

TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S SELECT NOVELS

K. Abirami,

Ph.d Research Scholar (Part Time),
Department of English,
Kandaswami Kandar's College,
Paramathi velur, Namakkal(dt),Tamilnadu.

Dr. M. Shameem,

Assistant Professor of English,
Kandaswami Kandar's College,
Paramathi velur, Namakkal(dt),Tamilnadu

Abstract

Conflict between Tradition and Modernity exhibits the tension between traditional and modern ways of life. Kamala Markandaya has also presented the evil effects of industrialization upon rural beings. The tension between tradition and modernity, entering of industrialization is presented in her works and the novelist's bias is towards tradition. Kamala Markandaya reveals the age-old tradition of India undergoing the modern changes exercised by the western civilization. Nectar in a Sieve presents the devastating assault of industrialization on the rural society. Through the character, Rukmani, Markandaya describes the disadvantages of industrialization upon the placid rhythm and calm beauty of a village which is symbolic of rural India. The disasters that fall upon the peasants are the result of the combined impersonal forces of nature and industrialization.

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Industrialization, civilization

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya shows life of south Indian as traditional, conservative, and rural aspects, with convincing sincerity and fascinating power. Nectar in a Sieve has become the most remarkable novel of the novelist because of its well-constructed. Kamala Markandaya has recorded the changes in traditional rural Indian society under the impact of modernity in Nectar in a Sieve. This chapter analyses to find out which is superior to the other or whether both have to coexist in the modern world or whether one can be given up for the sake of other or both are indispensable to each other and whether those who are modern in their way of life have moral right to change those who are traditional into modernity in a scientifically advanced society.

Conflict between Tradition and Modernity

Kamala Markandaya in her fifth novel *A Handful of Rice*, has once again dealt with the economic problem as in her very first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*. This time, the theme revolves around urban poverty, not rural poverty. Ravi the protagonist starts where Rukmini leaves off in *Nectar in a Sieve* in the desperate struggle for existence. Perhaps he is a transformation of Murugan whose whereabouts are lost in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Ravi is shown to be a rebellious and strong-willed youth who is disgusted with poverty in his village and comes to town to seek a new and better life. With this kind of new change in opting for a better living, Meenakshi Mukherjee says: "the modern Indian is torn in a conflict between two kinds of values, supremacy of social hierarchy and emergence of the individual. Sometimes the conflict neatly resolves into two issues, duty to the family and personal fulfilment. The fulfilment of oneself, however desirable a goal according to the individualistic ideals of Western society, has always been alien to Indian tradition, especially when it is achieved at the cost of duty to the family".

If economic inequity in the countryside forms the theme of *Nectar in a Sieve*, it is economic inequity in the metropolitan town of Madras which is depicted by Markandaya in *A Handful of Rice*. This is comparable to Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels - *So Many Hungers* and *He who Rides a Tiger* where, a typical kind of theme is dealt with, wherein the poor man suffers due to drought and famine, whereas the hoarders and black marketers prosper at the cost of the down-trodden. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* sketches through "the fringes of the problem of hunger". R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*. Even the memory of his village is disgusting to him. As Ravi recollects it:

The way one was always poor and everyone we know was always poor too, the desire -- the constant nibbling desire -- to have a second helping of food -- to know one never would.' (p.49)

He is equally sickened by the mentality of people: "the whole-sale acceptance of life as a culture for the breeding of suffering. (p.57)

Ravi thus, has nothing pleasant to remember of his village. Escaping the poverty and the struggle for existence in this village, Ravi comes to town (Madras) with a hope for a better living. Regarding the prevailing conditions in Madras during 1960's, Srinivasa Iyengar writes in connection with the novel *A Handful of Rice*, the significance of the title of the novel can be grasped only by the people who have witnessed the spiraling of grain prices in India", because of the inefficiency of the government which could not keep its "pledge to provide rice for the poor at pleasure for a rupee".

