



Man –Woman Relationship in the Select Novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandeya

KEYWORDS

Man-woman relationship, self –denial, self – assertion, self –negation, self –affirmation.

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ABSTRACT

A Comparative Study of Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandeya endeavours to examine the man-woman relationship as depicted in the selected novels and also analyzes the ways the protagonists have adopted to overcome the problems of their lives. A comparative study of the two novelists provides a fascinating and rewarding experience. Anita Desai and Kamala Markandeya are the two great artists in the realm of English fiction. However, except for an article or two, not many studies have attempted a comparative analysis of married Indian women in the novels of these two writers. They are ready for sacrificing themselves. They move from self -denial to self – assertion and from self -negation to self -affirmation. A large number of critical articles and some full length studies with regard to the two writers have appeared individually. This study is an attempt to analyze various women characters against the background of important aspects of woman's life – marriage, migration, motherhood and midlife. Hence, this paper seeks to examine the portrayal of women by these two contemporary Indian women novelists.

A critical and comparative study of women characters and family as portrayed by Anita Desai and Kamala Markandeya need preliminary discussions of the major prevailing conditions that had their corresponding impact on these writers. Anita Desai is regarded as the first Indian author writing in English who addresses the feminine theme, female condition and their relationship with men and their inner feelings, seriously focusing on the condition of women in India. She was unlike Kamala Markandeya who dealt with the external, social and political circumstances of their female characters. On the contrary, Anita Desai concentrates on the exploitation; of the inner recess and psychological condition of the oppressed heroines.

Marital discord, the conflict in married life, is as old as the institution of marriage itself, although it has varied in degrees from time to time and from person to person. In the pre-industrial era, men and women who came together in marriage shared cultural values, mutual commitment, trust and faith which subordinated the interests of the individuals resulting in the smooth relationship of the family. There were tensions and maladjustments in their marital relationship too, but the moral and religious convictions, economic dependence and the fear of social disapproval kept them together. "Marital discord represents a breakdown in the consensus and co-operation of the married couples. Usually, marital discord originates when rivalry develops between the partners by internal and external manifestations like separation, physical violence and vituperation. They drift apart when they are unable to sort-out their problems which result in the strain and tension in their relationship."

The suffering of Indian women, marital disharmony, existentialism, anger, dual tradition all find a place in the novels of Anita Desai. She has given a great deal of contribution in bringing forth light of women and has shown a glimpses into the world's heart which had laid concealed from outer world. In one form or another, the theme of marital discord dominates the contemporary fiction, may it be of British, American or Indian origin. A large number

of critical articles and some full length studies with regard to the two writers have appeared individually. However, except for an article or two, not many studies have attempted a comparative analysis of married Indian women in the novels of these two writers. They are ready for sacrificing themselves. They move from self -denial to self – assertion and from self -negation to self -affirmation. Hence, this study seeks to examine the portrayal of married women by these two contemporary Indian women novelists. The disillusionment, the frustration, the despair, the dilemma, the longing, and the hopelessness of the female world can best be seen from such women writers.

What Ruskin said about Shakespeare that 'he has no heroes but heroines,' is quite true in case of Kamala Markandeya, we can say that "She has no heroes but only heroines". Her woman characters are peculiarly memorable: Rukmani, Mira, Caroline Bell, Saroja and Lalitha. She had a particular interest in analyzing women characters and suggesting, the unusual poignancy of their fate. In her most of the novels the narrators are likely to be female and, if not women, the narrative will present a woman's perception in the main. It shows the value of women in the society as well in the works of Kamala Markandeya.

Kamala Markandeya's most famous work, 'Nectar in a Sieve', exemplifies this statement. Ravi is a village son who has left his desolate, destitute home for the promise of the city. There he falls into the company of similarly rootless young men, presided over by the wily city boy, Damodar, who appears fitfully through the book as a seducer to criminal and get-rich-quick schemes which Damodar is clever enough to survive and thrive by. By a chance misdeed, Ravi becomes acquainted with the tailor Apu and his family; Apu's daughter Nalini wins his heart and brings him from the streets into the already crowded household, first as Apu's apprentice, then his son-in-law.

Rukmani in 'Nectar in a Sieve' represents an eternal, universal mother figure bound by love and affection to hearth and home. Her family also supports her in her bat-

tle against her sufferings but many of the members of her family die during this struggle for survival. Such a human spirit sends a powerful message that life needs to be taken as it is but one must not give in to adversities easily. It conveys the message that God helps those who help themselves. Rukmani presents to us a heart-rending tragedy of peasantry in India suffering immense loss. Her character has been sketched in such a way that brings out a sensitive woman in her – someone who is doomed to live an unhappy married life due to the tyranny of custom – a person dehumanized by society, trying to endure all her troubles.

