CHAPTER II

KAMALA MARKANDAYA
KAMALA MARKANDAYA (1924 - )

Kamala Markandaya depicts in her fiction the anguish, agony, love, hate, jealousies and frustration of ordinary human beings whom one usually meets in one's day-to-day life. She is a social realist who projects the tumult, tension and turbulence of the present day world with a tragic vision. The values and attitudes depicted in each of her novels are the reflections or the "mental image" of our age with all its complex and diversified human life patterns. In her fiction we get the picture of a mini India, a compact India depicting its traditional and cultural values, social attitudes and economic conditions.

Kamala Markandaya's themes and characters are drawn from different sections of society. And her fiction is not confined to a particular class of society. What strikes us in her fiction is her broad outlook and her "humanistic concern" or her "sensitivity to suffering". She is opposed to social injustices and is sensitive to any sort of suffering caused to human beings. Margaret P. Joseph has compared Kamala Markandaya to George Orwell in exposing suffering arising out of social malice and evils.
George Orwell claimed that his work usually originated in a feeling of partisanship and a sense of injustice. He wrote because there was some lie he wanted to expose or some fact to which he wanted to attract attention. The same may be said about Kamala Markandaya. Like Orwell she may be called the conscience of her generation.1

By exposing the harrowing experiences and mundane conditions of men and women, particularly of women due to certain social customs, attitudes and values, she wants to stress the need for eradicating these abhorrent conditions which demoralize people. So by taking note of these fictional experiences many of our present-day conflicts can be avoided in future. And her characters are a 'standing warning' of tragedy for us. Her sincerity and deep involvement in social problems and her concern for the suffering multitude is seen in her letter, where, she says:

I do detest racism in any form, just as I detest cruelty to any living being.2

Her concern, particularly for women and their problems, finds so much in her novels that one wonders whether, as she wrote them, she kept in mind the emancipation of women. In Nectar in a Sieve, A Handful of Rice
and Possession she seems to be preoccupied with the problems of peasant women, which is a distinctive quality of her fiction. (No other Indian English woman writer has gone as deep into the agonies and frustration arising out of poverty, illiteracy and superstitions that dog the life of the lower class women as Kamala Markandaya has done.) Not only this; one comes across in her novels, many other present-day feminist problems such as the inferior social status of women, their economic dependence and degradation due to various customs.

Kamala Markandaya seems to emphasise through her novels that emancipation of women is not possible unless the social attitudes towards them are changed, and also their own attitude towards themselves are changed. They consider themselves weak, inefficient, dependent and destined to suffer. This cynical attitude towards themselves is at its height in the rural India, where women are illiterate. They, therefore, easily succumb to superstitions, blind customs and traditions. The peasant women pass on their meek subservience and beliefs to the next generations. Kamala Markandaya seems to suggest that women have a long way to go to liberate themselves from the clutches of ignorance, poverty and dependence.
1. NECTAR IN A SIEVE (1954)

Nectar in a Sieve, her first novel proves that her fiction pertains to what she herself describes as "the literature of concern".

This novel is in a way a protest against injustice, inequality and a few more social evils caused by customs, attitudes and beliefs. In it she particularly deals with burning feminist problems such as dowry system and prostitution.

By our society, this system forces women, her dependence, hence her degradation as a mere commodity. While the rich can afford the luxury of dowry it is the middle and the lower classes, which are tortured and squeezed by the unseen tentacles of this octopus-like system. The condition worsens if the girl belongs to a poor family and her father has a good number of daughters to give in marriages. The parents have to undergo a great deal of torture if they cannot provide any dowry. And a lot, they manage to give dowry to a few of their daughters, they would surely end up their life in utter poverty. The debt from giving dowry to the older daughters...
Kamala Markandaya has given serious thought to the dowry problem in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Rukmini's three elder sisters had been married off with pomp and pageantry appropriate for the daughters of a village headman. And huge dowries were given to the respective bride-grooms. But when it comes to the turn of the last daughter, the family is on the brink of pauperism. Rukmini's mother is aware of the suffering that the dowry system had brought to her family. She often wails, taking Rukmini's face in her hands.

What for you, my last born, my baby? Four dowries is too much for a man to bear.

A good dowry is considered as the passport to get a respectable and rich man as husband. So, in most of the cases, a small dowry would lead to a marriage alliance with a less desirable family as in the case of Kunthi and Rukmini. Rukmini had no dowry or beauty to offer, hence she is given in marriage to a tenant farmer, who demanded less dowry.

But the fate of her own daughter, Ira is slightly different. Ira is married to an only son of a land owner,
with a small dowry, because her charm helped "in this case". Kamala Markandaya stresses the words "in this case" to show that Ira's case was an exception. She also points out that the condition of Ira's parents became worse after her marriage. Ira's dowry and the expense of an elaborate wedding feast leave her parents in the dark dungeons of hunger and grief.