Ravi is shown coping with such an acute problem struggling hard to earn for a handful of rice for himself and his family. Ravi is portrayed as a normal human being with the natural instincts of a man under the given situations. He is shown to have a conscience, which pricks him when he tends to go astray. But fate rules him and he faces his lot with a helpless protest. Ravi is shown to be one of the poor English-educated youngsters who flock to the city in search of jobs. He is a literate, but his literacy is not enough to get a good job of his choice. His father a poor peasant was proud and dreamt of his learning "as a key to the power of earning which was the broad base of a man's pride" (pp.26-27).

His village house is all left behind him of which he is sick. His roots are in the village from which he moves away, to get a hold in the town in the hope of acquiring a job. It is very difficult for anybody to come to a place where one has to search for a morsel of food at every step and lead an uncertain life, trying to grab any and every straw of hope that seeing to bring

luck to one's self. Such is the state of Ravi when he comes to town to face the difficulties of a total stranger, leaving his warm and protective home in the village, abandoning it though, unable to bear the dire poverty and its related suffering. His venture to the town with a dream of getting decent employment remains just a dream, a wish, a hope. That is how, on coming to the city, he is lost and struggles hard to get a foothold.

Though the cities, like the villages, have nothing to offer to, poor people like Ravi, he continued to live with an illusion that one day, he could get what he wanted, become what he aspired to, and with this false notion he continued to live in the city. In order to save himself from starvation, he joins Damodar and takes part in the evils of the underworld - In the words of Prof. K.K. Srinivasa Iyengar, "the insensitiveness of the affluent, their mania for conspicuous consumption, their hardness of heart; the exploitation of small fist1 by big, the worker by the capitalist, the Apu's world by the Big Shops in Mount Road; and the infernal success of the bootlegger, the black-marketer, the drug-peddler at the cost of the poor, the down and out, the desperate.

The innocence of the village vanishes in Ravi, once he tastes life in full in the city dwelling. Despite his struggle for existence in the city, Ravi builds up an everlasting bond with the Apu family by marrying Apu's daughter Nalini who is a replica of a serene chaste beauty, who thereby attracts Ravi by her simple and innocent poise and brings in, a kind of reformation in him. He changes for good for her sake and joins his father-in-law; in his trade of tailoring around settles for a simple, yet contented living, happy to be in his wife's company. He regards his wife very much and respects her values. When times are hard and he is unable to bear the pressures of the financial stress in the family especially after the demise of his father in- law, he looks back for his wife's moral support. He waves in any time-either to join Damodar once again and lead a life of comfort and luxury or to go on, in the never-ending struggle for a "*Handful of Rice*".

It is his wife's strong support that makes him say 'No' to the temptations that arise in him. His inner consciousness wins always, as a result. Commenting on Ravi's state of mind, K.Venkata Reddy writes, "Kamala Markandaya presents Ravi's moral dilemma convincingly. Caught between two values, "the one almost dead and the other powerless to be born", Ravi is faced with an impossible choice. While it is true that Ravi has a choice, it is also true that free will in this situation operates morally only in a life-denying way.

Ravi always feels that he and his family are missing something in life – the unattainable luxuries that he sees people life higher class enjoy. The fact that the aristocratic, privileged families enjoy and live in comfort, takes him feel that he is responsible for that as, he being the bread-winner, is unable to provide them. It is totally against society, which is often referred to as 'they', 'them' or 'people' (p.231)

With regard to this Margaret Joseph writes, "He is destroyed by a false society, represented by the "people" who think he has no feelings, who give him no privacy, who pin him down, actually and metaphorically, who give orders, which have money. His harsh treatment of Nalini and his interest with his mother-ill-law are in-direct results of his frustrated rage against society. Ravi, due to ill-luck and his own doing partly proves to be a failure in life. His ego and pride come in the way of receiving offers from the rich memsahibs who he feels, "don't seem to me as a man no feelings (p.231), he thought,

As if you had no feelings either. They'd shred you to pieces right in front of you as if you weren't there, the feeling part of you. And that went for all of them, the big memsahibs down to the would-be

memsahibs' petty little squirts like this one who was a petty tailor's wife: all of them, who called themselves respectable and bamboozled you into falling down in worship"(p.50)

Life becomes very difficult for Ravi after his father-in-law's demise as he should be the total responsibility; It is beyond his means to meet the growing needs of the family with his meager income, leading to the break-up of the once joint family.

