CHAPTER – II

KAMALA MARKANDAYA: NEGOTIATING PATRIARCHY

For a long time, women enjoyed only a secondary role in the Indian English male writings such as those of R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. For example, Narayan's heroine, Rosie, in the novel The Guide is viewed only in relation to the male protagonist, Raju, and Raju's mother is confined to a very secondary position. Hence, it is not an overstatement that it is through the advent of the Indian women writers that woman has been able to assume a major role in the novel. In fact, since the last five decades many of the Indian women novelists have been focusing on women's issues. They have really a woman's perspective on the world, which has allowed them to create their own world, free from the direct interference of men. Among these different Indian women writers, who have made the female characters their main preoccupation, the very first name is Kamala Markandaya.

However , according to most of Markandaya's critics, though she is one of the foremost of the Indian women 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 (Indira 1991, Pathania 1992, Bhatnagar 1995, Misra 2000). K. Madavi Menon explores Markandaya's fictional canvas as 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 Coffer Dams (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 inter-cultural 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-fulfilment [Some Inner Fury (1955) and The Golden Honey Comb (1977)] (Menon:1993 : 230 - 31).

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 : 69 – 70).

However, such a complete denial of feminist perspective in Markandaya can be made only out of a surface reading of her novels. Markandaya is, in fact, not a radical feminist and her novels are not an outright condemnation of a repressive male-dominated society calling for radical reconstructing of male-female roles. Her novels are not also naturalistic accounts about the victimization of women. On the contrary, her attitude to feminism is established as personal, analytic and exploratory rather than public , political or polemical. She does not create a women's world entirely of their own but presents the real world, sometimes raising serious questions about contemporary attitudes to women and their roles in family and social and emotional bonds that

shackle women. In her novels, Indian women really define themselves by a set of relationships and modes of conduct within a created society . They confront a tradition-oriented society and learn to live under the twin whips of heritage and modernity. Despite the changes in norms, 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 feminist movement.

Her first novel Nectar in A Sieve (1954) has generally been viewed as "a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry...under the pressure of industrialism and landlordism" (Misra : 2000 : 2). The novel itself has a subtitle – 'A Novel of Rural India' – and has rightly been compared with Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth and Alan Paton's Cry, The Beloved Country. In the character of its protagonist, Rukmini, critics like Landow notices nothing but the suffering of a docile Hindu Woman :

> No pain or injustice can cause her to rebel or seek revenge (Landow: 1989 :1).

As Gajendra Kumar writes :

> Nectar in a Sieve articulates the village life in which Rukmini becomes kernel who suffers from pillar to post . The details of Rukmini's suffering highlight the truth of Coleridge's doctrine "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve" (Kumar, G: 2001:51).

But such views really subvert Markandaya's feminist perspective in the novel.

In a patriarchal constraint, the primary feminist role model is that wherein the suppressed and thwarted woman still dares to question the statuesque and, in quiet unobtrusive ways, asserts her individuality (Menon:1993:231). Rukmini belongs to this category. Throughout the novel, we find that her existence is thwarted by the irrational forces of Nature and commercialism, and that everytime her life's questions are reduced to the eternal quest for freedom in the face of tyranny of many kinds. Denied of individual, social and economic rights because she is a woman , and at that a poor one, her mental agony becomes truly reminiscent for the feminist call. She is branded in the society because she cannot produce a male child. But she is not entitled to approach a doctor for help because tradition does not permit her to do so. She has to live with her "fate". However, Rukmini asserts her self and her individuality when she goes to the Western doctor Kenny for medical aid. But this has to be maintained as a closely guarded secret as she cannot hurt the sentiment of her husband . Hence, the feminist leanings of the book are very grave because despite the surface acceptance and tolerance Rukmini is the woman of protest: despite years of cultural conditioning to accept and submit, she is tempted to question and defy the so-called "fate".

The novel is in first person narration, and Rukmini, being the narrator-protagonist, enjoys the authority to resurrect her subjugated knowledge about her victimization in a patriarchal society. What makes Rukmini an interesting narrator is that "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 : 66). She tells the story of her life, from her marriage with Nathan to the present, almost in a linear way, and her tale reveals certain facets of a woman's struggle in a male-dominated world.

