, as she does not want to be tied down with imperial limitations and British Imperialism. Maharaja himself is governed by her and she is conscious of this fact.

Mohini is the only captivating person before whom Bawajiraj is helpless and behaves like a child. Like Cleopatra, she practises feminine tricks and remains conscious of her physical attractions. She ensnares Bawajiraj. Whoever she argues with him, she emerges triumphant. She talks logically and convinces him of the validity of her views. Like Mark Antony, Bawajiraj starts loving her and wishes to marry her. He wants to give her the status of real queen.

Mohini is above common women due to her noble aims. She sets the example to be followed by other patriotic women. First of all, she is an Indian. Being Indian, she longs for freedom — freedom of thought, freedom of movement and freedom of expression. She is sad as the British have snatched every freedom from Indians. She visualizes India to be free from restrictions and bondage. Like Kamala Markandaya, she hopes to be seen India free from mental slavery. In her words she hates British colonialism and imperialism from depth of heart.



Mohini is not only the mother of Rabi, but also a freedom fighter. For India's independence, she sacrifices her personal interests and hence does not want to marry Bawajiraj. She can not tolerate him as a puppet of the Britishers. She feels satisfied with her present status that guarantees her the freedom to bring up son Rabindranath.

Mohini identified herself with Indian Independence. She makes Bawajiraj realize complex changing times in India. She inspires the fighters of freedom and plays the role of sheer anchor in Bawajiraj life. With fire in herself she encourages those who follow her. She reveals her anger saying that struggle for freedom is meant for men and women both. She stands with the suffering people and feels sympathy for Have-Nots. With her attitude, she asserts the spirit of independence. She regularly inspires Indian women not to confine themselves within four walls of their homes. Let women wish to change and form the destiny of the country with their devotion, sincerely, patriotism active participation in freedom struggle.

Mohini regularly reminds Bawajiraj of his duty towards India as she does not want him to be a victim of British imperialism:

Mohini perceives the capital, and was briefly antagonized. Your, duty is here, with your people, she wanted to say, sharply, but she could not bring herself. In the short time that was left to them and loving him as she did, well and all. And, Maharaja or not, he was, she felt, as entitled to his delusions as any man. (GH 445)

As a nationalist she is prepared to sacrifice everything for her country. She felt hurt at heart seeing some Indians ready to serve the Britishers for their personal interests:

... while fiery traits seemed to run through her demanding to know why this man should forsake his hearth, his home, his son, his lifelong partner, to serve foreign country. For what, she cried, for what? (GH 445)

Mohini is a life-like character and takes her decision rationally and not emotionally. When Bawajiraj reminds her of their bond of love, she turns down his proposal:

"I beg you. Will you not marry me?"

"No."

"I would make me the happiest man alive."

"I can make you happy without that I have no wish to be your second wife either." (GH 37-38)

Here Kamala Markandaya asserts that let every Indian woman lead her life according to her free will. No woman should like to be the queen at the cost of her freedom. She hates puppet like image. She remains quite satisfied with her present condition of being a paramour. Like Kamala Markandaya, she hates puppet-like image of Indian woman. She wishes to live according to the values and norms which she has decided herself.

### **Nucleus:**

Revolutionary ardour of Mohini, Mira, Lalitha, Sarojini etc. has been admired by S.P. Swain with the remarks:

These novels portray their female protagonists as self-confident and self-assertive, as women with a new sensibility and a new impulse. ... In most of these novels we find the woman protagonist portrayed through images of incarceration, alienation, exile and psychic estrangements. Kamala Markandaya in *A Handful of Rice* deals with the impact of urbanization and industrialization on the individual. Rootlessness or loss of moorings is the theme of this novel. (FVIF 14)

In the article *Crisis of Conscience: A Study of Kamala Markandaya's A Handful of Rice* S.P. Swain adds:

Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* fictionalizes the sociology of India by awakening the polite society to the plight of the rural people. A proletarian product of Fifties, Ravi is enmeshed in the maelstrom of change, in the transition from the tradition-bound rural society to the machine-ridden, materialistic urban milieu. (CCKM 82)

S.P. Swain asserts that the women of Kamala Markandaya belong to real world and can be found easily in present India:

In this urban milieu polluted by lethal fumes of exploitation in its variegated hues, the best and the honest run the risk of being corrupted; and the sanest act wildly. Ravi is Everyman. His conscience-stricken life is our own. His predicament is ours ... (CCKM 82)

In the essay *Modern Gallantry* Charles Lamb satirized people who respect only beautiful, rich and young women. Quite often even women insult their maid servants and elderly poor female relations. All this hurt him and he advised women as well as men to respect all women whether young or old, beautiful or ugly, known or unknown, rich or poor etc. and asserted that a 'healthy' society can be built when women are respected only because they are women. Kamala Markandaya portrayed different women from all sections of society with particular social, economic and political background as women are a part of the social system. They also changed and must change with changing times. How can they be treated as dumb animals, puppets and dolls with strings in the hand of husband, father and society? She analyzed her women in the light of freedom struggle of India mainly from 1915 to 1947 and then the evolution of the country. Some of her women like Caroline, Anasuya, Mira, Helen, Vasantha, Mrs. Bridie etc. have their own opinion about harmony/enmity between the people of East and the West.

## Conclusion:

To have full understanding of her concept of womanhood it is essential to have detailed knowledge of Indian history from 1915 to 1975. Secondly, readers must be well-versed with fundamentals of democracy, monarchy imperialism, Nazism, fascism, Leninism, Stalinism etc. Thirdly, she supported new Indian women who wanted to raise high in life as every ambition is like a star that guides the traveler in moments of darkness. She admired a woman — When she is devoted to family like Rukmani, Saroja, Jayamma etc., when she is above material greed and pride like Anasuya and Saroja, when she is conscious of positive approach to life like Mira, when she respects family traditions and culture like Vasantha and Mrs. Pickering, when she sacrifices her life and real-self for the nation like Mohini; and condemns lecherous woman like Caroline and unwise girls like Lalitha.

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