Despite all this, she shows her spirit that is as strong as steel but quite humane. Her human spirit ensures that she endure starvation, remain employed even in the face of industrialization, and refuse to succumb to the vagaries of life. This seems to epitomize the power of hope and the willingness to adapt, to change, sticks to family values; endure conflicts between the traditional and the modern etc. Even Ira, like her mother Rukmani, is also able to survive against the difficulties that await her in the course of her life. In fact, she was born as an unwelcome child to her parents. Both Rukmani and Nathan are unhappy because they wanted a son but were blessed with a girl child. Nathan wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on land, not a daughter who would take a dowry with her and leave nothing but a memory behind.

Despite this truth, Ira grows up quite fast and when she is thirteen years old, Rukmani starts thinking of her marriage. Rukmani and Nathan impose a lot of restrictions on her and Ira is bewildered by it all. She is unable to understand the reason for the curtailment of her freedom but does not complain even once.

When she is fourteen years old, her parents decide to marry her away and manage to find a boy who would not ask for a dowry of more than one hundred rupees. Motherhood eludes Ira for two years after her marriage and she is denounced by her in-laws as a barren woman and is sent back to her parental home. But by staying at her parent's home she becomes great helpful to her parents.

'A Handful of Rice' is a lesson for the youth who blindly rush to the cities to earn their living. She shows that if there is nothing to offer to the young men in the villages, even the cities too have nothing in their store for them. The peasants, with their meagre education get trapped into the urban evils. Those who succumb to the evil practices like that of Damodar, do get name, fame and fortune but not a family life. On the contrary, those like the protagonist Ravi who stick to honesty do get an average, though not happy, family life but do not get name, fame and money. In the climax of the novel, Kamala Markandaya takes her protagonist to the highest fatal moment of his life. Ravi joins the mob to get rice or grain, but coming back to his conscience, later, clearly shows that though poverty makes him lose his temper for the time being his conscience remains intact. Though most of the poor lose their grim battle against poverty they do not lose their conscience. Kamala Markandaya makes the readers aware of the exploitation of the laborers but she does not give mere superficial description. She peeps deep into the human psyche.

Anita Desai in most of her novels has tried to focus the family life, its problems, the reason behind the estrangement of the women, lack of warmth in marital bond. In

'Cry, the Peacock', she reveals this. Maya, the protagonist who in her father's abode was very happy; everything was okay but her destiny turns out to be worst, when she had to marry Gautama, middle-aged lawyer who never probes into the mind of Maya. Her desire to be loved and accompanied by her husband was tremendous—"Because when you are away from me, I want you"

The communication gap between the two and the sense of alienation is distinct. Anita Desai, through Maya voices the tragic, desolate condition of most women in India. Later it is seen she becomes a psychopath and kills her husband and she herself commits suicide. There was no way left out. Anita Desai has deep knowledge of tensions between the family members, fragile relationship of siblings which is seen in "Clear Light of Day", between Tara and Bimla, of course later realization comes to make them understand that familial bondage is indispensable.

In "Fasting and Feasting", Anita Desai shows the strong patriarch, craving for emotional needs by children, disharmony, etc. Uma, the protagonist undergoes tortures and humiliations and was misbehaved by the parents. Her position in the house is reduced to that of a servant. Uma does all the work.

"As long as they can do that, they themselves feel busy and occupied".

As one moves into Anita Desai, it can be found that she aptly portrays her society; familial bond, plight of women, communication gap, emotional needs seeking by children. Like 'Papa' in Anita Desai's "Fasting and Feasting", he is a stronger father, a strict one who bullies his wife and children. Even he has beaten his wife during her pregnancy. Kambili, the protagonist is too scared at his presence.

The passivity of the mothers in both the novelists is well noticed. They cannot raise their hands for the protection of their children. Like Tara and Bimla in Anita Desai's "Clear Light of Day", alienation towards one another and the wide gap of communication is observed, especially in women. "Bye, Bye Black bird" is Anita Desai's third novel. Alienation at different levels forms the theme of the novel. It explores the lives of the outsiders seeking to forge a new identity in alien society. Anita Desai succeeds in her pattern when she shows a character in action. Her revelation of the unconscious threads of human mind gives the structural unity to the novel. She reveals the intense of longing of the exiled hero's emotion towards his native land. Adit comes to England and marries an English lady Sarah. Having a job and wife, he leads a happy life there. After sometime Adit's friend Dev comes to England for higher education but he does not like the pomp and show of England. Like the other novels of Anita Desai, "Bye, Bye Blackbird" exhibit the living style of England.

