POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS IN
KAMALA MARKANDAYA’S NOVELS
(Nectar in a Sieve, A Silence of Desire,
Possession, A Handful of Rice)

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Kamala Markandaya’s works are intermingled with varied themes and when we discuss about her feminine perspectives and cultural conflicts we cannot ignore the political implications in her novels. Kamala Markandaya had a firsthand experience of the freedom struggle in the Indian History. She got involved in the political upheavals which shook the very foundations of the British Empire and it left an impact on her writings.

In 1600 the East India Company was founded in England under a charter granted by Elizabeth I to a group of Indian merchants, which obtained its first trading base at Surat in 1613. At first the trading company restricted to trade itself but slowly they began to tighten their hold over India. India at that time was represented by the different governments comprising of the Mughals, Marathas, Sikhs and Rajputs and their main aim was territorial possession. Taking advantage of the situation, the English implemented cunning strategies resulting in feuds among the native rulers. By the year 1687 they started aggressive ruling and expansion. The prevailing political conditions and the disintegration of the Mughal rule ensured Robert Clive’s victory in the battle of Plassey in 1757, establishing the dominions of the British.

It is under Lord Bentick that the British began to assert conformity on India in all spheres. They pursued religious conversion of the poor. They introduced western modes and system in education, courts and administration. But the English education awoke the Indians to the dignity of man and made them realize the need for individual liberty. Indians who had been encouraged to take English education were denied higher positions reserved strictly for the
Englishmen. The land reforms that they introduced also encouraged high handedness, injustice, poverty and unemployment for the rural masses.

After the Indian Mutiny of 1857 the East India Company was stripped of its powers and India was brought under direct control of the Crown. The British’s way of discrimination, tyranny and oppression led to resistance among the Indians. Thus followed the freedom movement and India’s struggle for independence came on August 1947. “Political dichotomy of the East and the West assume three dimensions in the novels of Markandaya. Firstly there is a merging of political history with fiction. Secondly, the novelist carefully portrays the impact of western political system and the ensuing bitter consequences which were not in conformity with the traditional background of India. Thirdly, she depicts the background of personal relationship because of political wrangling.”(S. John Peter Joseph: 59: 2004)

In Markandaya’s novel ‘Nectar in a Sieve’, Rukmani and Nathan are peasants and they are the victims of the system of landlordism, introduced by the English. They are tenant farmers who do not have their own land. They had to pay land rent, even at times when they do not have any yield as a result of flood or famine. They had to face many trials and tribulations to make the ends meet. Agriculture is the main source of income for the rural people and therefore importance should have been given to agricultural yields and utilizing the land for it, but instead industry came in the form of the tannery. The establishment of the tannery led to the rise in prices of things and even the place became polluted. Rukmani’s sons finds work there but while one died in the tannery, the other two had to leave after falling out with the management. Fate played havoc with their lives and the system of landlordism deprived them of their land when they could not pay their rent. They had to leave the place and go in search of new work and new living.
The reference of Rukmani’s father as the headman and the consequences also gives us a view of the political touch in the lives of the people. He could not enjoy the privileges of being the village headman for long because he had to bow down before the new political exemptions. As Rukmani’s brother speaks out on hearing Rukmani’s proud statement that she would have a grand wedding as her father is the village headman:

“Don’t speak like a fool, the headman is no longer a man of consequence. There is the Collector, who comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, and to those he appoints; and not to the headman.” (Markandaya: 4:2009)

Rukmani too refers to privileges which her father has lost and as a result of which he could not find her a rich husband and so married her off to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything, except in love and care for his wife:

“This was the first time I had ever heard that my father was of no consequence. It was as if a prop on which I leaned had been roughly kicked away, and I felt frightened and refuse to believe him. But of course he was right, and by the time I came to womanhood even I had to acknowledge that his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care for me, his wife, whom he took at the age of twelve. Our relatives, I know, murmured that the match was below me; my mother herself was not happy, but I was without beauty and without dowry and it was the best she could do.” (Ibid: 4:2009)

In a ‘Silence of Desire’ Dandekar is presented as a modernist with a practical and pragmatic mind. His English education helped him in procuring a clerical job in a Government
office. C.V. Chari, who was the head of the department, was a brilliant ex-congress leader, organizer, and now civil servant. He had been a member of the Indian Civil Service, which according to the crisp contemporary description was neither Indian nor civil, nor of service, so that when the ugly imperialistic interlude was over, one of the first actions of the new democracy was to remove its civil. Chari got there by his own worth and he did not, even in those perfervid nationalistic days, accept or refute the charges against the ICS. He resigned after he saw that he cannot continue there for it would mean ‘screwing his conscience out of true’. He joined the Congress party and landed himself in the gaol as he was hauled to the forefront. But when India gains independence, his goal sentences stood him good stead ‘in an intensely Indian India, against his former British liaison’.

