



# Probing Gender and Development in Kamala Markandaya's Fiction: A Study in Colonial Modernity

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## Abstract

The colonial Modernity is attached with the socio economic development of India and the emergence of the new woman is a concomitant phenomenon. The stresses and strains the woman faces the world over in the contemporary socio-economic setting of the world wherein she approximates the concerns of gender bias in the relational cobwebs of modernity is a matter of concern for the writers who seek to portray the changing contours of the Indian Culture. The economic independence, social emancipation resulting into acquiring an identity at par with men and the commitment to a value system based on egalitarian social setting in the face of socio- economic and political development in the present times have impinged upon the requirement of a social order suffused with the concerns of a woman in moral, emotional and spiritual fields whereby the more fundamental problems for the women under the category „aberrations“ remain at the periphery of their personality none of them touching the core of her being. At the conceptual level, the location of the new woman is seen as distinct from the modern or the emancipated woman and it is in her own psychological and emotional framework that she emerges a new woman without herself being aware of the fact and competently paces ahead as her own champion to help her realize her inner being spiritually and emotionally.

The present study seeks to discover how gender is constructed in the contemporary trends of potent development of the country, opened up economically, socially and politically in the world over setting, meeting the challenges of globalization, privatization and liberalization as depicted in the select works of Kamala Markandaya whose ouvre began at the time when India had just attained independence and the world was confronting a piquant situation in the face of resetting the world order after the two world wars. The study will focus on the relational matrix of gender in the contemporary times of industrialization and urbanization. The study will also aim to explore multiple nuances of modernism and liberalism contesting the unquestionable, hitherto, the hegemonic patriarchal dominance.

**Keywords:** Emancipation, Egalitarianism, Emancipation, Globalization, Liberalization, Privatization, Modernism etc.

The paper seeks to discuss the colonial modernity in terms of socio-economic and political development in India precisely in the post-independence era and the concomitant gender construction by

exploring the portrayal as done by the noted novelist Kamala Markandaya in her works. She is one of those IE writers who have had an exclusivist concern for Indian culture in the post – independence era of our country. Her first novel appeared in the year 1954 and in this novel, she portrays India of 1920s and 1930s by which time India’s valuable resources were depleted by a multiple invaders who had sullied this golden eagle of the world and at which time Britishers were having a firm hold on India as rulers. Britishers came to India as traders in the year 1600 AD and by the turn of 18<sup>th</sup> century, they realized that India could be ruled easily for it being fragmented into a plethora of rulers that is Kings and Nawabs of their own geographical territories.

Britishers had a strong pretension for the development of the world since they considered their being the first world which is fully civilized and developed and propagated a moralistic and ethical concern for a civilized and developed world order for the cause of humanity and took upon themselves this onus of development as “White man’s burden”. In our country, Britishers established many factories, laid railways and other transportation means overtly as means of the country’s development, however, covertly it meant for them to facilitate their trade in India and as a means to achieve smooth connectivity within the country so as to foster their empire. They got cheap labour in the form of the native Indians and even got skilled architects to work for the paltry sum they received from the rulers.

It is quite candid that in all countries of the male and female have their distinct identities in the form that they have different social status and as the saying goes that the female are the other sex and also male and female play different roles in society. Their personal cultures are different. They wear different dresses, behave differently and have different attitudes and interests and even their leisure activities are different. However in the present times there is a paradigm shift. Traditionally it was believed that there are substantial and enduring differences between male and female and the difference in their behaviour and culture are biologically or genetically shaped, however the recent researches have clearly brought out that the differences between male and female are socially constructed or these differences are based on the concept of gender.

In pre-independence India, gender construction was done on binary basis. The earlier influence of the Muslim rulers and invaders together made the female world a considered as a property of the male. In all the spheres of life the female was given a secondary status viz at workplace the female was paid lesser than male, in the social sphere, she was considered inferior in knowledge and was considered to be fit to remain within the domain of the hearth. But we go in for the concept of the New woman in India, it is pertinent here to first elaborate upon what constitutes gender. This word was first coined by Ann Oakley and others in the 1970s to describe those characteristics of men and women which are socially determined, in contrast to those which are biologically determined. This differentiation between male and female is concomitant with the twin terms gender and sex. The sex is a biological concept while gender on the other hand is socially constructed and this distinction between gender and sex has important implications which when linked with the development forms the solid basis of research. In Indian context, the development in pre-independence India aimed to drain out the resources of the country and to fulfill the ulterior motives of the British regime.