But to add another injury to their suffering Ira is abandoned by her husband. Rukmini lives from hand to mouth and finds it hard to feed and clothe Ira. Yet she has a faint hope that money could 'buy' a second husband for her. She wishes:

With a dowry it was perhaps possible she might marry again. Without it no man would look at her no longer a virgin and reputedly barren.

Thus, Kamala Markandaya repeats (more than a dozen times) the word dowry as if it is part of one's daily vocabulary or another name for a girl. Apart from pointing out that the dowry system is a social evil, Kamala Markandaya gives vent to strong feminist feelings when she describes the lot of Rukmini and other women who suffer on account of it.
Kamala Markandaya also shows concern about other customs and superstitions that are still prevalent among the people of rural India. Most of the villagers crave for male children. No man ... woman wants to give birth to a girl and invite problems in life... Rukmini's memory of her early life was quite fresh. Even Rukmini, who worked in the fields along with her husband and equally contributes to the maintenance of the family, curses herself when she gave birth to a baby girl.

I turned away and despite myself the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment for what woman wants a girl for her first born? 

Nathan her husband is also shattered when she gives birth to a girl.

Nathan at first paid scant attention to her. He wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who could take with her dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind.

Things are different when Rukmini gave birth to a boy. Kamala Markandaya shows here how girls are discriminated against at their birth itself. The ways of welcome given at the birth of a boy and girl are different.
My husband was overjoyed at the arrival of a son, not less so my father. He came, an old man, all those miles by cart from our village to hold his grand son.

And

As for Nathan, nothing would do but that the whole should know as if they did not already on the tenth day from the birth he invited everybody to feast and rejoice with us in our good fortune.

In Nectar in a Sieve Kamala Markandaya draws our attention also to a few more problems such as barrenness in women, their economical dependence, prostitution and seclusion of women (use of veil). She does not criticize the institution of marriage, but she is surely sore about the blind values that are associated with it, which in a way punish women. She questions the practice of considering women as machines meant for producing children and satisfying the sexual needs of men. Has not she any voice in her married life? Is she there only to reproduce? Is man the sole decision-maker in matters related to women? And why should a man be allowed to discard his wife when he wants to? Ira's life raises these questions. Kamala Markandaya seems to be puzzled by the double standards practised against barren women and the resulting social injustice which they
have to put up in India. It is always the woman who gets the blame and a cursed social stigma of barrenness, whereas the incapacity of a man is left unquestioned. This sort of discrimination against barren women is more prevalent in rural areas where people are ignorant of the medical knowledge. Kamala Markandaya has shown a keen perception and sensitivity of an artist in painting the agony and anguish of a barren woman Ira, who belongs to that group of innocent victims. Her husband brings her back and dumps her in her parent's house like an unwanted, worn out apparel.

"Mother-in-law", he said, "I intend no discourtesy but this is no ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a barren woman... she has not borne in her first blooming. Who can say she will conceive later? I need sons."

Ira is forced to believe that barrenness was her fault and silently suffered a disgrace. Suffering is the lot of any woman. However, Kamala Markandaya does not like to hold before women a gloomy picture of their life and leave it there. She has a hope about women's liberation and emancipation. She believes that this can be achieved only when women can stand on their legs. By this she means economical
independence. She, like a silent advocate of feminist cause, wants to stress that what women need is confidence and determination to do the right things without the so-called help of a man. She brings out this idea through the life of an old woman who is a vegetable vendor. She is an old, poor and feeble woman who does not go begging for alms and to live by the coins flung at her out of pity. She sells vegetables which she buys at a cheaper price from the village farmers. She pacifies Rukmini when the latter narrates her worries about Ira's future.

"It is fate. Nevertheless, I don't like to think of the future!"

"Why fear?" said the old lady, "Am I not alone and do I not manage?"  

Kamala Markandaya has something significant to say on the subject of prostitution. Her anguish on the fate of innumerable unskilled, uneducated women is visible here. When a woman is not trained for a job and if she is illiterate and a weakling there is no other alternative for her to earn her bread but become a prostitute. This is the story of millions of women dragged to prostitution. And Ira is the symbol of these suffering women. Even Kenny, the foreign doctor who worked among the poor, illiterate peasants holds the same opinion about Ira's ultimate action.
"I suppose it was necessary," he said quietly. "I have seen it happen before."