Anita Desai's "Bye, Bye black bird" is mainly concerned with the varied human love-hate relationship. Adit from the beginning of the novel develops attachment to the western way of life, especially to England; but while living in England he shows his repulsion towards the way of European life and particularly of England. Dev comes to England only for his education. As a matter of fact Dev observes the basic distinction of social and educational factors between the east and the west. Dev becomes eager to be an England returned teacher at the same time shows his abhorrence hate to the social system of England. Adit tries to be judicious to the country he inhabits to the

country and he exists for his future.

Rukmani is not simply a village girl, a loving and devoted wife and a sacrificing mother. She transcends these limited physical identities to represent the universal mother figure. She is not confined to any particular class, creed or convention. She is not an educated woman but she is literate and aware. She has been taught to read and write by her father and this accomplishment invites the derision of the womenfolk in the village, where she settles down after her marriage. She is conceived as the encompassing, enduring, devoted, sacrificing, suffering, loving and forgiving mother figure. She is the eternal mother. Her most prominent feature is her serenity and sense of balance in direst situations. She has no illusion in life and is not disturbed by any desire or longing. Rukmani has a progressive and liberal approach to the problems of life.

When she discovers that she has some cynic problem, she meets her mother's doctor Kennington--called Kenny. This English doctor helps her out of her physical unfitness, cures her inability to give birth after the first issue, and lifts away her great fear and anxiety. She develops a feeling of kinship with him for the rest of her life. He finds in her that vibration of life. That intimacy of which he has been deprived in his own family circle is the root cause of his agony. He is attracted to her warmth, her simplicity. Their friendship deepens in the course of years. Deep in their hearts they are full of love, gratitude and esteem for each other. She does not, however, choose to disclose the truth to her husband because she feels he may feel hurt in some way. She never wanted to upset Nathan.

Misfortunes cross her path again and again; poverty and starvation do not dehumanize her. Calamities of the flood bring major attack of starvation and sorrow. Rukmani does not show extreme emotional outburst. But deep inside, she is highly disturbed and depressed, and suffers for her loved ones. She absorbs all misfortunes that come her way. She has extreme tenacity for life and she works her way out. Rukmani also suffers for Ira, her daughter, when she returns home rejected by her husband on account of her childlessness. Rukmani has known the torment, the agony from her own experience. She once again approaches Kenny.

Nathan and Rukmani show remarkable forbearance when their impatient sons are affected by their disastrous consequences of drought. It is not in her nature to impose her choice, her opinion over them. She accepts their choice and adjusts herself to the change her future beings. Premala in 'Some Inner Fury' is a representative of Kamala Markandaya's feminist view of life. Premala, brought up in the conventional Hindu tradition, is married to the Westernized Kit. What Premala wants out of life is apparently so different from what Kit wants her to be. Kit has a distaste of the Indian way of life, particularly in the area of family relationships; this turns him into a bully and a sadist. His later negligence of Premala can be rationalized as a desperate attempt to evoke response but it is actually an expression of his disenchantment and regret. Under these circumstances, Premala's earnest attempts to adjust herself to her husband fail. Once she fails as a traditional wife, Premala decides to go her way. She takes up an orphan to occupy herself even though Kit detests this. Premala makes a heroic attempt to please her husband and master, and tries to rise to the traditional standard. At the same time she also puts up a heroic struggle between her instinctual individual urge and demands of the group. That

is the move of the Indian woman towards liberation.

The novels of Kamala Markandaya 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. In novels such as "A Handful of Rice" and even in "Nectar in a Sieve", she presents the prohibition against loose living lest the purity of women and the stability of the home be endangered. In 'Nectar in a Sieve' when Ira becomes a prostitute, driven to it by poverty, Rukmani operates as a restrictive force.

In most of the novels, Kamala Markandaya, as a woman writer uses her text, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her emphatic identification with her character. Nearly all of Kamala Markandaya's women characters exhibit a positive and optimistic outlook on life and emerge even stronger than their male counterparts emerge. By exercising their own free will, exhibiting their own self, they get fulfillment and recognition in life. It is through the technique of depicting women through male point of view, which is innovative, that Kamala Markandaya has used. She makes her male characters speak so that their comments and views may reveal the facts about woman.