The death of his little son due to his negligence in calling the doctor on time adds to his misery and his wife's silent rejection, which drives him mad in fury and in his growing frustration, shows his worst self on his wife, for whose sake he had resolved and reformed:

For her, he resolved, everything would be different, he would be different. No act of his should sully the wholesome quality he discerned in her, a kind of vulnerable purity that he wanted to enclose and guard, feeling himself cleansed and enriched by it.
(p.33)

His wife whom he kept on a high pedestal was his motivation in all his endeavour but when he could not succeed in maintaining it, he blared the society, "I blame the society Guilty of casual murder.
(p.231)

As Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar comments, "caught between the pull of the old tradition that all but strangled him and the pull of the new immorality that attracts as well as frightens him, Ravi lurches now this side now the other side, and has the worst of both". The gradual descent in his income due to his own lack of business tactics push him down in every way, landing him in debts. On such occasions he is found to oscillate between the two worlds of Damodar and Nalini - one of mean pleasures, easy money and crooked means of living; the other, a simple, plain, happy and healthy living which demands decency and honesty. Damodar represents the modern way of achieving things by any means while Nalini stands for traditional and ethical values which bind her husband to her, in spite of a few weak moments.

When Nalini notices that her husband comes home drunk one night, she chides him: You are getting high and mighty, putting yourself on a level with high-class folk ... why can't you be content with what we have? "Ravi retorts in anger: "Because I want more, I want thorn. I want a bed.... They all have beds, the people we slave for, do you know that? Disappointed with her husband, Nalini says: "..... you've been corrupted ... you go into all these big houses, see all these things, it gives you irresponsible ideas". The simple, contented soul in Nalini makes her speak: Ordinary folk like us can never belike them. He further argues,

Ravi dreams, to live like the rich, "without worry, without wanting, every need and craving satisfied" (p.76)

When he compares himself with them, he feels curling up within, grown smaller, even in his own eyes.... cattle in the eyes of the world"(p.25)

Losing balance in himself, allowing the animal instinct in him to rule him, he finds vent to his feelings of lust on his mother-in-law who, he notices had been cherishing a secret desire for him. He therefore, totally degrades himself to the lowest of the steps of faith and love. It is with such background and 'growth' of Ravi in mind that K. Radha in her article writes: "The hero of A Handful of Rice is a victim of hunger and anger, both of which make his life a long struggle. Unfortunately, he is a "failure with a conscience" like Gerald Middleton, the hero of Angus Wilson's Anglo-Saxon attitude.

Kamala Markandaya's presentation of the moral dilemma playing in Ravi's mind is very effective. He is always caught between two values, 'the one almost dead and the other powerless to be born'. As K. Venkata Reddy says that the tragic sense in *A Handful of Rice* is born not of the conflict between tradition and modernity as in *A Silence of Desire* or between East and West as in *Some Inner fury*, but of frightening dilemma of the human conscience itself, in the choice, between right and wrong. It is this struggle in Ravi's conscience that constitutes the kernel of the novel. His active conscience has to choose between penurious respectability and affluent disrespectability. He wants to be honest but, at the same time, he realizes that honesty buys no rice and pays no bills,

It is this constant pricking of Ravi's conscience that constitutes the core of the novel. His mind always oscillates between the right and the wrong -- his inner conscience and the temptations of the evil world around. As Margaret Joseph puts it, in this dichotomy between idea and fact, in the impossibility or bridging the gap between desire and honest fulfilment lays the essence of the tragic in Ravi's life.