Ira's life is pathetic and symbolic when we consider the circumstances under which she turned to prostitution. Her parents' land had parched up. Famine's hungry tongue was licking their rickety figures. Ira sees her youngest brother Kuty dying of hunger. The human in her could no longer suffer the agony and torture men and nature inflicted on the members of her family. She has to help her family, at least to save Kuty. She is illiterate and unskilled. She has no other way of earning but by selling her body. She wanders like a dissatisfied soul in the dark alleys of night searching for a customer from the tannery workers. Thus Ira sells herself to feed the members of her family.

W.R. Greg in his book The Great Sin observes that prostitution is supplementary income in all the underpaid jobs or the only source of income when the individual has no other trade to earn money. And while discussing about Walter Greg's observation Frän Coise Basch says:

Many women prostituted themselves for food for their families or themselves and that typically they were peasant girls earning at best nine pence a day or else were like
'Kitty', the fifteen year old daughter of a house keeper, who with her illicit earnings embellished her ordinary fare, sausages, meat-pies, and pastries.  

Another problem of women discussed in this novel is the use of purdah by women. Even a peasant woman like Rukmini wonders at the incongruity of women wearing a veil. The women she meets at the tannery quarters were a queer lot. They live in self-made prisons, devoid of freedom and natural light. Rukmini feels a shocking experience when she sees the pale, dissatisfied women groping in their high walled court-yards. Rukmini has the following comment to make about women who use the veil:

Sometimes, when I caught sight of a figure in voluminous draperies swishing through the streets under a blazing sun, or if a face peering through a window or shutter, I felt desperately sorry for them, deprived of the ordinary pleasures of knowing warm sun and cool breeze upon their flesh, of walking out light and free or of mixing with men and working beside them.

This novel, Nectar in a Sieve is the finest example of Kamala Markandaya's humanistic nature and her intense awareness of Indian women's problems. This novel certainly raises a consciousness about the plight of women among the readers.
2. SOME INNER FURY (1955)

Kamala Markandaya's second novel, Some Inner Fury, is about national struggle and the impact of western liberalism in the lives of a few upper class people. It also depicts the havoc in the private lives of individuals, especially in the lives of women like Mira, Premala and Roshan.

Mira is shown as educated, sophisticated and westernized. She was fortunate to be born in a family which recognized her individuality and allowed her to be free in her ideas and behaviour. Though her father and brother always respect her identity as a woman, there is that typical orthodox pull from the side of her mother and Doddamma. Her streaks of rebellion and free behaviour are controlled by her mother in a gentle way.

"Why not" ..... I asked and cried to myself, why ever not, while the wings of my anticipation began slowly to fold. "Modesty graces a woman,". She replied. "It is not right for a young woman to go among young men". 14

The impulse of freedom in her is indicated by the way she appreciates Roshan and her free life. She even
leaves home and stays with Roshan, an emancipated woman. She does envy Roshan and others who work in Roshan's Press, because she wishes to be one of them. She says of Roshan and her inability to join Roshan, thus:

I admired her because she stood alone and thought nothing about it.  

I discovered at last the gateway to the freedoms of the mind, and gazed entranced upon that vista of endless extensions of which the spirit is capable.

And so I would have liked to go with Roshan, who was free as the wind, and no man's warder, but this I could not do.

Roshan is a fully emancipated and sophisticated woman of the world. She is single, working and independent. Apart from her stubborn nature, she shows tremendous inner strength, optimism and courage in pursuing her ideals. This distinguishes her from other women characters.

But, Premala of this novel serves as a contrast to Roshan. She represents a typical subdued Indian womanhood. She is innocent, modest, shy and unpretentious.
She sincerely tried to adjust to Kit's westernized ways, though she failed miserably. Kit, on the other hand, is bewildered by her inhibitions and is unable to realize her predicaments. Premala tries to drown her unhappiness and frustration in school work. Thus in her loneliness and misery she turns to the village and her adopted orphan baby for personal satisfaction and fulfilment. Premala's suffering has a far greater relevance to the contemporary social context. (Premala's inner suffering, failures and conflict in the domestic sphere are just a reflection of the suffering of innumerable women, who try to adjust with the ways of their male-dominant husbands.)

3. SILENCE OF DESIRE (1960)

This novel is woven round a typical middle class couple: Dandekar and his obedient, placid wife Sarojini. A crisis starts developing in their life the moment she swerves from the set pattern of their smooth flowing life and neglects her wifely duties. And the catastrophe that befalls their life is of interest from the feminist point of view because it reveals the tumult of social problems arising out of the social double standards and inequality among men and women.
Kamala Markandaya reveals here the standard by which men and society value the worth of a woman. A woman comes to be praised as chaste and good if she is obedient, useful and conforms to all the rules set by the unwritten moral code. Sarojini too is considered good because she is a typical obedient wife who is very useful in the family. She is a good wife, a good mother, an excellent cook and a woman who still gives sexual pleasure to her husband.