In "Some Inner Fury", the feminist novelist refers to the silent barriers against women. "There is a tradition, perhaps not only in India that women should not be worried, that the best way to ensure this is to keep them as far as possible in ignorance ... Certain domains belong to men alone, and Indian women learn early not to encroach." In her writings Kamala Markandaya shows signs of profound influence of a feminist school of writing. In Kamala Markandaya's wide repertoire of women characters ranging from the harassed, victimized peasant women to the princesses we discern the plight of the Indian woman crippled by her sex, society and economic condition.

In an age of development and flux in every field one cannot easily ignore half the population. Indian writers in English have also come out of their cocoons of 'non-attachment' and 'non-involvement' and have started acknowledging the status of the Indian woman in a male dominated society. The concept of Indian womanhood is as divergent as the country itself and has undergone drastic and dramatic changes from era to era. India has travelled from her glorious past to degeneration, from spiritual ascendancy to communal clashes, from captivity to independence, from agrarian revolution to cyber technology. The women of India reflect of the respective society they live in.

Surveying the history and vicissitudes of the status of Indian women one observes that women once enjoyed considerable honour, freedom and privileges in both private and public fields. But with the centuries rolling by the situation changed adversely for women.

Indian womanhood has "to be explored, experienced, and understood in its entire vicissitudes, multiplicities, contradictions and complexities". Indian woman's journey from the cradle to the tomb passes through different stages, playing familial roles. Yet she remains an enigma. Misfortunes, loss and societal sanctions restrict her freedom but they can never destroy the spirit within. Literature as well as the society around us, reinforces the image of the Indian woman as Pativrata, the paragon of all virtues. Yet

the same society does not chastise a husband for marital disloyalty. Rukmani is shocked to learn about the infidelity of Nathan. "Disbelief first, disillusionment, anger, reproach, pain, to find out after so many years, in such a cruel way". The callousness with which he asserts himself as the father of Kunthi's sons is unbearable to her. Neither does he hesitate to rob her of rice during famine to provide for Kunthi.

Kamala Markandaya's novel "Some Inner Fury" is entirely different from "Nectar in a Sieve". Even when a woman is not biologically a mother, she can function as one emotionally. As a young girl Ira was a surrogate mother to her brothers. When her youngest brother is born "Ira's feminine instinct of nurturance takes precedence over hurt, sorrow and resentment. She becomes a "harlot," a "common strumpet" not to quench any burning fire in her body but to feed her ailing brother. A strange and bewildering change comes over her. She ceases to be a child "to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination". She defies society, but fails to give life to her brother. What she gets in return is an illegitimate albino child. Physical or mental aberrations of an offspring cannot annihilate the innate love and understanding of a mother. Unperturbed, Ira accepts proudly her child's 'fairness.' Her bearing astounded and even awed the fault-finders.

In her novel "Some Inner Fury", Kamala Markandaya begins to question beliefs when her brother Kit returns from Oxford bringing with him a new lifestyle and his friend Richard. Mira's love for Richard grows as the country's agitation against the British gains intensity. Caught in the crossfire are Kit, now a district magistrate, his wife Premala and Govind, Kit's and Mira's adoptive brother, who is rumored to be the mastermind behind the anti-British violence. Events come to a head when tragedy befalls the family and Mira is forced to choose between her love for Richard and duty towards her country. 'Some Inner Fury' is Kamala Markandaya's assertion of how no one can stand apart, undecided, when a country is divided.

Mira and Richard's love affair fails to come to fruition due to the fury of the Quit India Movement and the lovers are torn apart. It is a Research Expo International Multidisciplinary Research Journal tragic commentary upon waste and futility with Mira sorrowing for her dead lover who died in riot and for the indifference of time and fate that stand in the way of some powerful social forces and juggernauts of change. So Mira says: It is all one, I said to myself. In a hundred years it is all one, and still my heart wept, tearless, and desolate, silently to itself. But what matter to the universe... if now and then a world is born, or a star should die... if here or there a man should fall, or a head or heart should break. Despite of the tragic departure of Mira and Richard, the novel ends with a note of patriotism as Mira sacrifices her personal happiness for the sake of greater national. The essence of art is to reveal truth; the truth about the complexities of life, about the founding and nurturing of individual character.

As far as Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai are concerned, they are two distinguished women novelists of the post-modern era in the realm of Indo-Anglian fiction. There is great affinity between the two regarding the themes their creations. Both the novelists Anita Desai and Kamala Markandeya, project their women points of view with their experiences and understanding of Indian women. Anita Desai and Kamala Markandeya projected and delineated the need, desire, and struggle of women for establishing their identity and freedom. These novelists catch the attention of the society towards the real demand and life of women. They understand the feelings, emotions and desires and pangs of women.

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