

## **Depictions of Women's Character in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya: A Study in Strength, Sacrifice, and Social Identity**

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### **Abstract**

Kamala Markandaya, a prominent Indo-Anglian writer, portrayed Indian women navigating the complexities of colonialism, tradition, modernity, and personal agency. This paper analyzes the characterizations of women in her novels, especially focusing on figures like Rukmani from *Nectar in a Sieve*, Roshan from *Possession*, and Helen from *The Golden Honeycomb*. The study highlights how Markandaya presents women not merely as passive sufferers, but as dynamic individuals striving to assert identity and dignity in patriarchal and postcolonial contexts.

Key Words: Kamala Markandaya, Colonialism, Modernity, Patriarchal, Postcolonial.

### **1. Introduction**

Kamala Markandaya (1924–2004) is recognized as one of the most significant figures in Indian-English literature. She belongs to a Brahmin Family and he later went to Britain. She married Bertrand Tailor and had a daughter Kim. She announced herself as a Freelance writer in France, She learned thoroughly the Indian Literature and culture Her novels explore the intersections of gender, tradition, and societal change in the context of pre- and post-independence India. She studied History in Madras University and worked in Army as a Clerk before joining the journalism. Though her work does not align with any single ideological movement, it consistently foregrounds women's lived experiences. The present study seeks to explore how Markandaya constructs the identities of her female characters and how these identities challenge, conform to, or transform the expectations of a patriarchal society.

Markandaya's literary career spanned over five decades, during which she authored ten novels. Her protagonists are often caught between the opposing forces of tradition and change. Women, in particular, embody this conflict, as they are often the carriers of cultural legacy and yet must

adapt to changing socio-economic realities In his lifetime she published 10 Novels She also have been often awarded for bringing the Indian culture in his writing. She also taught about the image of India in American schools and books. The analysis herein focuses primarily on Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Roshan in *Possession*, A silence of desire ,Hand full of Rice and *The Golden Honeycomb*, while also drawing thematic connections to her broader corpus. Most of his themes consists of traditional and modern, alienation and colonialism, Poverty and social injustism, Eastern and western characters. After her Husband died she moved to India partially for writing her Novels. At the age of 79 She left the world because of Kidney Failure.

## **2. Traditional Womanhood and Silent Endurance: Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve***

Published in 1954 [1], *Nectar in a Sieve* is perhaps Markandaya's best-known novel. It chronicles the life of Rukmani, a peasant woman who got married at the age of 13 and went far away from his Family, And how she overcome his life drastically through his patience and courage. Throughout his life he stayed in a place where the cultural is completely opposite to India as she confronts poverty, displacement, and loss of his infant because of Starvation. with stoic grace.

At that time her daughter who was left by her husband as he was not able to find food for her child she joined in prostitution to help the family. When kamala came to know this, she worried a lot but also she didn't change her character by being a disciplined Indian woman. Rukmani's character is emblematic of the traditional Indian woman — nurturing, obedient, and spiritually resilient. Her relationship with her husband, Nathan, is marked by mutual respect and emotional strength rather than romantic idealism.

Despite immense suffering, Rukmani retains a quiet dignity. Her resistance is not overt, but it manifests in her unbreakable will to survive and her deep sense of moral purpose. [4-6].

"When the dawn breaks, I will still have my hands, my faith, and the memory of those I loved."

Her narrative voice invites the reader to witness not just the pain, but also the strength that emerges from such hardship. This depiction is a significant deviation from Western literary tropes that often marginalize the agency of rural women.

### 3. Modernity, Hybridity, and the Urban Woman: Roshan in *Possession*

*Possession* (1963) [2] presents a stark contrast to Rukmani's world. Set in London and India, it explores themes of cultural appropriation, identity, and power dynamics. It is a relationship between Caroline a English woman and Valmiki a young Indian Artist. This story reveals about the Indian culture and western Culture. Caroline finds Valmiki in the village and because of jealous he drags her to London to shape him and his art. Roshan Merchant, a wealthy art patron, becomes both protector and possessor of Valmiki, an Indian spiritual artist. Her character challenges the binary of oppressor/oppressed by occupying a liminal space.

Looking at the difference in London culture he begins to question his own culture and his relationship with him. From that she started to come to India often to get help from swamy who find out her talent as a Artist. They started to argue with swamy about Indian and western culture which bought a heavy heart in Valmiki. It also consequences about the relationship between both spiritually and mentally.

Roshan embodies traits of modernity and female autonomy. She is assertive, sexually liberated, and cosmopolitan. However, her relationship with Valmiki reflects a neo-colonial desire to possess the exotic other. Roshan's attempts to mold Valmiki into a Western-style artist reveals the limitations of her agency, caught within the structures of postcolonial power:

"She could not separate his art from his mysticism, nor his body from her desire to shape it."

Markandaya critiques the romanticization of the East by the West through Roshan, while also portraying her as a woman struggling with genuine emotional vulnerability.

### 4. Conflict Between Personal Desire and Social Responsibility: Helen in *The Golden Honeycomb*

In *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) [3], Helen Langford serves as a counter-narrative to both Rukmani and Roshan. As an Englishwoman living in India, Helen becomes emotionally invested in the life of Maharaja Rabi. The story highlights the both social and the political problems they face. The story mainly tells about the influence of western culture on Indian culture. The story

conflicts in desires and shaping their life. Her love for him and for India signifies a bridge between two worlds, but one fraught with political and cultural tension.

Helen is intelligent, empathetic, and morally grounded. Her internal conflict arises from her dual identity as both participant in and observer of colonial rule. Despite her personal feelings for Rabi, she refuses to let romance obscure the historical realities of imperialism:

"Affection alone cannot erase history. Love cannot undo what power has done."

Helen's narrative emphasizes the ethical dimensions of intercultural relationships, especially those shaped by colonial hierarchies. Her character signifies the potential for mutual respect, but also the inescapable burden of historical guilt.

## **5. Feminist Undercurrents and Social Commentary**

While Kamala Markandaya did not explicitly align herself with the feminist movement, her writing reflects a profound awareness of gender injustice. Her women characters are not mere symbols of suffering, but complex individuals with emotional depth, moral strength, and intellectual capability [7-8].

Markandaya often juxtaposes male and female perspectives to highlight the disparities in autonomy, expectation, and consequence. In *A Silence of Desire*, for instance, the tension between traditional healing and modern medicine becomes a metaphor for the negotiation of gender roles within marriage. Similarly, in *Some Inner Fury*, the female protagonist Mira defies nationalist and patriarchal expectations in her pursuit of personal truth.

These narratives suggest that feminist consciousness can manifest through culturally embedded forms of resistance, not just through overt rebellion. Markandaya's feminist vision is therefore integrative, rooted in context, and sensitive to the emotional and social textures of Indian life.

## 6. Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of women is neither monolithic nor idealized. From rural India to urban London, from colonial subjects to postcolonial citizens, her female characters reflect the diversity and complexity of womanhood. Through figures like Rukmani, Roshan, and Helen, Markandaya presents women as agents of change, memory, and moral clarity.

Her work challenges the reader to reconsider simplistic dichotomies such as tradition vs. modernity, East vs. West, and submission vs. rebellion. In doing so, she creates a literary space where women navigate the inescapable constraints of history with dignity, courage, and hope.

Markandaya's contributions remain vital to the discourse on gender in postcolonial literature. By giving voice to women's inner lives, she enriches our understanding of both the personal and the political dimensions of identity.

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