Ravi is a tragic character in contemporary context and under evolving contemporary social conditions. Quoting R. Sewall in *The Vision of Tragedy*, D. K. Venkata Reddy says that the new tragic hero does not have a clear-cut opponent like a human being. The opponent is replaced by an immoral society and its false values with which the hero has to contend. Ravi, as a new tragic hero, knows fully well that what might be would be if you were prepared to do this, and this, and this.

The real tragedy of Ravi is that his enemy is not tangible and cannot be crushed or demolished. It is around him and entangles him in its octopus-like arms -- respectability, indifference and amorality which do not pay. This dimension of his tragedy is again noted by Margaret Joseph, He does not have a clear-cut opponent like a human being; it may be just society and its values with which he has to be contending.

Throughout the novel, we find that Ravi is submerged in existential problems. His life from birth to the close of the novel is a prolonged search for a better living. Ravi is in conflict when he is put in a fix to choose the path of determining or the other -- that of a noble, virtuous one. He gives in to the better of the two, for the sake of his lady love Nalini whom he marries and shoulders a greater responsibility, that of a house-holder, than that of a carefree vagabond. *A Handful of Rice* represents Markandaya's fictional world in full.

It reveals an Indian caught in the vortex of change, a change from the rural society deeply rooted in tradition to the machine-based materialistic urban society. And, like all her novels, it derives its "aesthetic validity from the inter-locked polarities of religion and science, possession and renunciation, empiricism and transcendentalism" As Kai Nicholson rightly points out, in *A handful of rice*, Markandaya "uses the village as a pretext for her hero, Ravi, to flee the countryside and plunge, into the turmoil of urban life". The shift is not only from "rural economics" to "urban economics" but also from autobiographical narrative method to the omniscient point of view.

Thus, Kamala Markandaya portrays her women characters in every novel of hers in an assertive manner, makes their presence felt at every important juncture. Her concern for feminine problems is explicitly expressed. "The novels of Kamala Markandaya, writes P. Geetha, "also express her feminist moral concern through the detailed examination of sexual and familial relationships. She stresses the need to believe in the moral superiority of women in upholding the sanctity of the family." And Kamala Markandaya has put forth her ideas about feminine stability and strength to uphold the familial ties. But *Two Virgins* seems to be different in conveying the

most delicate issues of sexual taboos in our society. The theme is good but the conveying mode is blunt and crude, bordering at times on vulgarity.

Conclusion:

This study catches various aspects of radicalism, Conflict between Tradition and Modernity Gender discrimination and Men's relationships with women were examined and the cultural life of Kamala Markandaya novels was undeveloped, which was first discussed. This research also learns Kamala Markandaya rightly describes how life depends on each other. So Kamala Markandaya develops facts of the circle of life and is presented by her numerous novels, which have been discussed here. It reveals the cultural representation of Indian village life by Kamala Markandaya is the basis of her popularity. Markandaya has adequately addressed almost all of the essential aspects of human life through the broad spectrum of her novels. Having her plays and main themes as a base, one has to seek to assess their importance in the world of today. The binding link that takes place between each of the social issues; for example, inhumanity causes inequality.

References

1. H.M. Williams, "Victims and Virgins: Some Characters in Markandaya's Novels." Perspective on Kamala Markandaya ed. Madhusudan Prasad (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984), 28.
2. The Fictional Epic on Indian Life-A Study in Theme and Technique of "Nectar in a Sieve", Perspective on Kamala Markandaya ed. Madhusudan Prasad (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984), 99.
3. K. Radha, "The Hunger and Anger of Ravi in Kamala Markandaya's A Handful of Rice", The Indian Journal of English Studies, Vol. XXX, 1991-92: 14.
4. A Critical Study: "Soulful East and Ratiocinative West," Indian Novel in English (1977), 14.
5. "Kamala Markandaya: Sovereignty, Nurturance and the Sisterhood of Man" The Woman in Indian Fiction in English, 167.