Dandekar is angry when Sarojini starts going out during his absence. Sarojini is in a dilemma. She has a growth in her womb and does not know how to explain her problem to him. She tells him lies about her innocent visits to a healing Swamy. When he finds out her secret 'hide outs', he misunderstands the whole affair and accuses her of infidelity. He shouts at her to establish his male authority.

He said passionately, "what were you doing? you say, you a married woman, were with this man in his house but you don't say why or what for. Am I not your husband entitled to know? or am I some kind of hireling gigolo to be told only as much as is good for him?"
And again this sense of male superiority complex instills in him the idea that women should be obedient, pious and should live as their men wish. So he feels the same agony when Sarojini questions him harshly on the authenticity of Dandekar snooping and sniffing at her heels because he just suspects her purity. He does not want her to interrupt him or contradict him.

Kamala Markandaya also points out a very common notion that is still prevalent even among the educated and advanced people. Many a man thinks that women are passive receivers of sex (that is they play a secondary role in sexual activities) and man should take the initiative to possess the woman. Dandekar loves his wife for the same reason, that she allowed him to dominate the scene. In a way this satisfies his male ego.

Kamala Markandaya makes the above mentioned idea more emphatic by a humorous episode from Dandekar's life. When he visits prostitutes he expects passivity and total submission from those professional women. The prostitute, who was skilled in her profession, took initiative to motivate him. But his whole body contracts and he draws back into some protective shell at her audacity. The prostitute thinks that he is impotent. The irony is that, his male
superiority was hurt by her open behaviour. And because of his male tenacious (stubborn) nature, he expects the prostitute to behave like obedient Sarojini. So he has to retreat like an invalid, and an impotent.

Kamala Markandaya is also conscious of the sexual double standards still prevalent in India. The pattern is always male oriented and so, a normal action of a man can be apprehended as a sin when it is done by a woman. As Jitendra Tuli puts it:

The Indian male is even now suffering from double standards. One code of ethics and morality for himself and the other for his wife and daughters ... While he feels it is perfectly alright for him to indulge in pre-marital and extramarital relationships, visit prostitutes and call girls, he would kill his wife or daughter if they indulged in pre-extra-marital sex.19

And a typical example of this sexual double standard is clearly portrayed in this novel by the juxtaposition of the actions of two characters – Dandekar who represents the men, and Sarojini who represents the women. Dandekar visits prostitutes though he knows it was a sin, But he wants his wife to be placid, chaste, obedient and morally conscious.
He doubts his wife's innocent visits to the Swami. He demands an explanation for her absence from home, whereas he himself runs to any place where his fancy takes him. He thinks it is Sarojini's sole duty to look after the children. He accused Sarojini of her carelessness and faithlessness as a wife and mother. Thus, Dandekar who had failed as a husband and father, had the audacity to accuse his wife.

Kamala Markandaya stresses the male ego and the male superiority and the sexual double standard.

He had been convinced the fault was Sarojini's. It simply had not occurred to him that it might also be his.  

But the novel ends on a note of hope. When the doubts and misunderstandings are cleared he comes to realise the real meaning of marriage which lies in 'togetherness'. He comes to regard Sarojini as a partner of his life.

My wife is part of me now - I did not realize it in all the years it has been happening, but I know now that without her I am not whole. Being incomplete won't kill me - I know that - but it will take away most of everything that life means to be.
The above quotation seems to be Kamala Markandaya's message to the readers. She shows that marital disharmony or discord due to male supremacy and sexual double standards lead to a tragic waste of life. People with a little understanding, and sense of co-operation can elevate themselves to higher levels of maturity. Dandekar's final compromise transcends all prevailing social attitudes and male supremacy; and in a way it is the novelist's way of showing the possible solution to the tension and suffering of human beings.

4. POSSESSION (1963)

In this novel, the story centres around Valmiki. But Kamala Markandaya never misses a chance of focussing the attention of the readers on women's problems. Her great concern for women and their problems is also clear in this novel. She feels that women in the rural areas are the most exploited in several ways. The pattern of life is the same for all peasant women. When the women are young, they toil in the field from dawn to dusk along with their men folk. But a woman has the additional duty of cooking, washing, and bearing children. A woman's personal wishes and needs are secondary,
and she has to devote her entire life to the welfare of her family. Women are conditioned in this way by social attitudes, beliefs, religion and a peasant's unwritten moral code. Most of the women are forced to believe that their sex is their fault (or crime!) and thereby suffer silently throughout their life. But in course of time their neglected and over-worked bodies fail to satisfy the undue demands from various corners. They become an easy prey to diseases and death at an early stage.