Different writers in different times have dealt with the idea of gender sensitization while concurrently dealing with development. For any development to be sustainable, it is imperative that the resources used in the development are not perpetually drained out. Gender awareness is the first step towards achieving the holistic development. Gender awareness is a way of seeing and it is a perspective an insight which forms our understanding of people and society and it is a method and means of seeing the things with new eyes, which are constantly open to learning more. This awareness aims at improving the image of women in society. The term “The New Woman” was coined by professor Sharad Srivastava to deal with the construction of gender and socio-economic and political development as portrayed in the works of the noted Indian English fiction writer Kamala Markandaya whose first novel appeared in the year 1954 that however recounts India of 1920s and 1930s and later on in the novels like *Coffer Dams* (1969) and *Pleasure City* (1982) she has dealt with the situations of gender and development in the post independence India.

According to professor Sharad Srivastava, the New woman is not the modern or emancipated woman, she is also not the one who thwarts the established social norms rather, at conceptual level it is possible that a woman can be a „new woman“ without herself being aware of the fact. The „New Woman“

is one who has a value system of her own and also sticks to the commitment attached with this value system. She is constantly aware of the fact that she will have to bear the brunt of what may be termed as an „adherence“ to this value system which is confronting the long established social mores of the country. In the contemporary society the socio-moral ethics are steered by the male-dominance. The „New Woman“ is constantly aware of this degeneration and is alacritically ready to redeem the position of woman in society.

The one critical aspect that demands space here is that the sustainable development is tenable only and only if it is concurrent with other forces that foster the roots of development and also the socio-economic, political aspect related with the process. Alix Kates Shulman observes;

“Feminism is not a monolith: there are many different, even at times contradictory positions which may spring from good feminist motives.”(P 32-33)

The concept of modernity keeps changing from time to time and from one social million to another. This paper seeks to look at development in the field of social, economic and political parameters in the post independence India and to probe as to how the development is concurrent with the gender awareness in the form of staging a strong conviction by the woman of contemporary society under the umbrella, at theoretically level, be called as the „New Woman“. There are social theories of Marx and Engels which have originated in the West and elaborately deal with the consciousness of the change and also embodies the emancipation of woman.

Any study of Kamala Markandaya would be incomplete without the „Woman Subject“ howsoever abundantly she might be portraying the socio-economic development of post- independence India. It is the question of gender that occupies the centre stage in her novels. In *Some Inner Fury* she refers to the silent barriers against women:

“There is a tradition not only in India, that woman 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.”(P- 117)

In any cultural setting, an individual is ruled to a great extent by the economic factors that govern the socio-economic and even political setting at a particular point of time. Kamala Markandaya’s first novel, *Nectar-in-a-Sieve* projects this awareness of an individual/individuals who react to the socio-economic development bringing about a change in the economic setting of the country. It is in the form of a tannery symbolizing the industrial development in the background of which there is an exploration of the consciousness in the individuals. The impact of industrialization on the Indian populace particularly in terms of gender construction in the face of this development from the point of view of the peasants, members of the lower middle-class in the city, the tribal populace and other common people of the developing nation where the basic assumption is that each and every individual in the developing society can act free and a responsible agent of this social, economic, political development only when the established norms of the society that mar the basic human value system of egalitarianism where gender construction is done on a pragmatic level keeping into consideration the main reasons of the present day unfreedom, perpetually fostered by those in society who dominate it and who force people to accept the working conditions which they would otherwise not accept. This atmosphere of the changing economic situation is presented through the character of Rukmani, who is the female protagonist of the novel and is the one confronting the development. Through her, the novelist portrays the tragedy of a traditional Indian village and one of its peasant families that is assaulted by the forces of industrialization as a symbolic representation of sustainable development of the country. Reacting to this change Rukmani says;