Rukmini says this about the little education which she got from her father:

> It was my father who taught me to read and write...'Practise hard', he would say, watching me busy with slate and pencil, 'for who knows what dowry there will be for you when you are ready!'
>
> '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? (Nectar in A Sieve: 11).

This discourse makes certain facts clear. First, as a novelist Kamala Markandaya subverts simple man-woman binary opposition in this novel. Rukmini's father is portrayed here in the light of the nationalist male reformers, while her mother inherits patriarchy in herself in such a way that she does harm to women's cause. Secondly, at the very outset, Rukmini's tale makes it clear that from her very childhood she has been brought up under the twin pressures of tradition and modernity.

Rukmini began her life with Nathan like the average Indian women. From her marriage, she expected nothing 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 ask for ? (7).

In her confessional discourse, when Rukmini remembers her first reaction on begetting a girl-child, we again find the revelation of every (Indian) woman's psyche to whom fertility is the essence and producing a male child is the status:

> I turned away, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what a woman wants a girl for her first born ? (14).

Even when she moves to Dr. Kenny for medical aid for having a male-child, she is motivated by the patriarchal ideology that a woman must have a son in her life. However, it is Dr. Kenny's Westernised liberal approach to life that makes a significant change in Rukmini's life. She starts to see life from a different angle and hence, Kamala Markandaya differs from most of the postcolonial writers because she presents an Englishman as an agent of positive changes in the mental set-up of a colonized subject.

No doubt Rukmini keeps her meeting with Kenny secret from Nathan, but it is not her fear or deceitfulness, which tempts her to do so, rather a calm appraisal of human nature, touched by the genuine conjugal love that she did not wish to upset Nathan in any way. Moreover, she develops a feeling of kinship with Dr. Kenny for the rest of her life, though she does never allow this relationship to infringe upon her marital integrity. In both the cases, she appears as an essentially Indian woman. In fact, the author does not really contrive to create a promiscuous situation between the two for that would be alien to their personalities, especially that of Rukmini's. When there is a vague rumour in the village about Rukmini and Kenny and Kunthi tries to blackmail her, we find that it is Rukmini's personality that acts as a feminist resistance.

When Ira, her eldest daughter, is brought back to her because 'she is a barren woman' (50), and even Nathan, the girl's father also supports the action of their son-in-law because he believes that " He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient" (Ibid), we again find Rukmini's submissive and yet strong assertion of disagreement with him :

> Not patient enough ... . Not patient like you, beloved (Ibid).

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? (Ibid).

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

> Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need, I will not hunger any more (99).

Here, her voice is like that of a radical feminist, claiming her right on her body. Rukmini even seems to support her:

> 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 (100).

Though here lies an undercurrent of frustration, yet it is a conscious denial on Rukmini's part of the patriarchal demands of obedience of the girls. Together with Ira, Rukmini also faces another problem boldly – the birth of Ira's albino child.

Rukmini is indeed a strong woman. Even dire poverty and cruel starvation do not dehumanize her. When her impatient sons are understandably affected by the disastrous consequences of drought, she is able to withstand the strain with remarkable forbearance. This spirit of forbearance is not stoicism as practiced in the West. It is significantly Indian way of life which she accepts, and it is for this acceptance that critics like Myles criticises her character as passive:

> In the character of Rukmini there is a steady progression from innocence to experience as also from rebellion to acceptance (Myles :2006 :117).

In order to prove her point of view Myles quotes the following words of Rukmini :

> Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as seasons of earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change ? (113).

Myles also mentions that even "the knowledge of her husband's extramarital relationship with Kunthi" is accepted by her as "onslaught of fate which can not be avoided" (Myles :2006 :117).

However, what Myles has failed to notice that in the novel Markandaya did never aim to portray Rukmini as a woman revolting only for her sex but as a real human being living in a particular situation and sharing its predicaments. No doubt, she accepts life as it comes, but that is not her defeat in any sense. She rather appears like the earth mother, continually regenerated and sustained by inner energy. For example, when her relationship with her husband is threatened by the discovery that he fathered another woman's sons, she neither strikes out at him nor crumbles. She rather casts off her dependence syndrome and raises herself:

> 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...(86-87 /Emphasis mine).