Val's mother is the symbol of peasant women. When she was young she bore many children. She was always a meek, obedient and hard-working wife. But in the long run her chronically half-fed body had fallen an easy victim to diseases. Val's mother was suffering from both malaria and consumption. But like any other peasant woman, she takes her plight as fate, because she too belongs to the 'generation' of meek obedient wives.

'Nor did she think to complain of dying at forty; indeed she considered herself lucky, many of her friends having been taken at thirty. Hers was a generation thoroughly conditioned and ground into acceptance.'
Kamala Markandaya feels that most of the villagers are indifferent to their womenfolk. In a way men take advantage of the peasant women's meek acceptance and silent suffering. This indifferent attitude of the rural menfolk towards women is presented in the novel through the life of Val's father. He never cares for his wife, not even when she is ill. While she lies alone on a tattered mat in their empty hut, he is always out to get drunk on Arak. His inhuman nature is shown by the fact that he does not even care for the feelings of a mother when Caroline comes to buy Val. He bargains for money and shows little feeling for his departing son. Val's mother says to Anasuya.

"He has already decided." She said bitterly. "Did you not hear him? It was the money it was too much for him. But it is always so. Men are ever free and easy with that for which they have neither suffered nor laboured." 23

Kamala Markandaya presents yet another example to show the rustic mentality of men and their indifferent attitude towards women. She does it by portraying the life of Val in a foreign setting. The "rustic indifferent attitude towards women" might have prompted Val to betray Ellie. She uses her as a model and sex object. Though
Ellie loves him and does all the possible things for him, he is quite indifferent to her needs as a human being.

In Possession Kamala Markandaya is also explicit about the treatment the 'domestics' (house maids) receive at the hands of their employers. They are forced to undergo harassment and ill-treatment at the hands of their employers for they have no other alternative to earn their living. They are often used as 'machines of work' and also are used by some men to satisfy their sexuality. Ellie, the Jewish refugee of this novel, belongs to this group. Life is not good for her in Caroline's house as a domestic servant. Val uses her as an unpaid model and an object of sex and finally betrays her when she becomes pregnant. And Caroline had a hand in Ellie's tragedy, for Caroline threw her out of the house. The selfishness and jealousy of a woman and the 'oriental cruelty' of a man forces Ellie to commit suicide. Thus Kamala Markandaya definitely gives glimpses of her anguish and sympathy for the innumerable unskilled, uneducated women who lead a miserable life.
A Handful of Rice is primarily a story of Ravi. But it deals with many feminist problems such as (1) how male and female children are treated, (2) how repeated pregnancies affect women adversely, (3) how poverty strikes women more than men, (4) how women are cruelly treated by their husbands, (5) how women suffer owing to their economic dependence, and (6) how men feel towards a woman's chastity.

In this novel also Kamala Markandaya speaks about the longing for male children, both by the villagers and the city dwellers and the rich and the poor. She considers it her humanitarian duty to expose the hazards of such notions and prejudices, that have taken deep roots in our society. Ravi's peasant parents long for male offsprings to continue the family line. But Ravi knows from his parents' experience the futility of doing penance for getting a baby boy. Yet when he gets married, he is often hunted by a desire for sons.

Ravi wished he had a child too, preferably a son rather than a daughter, a little boy who could run after him and call him father, who would look up to him and to whom in time he would pass on his skills, so that he would never have to worry about whom to hand over.
Appu, a city dweller belonging to the middle class also has a visual dream to get male children, so that he could pass on his craft to his sons. He always broods over his incapacity (or a curse!) to produce sons.

He brooded and went on bitterly. A man needs sons and ... I have none, only daughters. 25