“Change I had known before, and it had been gradual but the change that now came into my life, into all our lives blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye.” (NIS-25)

She reacts sharply and vehemently to the forces of development because of the fact that change came suddenly and because of the reason that it depleted the very basis of existence for the peasant community of the village. It is Rukmani as representative of the female world of the village who has to suffer the slings and arrows of the outrageous nature and resultantly becomes passive. Markandaya like some other novelists of the East and also of the West like R.K. Narayan, Thomas Hardy, shows the gradual intrusion of the western trends and techniques of development in the silent sleeping villages and this changing landscape of rural India is truly immortalized in her novels where the agricultural

communities are displaced by the new industrial society. The pristine glory of the villages in the form of their calmness, beauty of the countryside being destroyed by the smoky factories like the one tannery of the Nectar in a Sieve.

Rukmani emerges as the „New Woman“ who grows in awareness that the socio-economic development of the village is intruding on the traditional setting of the village. Her relationship with Dr. Kenny and her frankness with which she conducts herself testifies the truth of change in the form of „New woman“. She is a product of her environment and also of her culture more than anything else. As S.C. Harrex says;

“Markandaya superimposes on the traditional background certain predicaments of identity that can beset a modern Indian”. (P-247)

In the face of ongoing development, Kamala Markandaya adumbrates the value of human sensibility, relationship and respect for the gender difference. The modes in which the traditional moorings of the tribes are upset and there is a role change in terms of gender pronouncements and the way they are drawn into the vertex of a volcanic change of values and new modes of living are carefully structured in the plots of her works. The realization on both sides – male and female – that human values should be the basis of technological progress of the country and abandonment of the cynical arrogance of the male dominant society regardless of the diversity in cultural matrices in order to accommodate the changing sentiments form the core basis of her narrative. In the background of the interaction with the autochthonic traditions and the socio- economic development resulting into the development of the cultural consciousness forms basis of her novel *Coffer Dams (1969)*. The quality of mutual respect in Helen-Clinton relationship keeps them secure even after the drift in the social economic setting of the countryside and thus Clinton voluntarily says:

“I did not wish to destroy.....” and Helen responds with: “If you are sure.....” and he accepts her.”

This is the progression of a realization that times are changing. Similarly in her story, Markandaya gives a symbolic experience of Millie Rawlings that impact of growth of the society in terms of socio-economic political changes of the times, on the growth of the individuals has to align with the spirit of equality in relationship and for a sustainable society the otherness of the other individual in gender perspective has to be accepted in order if the societal change and concurrent development of nation ought to be sustaining in future time.

The characters are aware of the fact that their realization that escape from any kind of responsibility in this context will not constitute real freedom and sooner or later the edifice of development will collapse like packs of cards and the voices of the majority, their conventions and socio-ethical values of their developing society will have their own repercussions on individual destinies that will ultimately form the destiny of the society and then the destiny of the nation.

In the portrayal of socio-economic development of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kamala Markandaya expresses that British imperialism has gone hand in hand with deforestation and has always tended to deplete the natural resources in the name of development and says that there is no real break from the past and the cultural and intercultural moorings but rather however responds to an experience that is evolutionary and recurs in progressively modified forms according to the changing of situations and the point of time. In her oeuvre, she focuses on socio- economic political development in terms of ending the wretched poverty and hunger of the traditional communities that are undergoing this change. She stresses the idea of dignity and equality and attendant need to foster peaceful, unbiased, free, just and the concept of inclusive societies where prosperity and harmonious living conditions negating any kind of prejudice in terms of gender. We can safely conclude in the words of Lionel Trilling:

“It is not possible to conceive of a person standing beyond his culture. His culture has brought him into being in every respect except the physical, has given him his categories and habits of thought, his range of feeling, his idioms and tones of speech. No aberration can effect a real development and change .....are controlled by the culture in which it occurs.” (P-12)

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