Here Rukmini's tolerance may appear as a weakness to the Western readers, but from another point of view, she has incredible strength with which she can really rise up after having such blows. No doubt, she accepts the traditional role of an Indian woman, but within that she can also nicely accommodate her other roles as a human being.

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 study 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, unassuming housewife, Roshan – the firebrand freedom fighter, and Mira – the narrator. Each of them is like a pilgrim on a journey, seeking answer to their questions on the meaning of life. All three have doubts and problems and have to cross many thresholds in their search for selfhood. 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 the crevice to appear, between one generation and the next (189).

Though better equipped with education and wealth than their counterparts in the earlier novel, self-fulfilment becomes a distant and unattainable goal to these women also.

Premala epitomises the traditional concept of upper-class women. Hailing from a conservative Hindu family, she tries to remould herself to her husband's modern, anglicized tastes. But "though she tried desperately, she plainly found it difficult to adapt herself to him"(37). She sacrifices all her aspirations, freedom and happiness, yet she fails to bridge the cultural gap between herself and Kit, her husband . Mira, her sister-in-law, feels sorry for her:

> If she had not loved Kit so much, she would not have tried so much to please him (97).

Moreover, though Kit himself has an extramarital relationship with an English lady, he suspects that his wife has an illicit affair with his stepbrother, 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. Her unfulfilled maternal feelings also find an outlet in nurturing an orphan child. By this way 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: 1985:440). 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 (154).

Hence, she really rises from the state of bewilderment and vulnerability of the traditional Indian Women confronting a culture in flux. Despite her being a victim, she shows a streak of inner strength in her attempt at saving the school on fire risking her own life.

Traditional Indian society really does not leave much scope for a woman to transcend the role boundaries and yet Roshan Merchant withstands the conflicting social factors and seeks independence more assertively than Premala. The most striking and autonomous among Markandaya's heroines, she bestows her outstanding qualities than her less fortunate sisters around her. From a columnist she becomes the owner of the paper she is writing for. Her magnetic dynamism appeals even to the conventional Premala. Her quest for identity and autonomy cannot be separated from her desire for national

independence. Though she is not an advocate of terrorism, she does not restrain from vouching a sound alibi for Gobind. No other woman in her place would definitely have sworn in the court that he had spent the night in question with her. With her simplicity, calm and composure, she can even control a violent mob. Her foreign education does not distance her from her people, but instills in them the need for personal as well as national freedom. She becomes a role model for other women in the novel and is easily followed by Mira, Anusuya, Vasantha, Mohini, Sorojini 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 (71).

Apart from Premala and Roshan, Markandaya portrays another educated woman engaged in the war between tradition and modernity, romanticism and relation, and aspiration for personal freedom and patriotism in Mira. Her rich Hindu background and exposure to Western life-style equip her with the knowledge to select the best from both Indian and British culture. Like her pro-British and anti-British brothers, she too is torn between her passionate love for the English official Richard and her patriotism. Despite their deep and lasting love for each other, she is mature enough to understand the hindrance to their union. It is a love between two individuals who happen to belong to two different races. The rigidity and orthodoxy of her own society help her to understand the conventions of her caste. When Roshan rises above the narrow confines of family and society, Mira finds it hard to seek private happiness at the cost of patriotism. She says to Richard quite clearly:

> You belong to one side – if you don't, you belong to the other (147).

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 was our life, by our own choice, even if one were so minded, by destiny. We created it as much as it 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 (192).

Mira's return to her root 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. Neither as active as Roshan, nor as submissive as Premala, she has the true powers of resilience and indomitable faith, which will enable her to survive, if not win outright in the battle for life.

In Possession (1963), however, Markandaya portrays the character of Lady Caroline Bell as diametrically opposed to the women of all her earlier novels. She really belongs to an altogether different category in the whole canvas of Markandaya's fiction, created probably out of the novelist's opposition to the patriarchal tradition as also of her intention of giving an allegorical grab to a political theme of British domination of India (Iyengar: 1984:151). Consequently, Caroline turns to be a monstrous creation of a woman whose instinct and ambition to possess – living beings as well as lifeless objects – become the main concern of her life. Her nature and