Kamala Markandaya points out here that while men crave for male children, women have to suffer the pains of childbearing. She poignantly pictures in Thangam, how repeated pregnancies affect the health and life of a woman. Thangam gives birth to babies one after another without proper care, food, medicine and the necessary amenities. This constant childbearing affects her health and mental peace and ultimately turns her into a nagging, dissatisfied wife. Kamala Markandaya also shows the 'degeneration' of young beautiful girls, after marriage. Nalini is an example. Domestic drudgery, repeated childbearing, poverty and various other pressures of life wear her out. Whether in city or in a village, women have to shoulder the pains of child-bearing, burdens of misery, and they are trained not to complain. . . . Ravi's peasant mother always struggled and suffered from the meagerness of food and shelter. Then there was constant child-bearing. Each pregnancy gave a blow to the already tattered,
In this novel Kamala Markandaya reveals the fact that poverty strikes women more than the men and that it is women who are doomed to undergo a silent suffering. It is true that men share their poverty but it is more hard on women because they have to be satisfied with less food, less care, and medicines. Also, they are burdened with frequent child bearing. In spite of the poverty, things are a little different for Appu, Varma, and Puttanna, because they can manage to get an 'escape' from poverty and the monotonous drudgery of their overcrowded house. But what about the women? By giving an example of Ravi's mother, who is like any one of the millions of village women dying for want of 'decent food' and lack of medical facilities, Kamala Markandaya suggests that life is more taxing for them than it is for men. Ravi's mother is always half fed. When drought and famine lick their skeletons, she tries to keep alive by feeding herself on the water in which things are boiled. And later, she suffers more than her husband, when her sons who were 'flesh of her flesh' leave her. Like a typical peasant woman she has dreamt that she will have her son's warmth in her old age. At last she dies of hunger and ill-health before her husband. Thus her life is a saga of misery and suffering.
Kamala Markandaya also writes about the cruelty of men towards women. She points out that many a man expects women to suffer and tolerate the ill-treatment and physical torture inflicted on them. Ravi, like any other middle class Indian believed in the supremacy of men and he hurts Nalini when he himself is hurt by somebody. And all that she gets from him was scoldings and beatings. He often strikes her, but one day, in his monstrous way, he asks her to get out, and when she finally leaves the house, he is furious with her. In his hysterical mood he curses Nalini.

And today she had left him, leaving with his troubles. Forgetting the duties she owed him, the duties of a wife to her husband. This was where she should be now here beside him when he wanted her, not where her fancy took her. Where was she now? "Bitch" he said "Bitch".

Nalini has a different story to tell about the way Ravi treated her. She laments:

"He beats me, I don't know why. For nothing at all".
"Do not fret". Kumaran, his tenderness that was like a woman's. "Don't fret anymore. It was a bad moment, it is over now". "But all the time. Why
Kamala Markandaya is explicit here about the treatment a woman receives at the hands of her husband. Thangam's too is not happy and her husband Puttanna ill-treats her in another way; that is, he bothers her with repeated pregnancies. He uses her as an object of sex. But he never cares to work and support his wife and children.

Kamala Markandaya also points out the predicament of ordinary housewives who live at the mercy of their earning husbands and do petty odd jobs to please and satisfy them. She explains in simple terms how Manu's injections still work in the lives of women. Women just suffer and tolerate the atrocities committed on them because they have no other alternative. This meek acceptance and dependence on men is typical of Indian women. Ravi's mother accepts it, so also Jayamma, Thangam and Nalini. Thangam knew the worthlessness of her husband, but follows him, when Puttanna was thrown out of the house by Appu.

No edict bound her, but she knew .... they all knew that where a man went there his wife must go and with her would go her children. 28
Nalini too goes back to her husband, Ravi, though she had dared to leave him once, when she could no longer suffer his cruelty. A Nalini and her children had decamped to Thangam's one room apartment. Thangam is furious when Ravi turns up to summon Nalini. She questions him. But Nalini follows him because she was neither self-reliant nor had any boldness to forsake her ill-treating husband.

In this novel, Kamala Markandaya definitely gives several glimpses of the attitude of men towards chastity and virginity of women by a clever-stroke of her pen. She is aware of the social attitude which still prevails among men of all classes of society that their wives should be virtuous whereas they need not be. The following sentences bear witness to the above mentioned fact.

Ravi had had women before - a dozen, a score, procured for him at first by Damodar, later on his own initiative. \(^{29}\) and

Nalini was different, she was young, untried, a virgin. If she had been otherwise he would not have wanted to marry her. \(^{30}\)

By revealing the incandescent ways of men, Kamala Markandaya shows her resentment about the formidable ways of men and
society. A typical example of her resentment is shown by the way Ravi looked for virgin 'blood' after his 'first night' with Nalini. She seems to caution us that the discriminatory social attitudes towards women and the silent social sanction of the double standards in morality may further degenerate the social status of a woman. And, as long as men consider themselves superior to take as many women as they please (as their wives or lovers) and expect women to conform to meek acceptance, there will not be any equality.


The Coffer Dams is a novel about the construction of dams by the British in a primitive frontier town in India, under the supervision of Clinton. But the human drama starts the moment the British workers bring their families to live in the quarters. And among them the lives of Clinton and Helen prove to be of interest from the feminist point of view. Here Kamala Markandaya shows that (1) a woman comes to grief when she deviates from the prescribed code of conduct (2) in the East as well as in the West men consider themselves superior to their women and love to possess them 'as pieces of property, and (3) they
regard themselves as lords and as lords justify any pain or
cruelty they inflict on their wives. Clinton loves Helen
very much and he did not oppose her unpredictable ways in
the beginning. She excites him because she is different
from other women and has no pretensions of wifely duties or
any great love for routine. But whenever Helen shows more
independence or pursued her personal interests, Clinton does
not much appreciate it, especially when she wanders into the
rampant jungle to meet the primitive tribals. The life of
Helen and Clinton appears to be smooth and happy, till
Helen moves away from the path fixed for a memsahib in India.
Thus disharmony starts, sprouting in their life, the moment
Helen set aside "wifely duties" and the code of conduct
accepted for a memsahib in India. Then he only wishes that
she is like other wives, conforming to accepted behaviour.

"Occasionally when he wanted her and she
was not there, he wished she was more
like them, ubiquitous, conformist, and
predictable."

"Oriental jealousy of men is a recurring theme in the
Anglo-Indian and Indian-English novels. In Coffer Dams
Kamala Markandaya points out that men is the same every­
where, either in the east or in the west. Firstly men consider
themselves superior to women and secondly, they love to
possess them as pieces of property. Even Clinton who is wedded to his work burns in jealousies when Helen vanishes into the dark jungles in the company of Bashiam. And like any other oriental man he rapes his wife when the urge tightened his loins. The weight of his sudden passion oppresses her. Her mind and soul are already tattered by his inhuman mentality towards the helpless tribes. Now, by inflicting pain on her body, he insults her self-esteem, her honour and her womanhood. She cannot longer tolerate the pain and disgrace Clinton has implanted in her. By an unknown urge she drags her bleeding body and mind to the soothing jungle where Bashiam's hut stands. She comes to grief because she has deviated from the prescribed code of conduct. Clinton, on the other hand, lying awake and looking into the black opal night realized that he has virtually raped his wife and has hurt her feelings. But he does not feel guilty about it. He just justifies his action:

"She is mine", he said stubbornly; "why should I let her go. What I have, I hold".32

Thus Clinton thinks that Helen is his property and it is his sole right to decide what he had to do with her. Kamala Markandaya shows here how men, instead of regretting their cruelty to women, try to justify it.
7. THE NOWHERE MAN (1972)

As the title suggests, is a study in alienation. In this complex novel Kamala Markandaya may well be saying that 'The Nowhere Man' is not only Srinivas, but also Mrs. Pickering, because she is portrayed as an old divorcée, who was doomed to roam in the streets for lack of food and shelter. She symbolizes the old, lonely and unwanted women having no one to care for in their dog days.

8. TWO VIRGINS (1973)

Kamala Markandaya's novel, Two Virgins has given rise to much criticism in various quarters. Many critics felt that it was a gimmick of Kamala Markandaya to weave a flowery village documentary with typical village scenery and people for the sole consumption of the western readers. Nissim Ezekiel has called these characters puppets:

Puppets, manufactured for those who know nothing about India. 33

Margaret P Joseph also has the same opinion about this novel. She wrote:

A platform for propaganda against the evils in society. 34
Propaganda or no propaganda Kamala Markandaya draws our attention to a few social problems - particularly the problems pertaining to women. In this novel, she focuses our attention on the problems of widows like Aunt Alamelu, the inefficiency of law in protecting women and how women themselves contribute to their inferior social status. She also discusses here about personal freedom here.

Aunt Alamelu in this novel is a typical Indian widow. After the death of her husband, she comes to stay with her sister and brother-in-law Appa, because she has nowhere else to go, and has nothing of her own except her wornout cooking vessels. She is nothing more than a helping hand and holds a position little higher than that of a servant. Aunt Alamelu does not receive the usual respect given to elders in an Indian joint family. She is unwanted by everyone, particularly by Appa and Lalitha, who complains about lack of privacy because of her presence in their house. She is a lonely woman. So had a bad temper and she was found nagging at times. But the members of the family who failed to understand her tormented psyche, found her a nuisance. One day Appa asked her to shut up and get out. But where could she go? Aunt Alamelu's tottering figure bundled up the petty belongings to go away to a destination which she herself did not know.
Thus Kamala Markandaya wants to draw the reader's attention to the social crimes committed on widows, who are still looked down upon and are forced to live a secluded life in society. She points out that the reason for such treatment is their deprived condition and their being women, and women without men to rely on. Kamala Markandaya makes Saroj, a sensitive girl, to contemplate on Aunt Alamelu's pitiable condition and wonder why she could not take refuge in anything or why an escape route had been denied to her. And she comes to this conclusion:

She did not have the status, you did not have the status if you had not a husband. She did not have the status, you did not have the status if you had not a husband. And

Aunt Alamelu had nowhere to sink to. She said it was the state of her fate, that foiled her. Saroj mulled it over, saw it was not that all, it was her sex. Appa and Anand could stride off to coffee-shop, Manikkam had his bhang hide out, Bandi's liquor store was always crammed with men. Women had no bolt holes. There was no escape for them, they had to stand where they were and take it.