activities give an impression that by inverting the sex-roles Markandaya has thrust the traits of a patriarchal male tyrant into Caroline's personality. Moreover, if Caroline possesses Valmiki by money and strength, Anusuya does the same by her kindness and sympathetic understanding, and Ellie and Annabel by their youthful charms. Hence, in the novel, it is a woman's world in which the male is manipulated, purchased, commanded and exploited to the utmost. Of all the women characters in the novel, Caroline is the model of anti-patriarchal stance, and her traits are associated with the male members in a patriarchal construct. She possesses none of the feminine traits, such as "sweetness, modesty, subservient and humility". On the contrary, she is active and victor, domineering and arrogant. It is rather Valmiki, who is sweet, modest, subservient and humble. In the opinion of Raman Selden, it is not the "waiting ovum" of Caroline that lacks identity and is given by Valmiki "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: 131 – 132).

Selden points out five areas in which woman under patriarchal value system is considered inferior to man. They are: (1) biology (2) experience, (3) discourse, (4) the unconscious, and (5) social and economic condition. But, in the novel, Markandaya has made Caroline quite confident and biologically powerful in her capability of possessing Valmiki. Successfully outwitting others, she puts "her arm round the boy, as it were taking possession of him in full view of his family" (20) implying her victory over the resisting parents, the headman, the Swamy – the authority figures of this patriarchal society. Her act of taking other possessions – a Palmyra fan, a flywhisk and some cheroots – symbolically suggests that for her no differences exist between living beings and a lifeless object. Moreover, after taking possession of Val, she employs her full powers by denying him the freedom, which a man enjoys in a patriarchal society as his birthright. Not only Valmiki, but also the Swamy, who

for Valmiki was the father, the mother and the friend, is 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. Their relationship is based on love, while Caroline's on her craze of possession, which naturally gets a jolt when Valmiki begins to like Ellie, though she hopes that his temporary affair with Ellie might be cured in the same way she had managed to cure the feeling of his homesickness by forging a letter from the Swamy, Anusuya comments on the nature of her relationship to Val:

> "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 (160).

Even when Annabel begins to dance with Valmiki, Caroline regrets teaching him this art because it benefits "a rival" and terminates the party. In her subsequent parties, Annabel does not find a place. Anusuya tells Annabel that Caroline feels Valmiki belongs to her and she cannot let him go:

> People don't easily give up what they think are their possessions (198).

We find that in order to maintain relations with Annabel without hurting Caroline, Valmiki thinks of maintaining relations with both: during nights, it is Caroline and Valmiki; by day, it is Valmiki and Annabel. Here the male

member is under the possession of two women – an inversion of the Draupadi situation.

Hence, Uma Parameswaram comments upon Caroline's character appropriately:

> Lady Caroline Bell is an autocrat, typical of the British Raj in India. She sets about getting possession of Val 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 opinion he gains more than he loses (Texas Quarterly, 11,2, 1968:239).

Even when Valmiki succeeds in extricating himself from her tentacles and departs to 'wilderness', she considers it "a waste" (228). 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 (232).

Anusuya, the narrator is also a woman as possessor 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 from 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: 64).

Anusuya is really capable of decent 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 necessarily 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. Hence, these women characters have really evolved a long way from the likes of Rukmini or Premala. And such a feminine emancipation is emphasised by Markandaya in her later novels also. In Golden Honeycomb (1977), Mohini, the commoner beloved of the King, in spite of having promiscuous relationship with him, refuses to marry him. She states emphatically:

I don't want to be your queen; I want to be free (32).

Hence, Shantha Krishnaswamy is quite right when she says that Markandaya's novels are "metaphorical elongations of the basic fact of awakening feminine consciousness" (1984:345). There is, in fact, a shift in her 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 on to land to collapse gasping upon the beach," to quote a passage from Possession (99). Of course, this simile pictures the women as unhappy in the transition and that is mainly because of the ambivalence in the novelist's attitude, caught in the tenuous struggle between tradition and modernity. However, the analysis of the novels in this chapter clearly reveals that there is a new awareness of fulfilment of feminine identities as a social, emotional and spiritual context, as represented by characters like Mira, Roshan and Anusuya. In Markandaya's novels, there is always a

reassessment of what the woman in the Indian cultural context aspires to be. However, at the same time Markandaya does not want her characters to part with the past and their ancient heritage. Thus there is a fundamental dualism in her novels: she tries to criticize the tradition, which she has inherited and, at the same time, in a sense, also tries to renew it.