Kamala Markandaya touches here an important feminist problem: A woman is not supposed to assert
herself and take a path of escape leaving the roles and duties assigned to her. Religion and public opinion do not exercise any substantial pressure on men to conform to the set rules of society. So, a woman has nowhere to turn to as a way of escape from drudgery, whereas a man has. For women like aunt Alamelu, Amma and Manikam’s wife, there was no life and experience outside the home circle. But during marriage season Amma and the girls could at least go out to attend weddings wearing their best. They could enjoy the festivals like Diwali. But because a widow is considered inauspicious, Aunt Alamelu could not do that. So apart from the emotional isolation, widows like Aunt Alamelu have to face some more ordeals in their life. Aunt Alamelu never complained and silently suffered it.

Kamala Markandaya also shows concern about the safety of women. She gives an example to show how the law fails to give protection to women in distress. There is Lachu who lurks behind shadows to seduce maidens. As the name signifies he is a scandalous, erotic person, who did terrible things to girls on their way to school. Amma and other mothers took a deputation to the village Police Inspector. He was sympathetic to them, but could not take any action for lack of evidence.
The mothers went away. They called the law an ass, said everyone knew about Lachu, and what crimes must be committed before their daughters were protected? But they had no evidence to offer because none of the girls would testify. Secretly the mothers were glad the girls would not testify, they did not want it shouted in the courts what had been done to their daughters.37

The very idea of women in a village going to a Police station to submit a memorandum against a scandalous person appears incredible. But Kamala Markandaya is true to life when she mentions about the secret gladness of mothers when their daughters do not testify to Lachu's amorous advances. Indian women seldom open their mouth to disclose their grievances or the atrocities committed on them. There are thousands of cases of seduction, molestation, and rape kept in the dark. The innocent victims do not disclose it, for the fear of adverse publicity which would harm their future and bring disgrace to their family. Kamala Markandaya wants to suggest that, in spite of all the tall talk about equality for women, and legal and constitutional protection given to them, women against them and the culprits go unpunished.
The rich women also contribute towards this inferior social status of women in another way. These women in rich families look satisfied and comfortable, but they too hold an inferior position as they are treated as objects of lust and the bearers of children by their husbands. In the novel there is a reference to women in big houses sending jutkas to summon Manikkam's wife. She went to breast-feed their infants.

The women, she told Saroja, used her because they did not want to spoil the shape of their breasts, which suckling did. They wanted to keep them firm and round for their husbands. Does Kamala Markandaya want to suggest that women waste time and energy to please men? It is true because men want beautiful wives to satisfy them and cater to their egoistic and male chauvanistic ideas. This throws light on the position of women in society. It also shows how far women themselves contribute to such an inferior position by playing the role of a dependent sex object.

Gandhiji, while talking about the status and position of women in society, was asked to say whether a woman had to engage herself in public work. He wrote in 'Harijan' thus:
More often than not a woman's life is taken up not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but in catering for the egoistic pleasure of her lord and master and for her own vanities. To me this domestic slavery of women is a symbol of our barbarism. In *Two Virgins*, Kamala Markandaya also gives caution to the enlightened and emancipated women, not to forget their roots. Equality and freedom are necessary for growing up into fulfilled individuals, but freedom should not be utilized as a ladder to ephemeral fame and fortune. And absolute individual freedom will lead to new sources of self torture and frustration. This has been made amply clear by the example of Lalitha. Kamala Markandaya appears to caution young women that freedom is not to be misused as was done by Lalitha. This is amply depicted in the lives of the two girls born and brought up in the same circumstances. While, Lalitha fell victim to the lures of the city life, Saroj did not. Saroj did not take the easy path to happiness, nor did she succumb to her emotions.

Kamala Markandaya wants to say that there is certainly a social process taking place. But it depends upon the individuals, also, as to how they shape it and how far
they can develop taking advantage of it. She also points out how a 'free' woman like Saroj comes to be treated by men like Chingleput or Devraj. In other words, how men like to take undue advantage of women's trust and the casual behaviour of independent women. It is up to women to withstand such selfish advances of men as is done by Saroj.

9. THE GOLDEN HONEYCOMB (1977)

Kamala Markandaya's 'humanistic concern' fully manifests itself in this novel. But The Golden Honeycomb does not project darker shades of tragedy and the meek suffering of women. This novel shows Kamala Markandaya's faith in humanity and universal brotherhood of man. Another speciality of this novel is that, unlike the earlier novels, conjugal devotion is highlighted and shown to be enduring. And the usual domestic conflict between the husband and wife and other social maladies are totally absent here.
CHAPTER II

REFERENCES


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