Dandekar’s colleagues recall that the English had built the roads, railways and bridges in India. They argue over the British’s superior ways. Ghosh who worked in the office as Chari’s deputy had a burning, painful pride in new India, coupled with an acute sensitivity to its short comings which made him more earnest than he might have been. While Chari had learned – from his English captors, a curious legacy of his gaolbird past – to be casual and his casualness was apt to conceal, Ghosh feels harassed in the absence of Chari.

Dandekar’s education makes him come in conflict with the beliefs of his older traditional thinking. When his wife revealed of the tumor in her stomach and for which she was going to a faith healer because she believes that she will be cured by the faith healer, Dandekar is taken aback. He tried to make his wife understand the importance of going for scientific cure but without success. When he could not make her see reason, he decided to take the help of his officers and colleagues he tells them about the swami and how he is a threat to the society.
In ‘Possession’ too we get glimpses of the political implications. The theme is about a rich English lady, Caroline Bell trying to possess an Indian goatherd boy, Valmiki. Caroline Bell belongs to a rich English family with landed estates and money and whose father worked in India. She has the inherent nature of a colonial, one brought up to be extremely confident with none of the hesitancies that handicap the lesser breeds. While going to a village Caroline gets to see Valmiki’s paintings and promises to take him with her. The role of the headman in the village indicates his political position. When they reached the village, they first went to the village headman and when Anasuya explains to him the reason of their visit, he gave directions to help them reach the place but didn’t accompany them himself:

“After this and the courtesies of leave taking, we made for the arak huts – unaccompanied of course, for the virtuous headman would have no hand in illicit deals, but supplied with explicit instructions on how to get there.”(Markandaya: 6:2010)

And as they reached the huts and went inside, Anasuya felt confident to leave Caroline inside the house alone with the ladies as she ‘knew Caroline was safe, for the headman’s powerful, if invisible, mantle’ has covered them adequately.(ibid:6:2010) Anasuya decided not to help Caroline further and so she consigned Caroline to the headman’s care. The headman had his objections and he said, ‘he could not patrol sheep grazing to ensure the lady’s safety. He had no jurisdiction over the neighbouring village to which she intended to go.’(ibid: 13:2010) However Anasuya made him promise that he would call on his counterpart in the next village and enjoin him to keep an eye on Caroline.
There is a clear indication of Caroline’s imperious nature being attributed to the political situation. It shows in her possessive hold over Valmiki. Anasuya expresses her feelings regarding the relationship of Caroline and Valmiki, “Perhaps, indeed, relationship was not the word to describe a forcible possessing which had established nothing so closely as that there could be no reasonable relationship – merely a straddling of one stranger by another with little out of it for either” (Ibid: 70:2010) Caroline too refers to her relationship with Valmiki as one like Britain and India used to have, ‘sort of love-hate relationship.’ Valmiki’s resentment of Caroline reveals his realization of her exploitation just like the realization of the Indians that Britishers want to exploit them for their own selfish ends and this led to the political struggle. Anasuya’s feelings show her concern over India lagging behind due to political dominance for a long period of time:

“Poor old India, staggering along behind everyone else, was at last getting there, even if those centuries of ferocious paternalism had affected her growth so that she walked like an uncertain toddler, instead of the adult she now was.” (Ibid: 168:2010)

‘A Handful of Rice’ mainly deals with the economic crisis but since economic crisis arises out of politics we find reference of it in the novel. Ravi leaves his village to find work in the city but he found that the city was full of graduates looking for employment and he stood no competition with his little earning. His father, a poor peasant, had insisted on his learning ‘as a key to the power of earning which was the broad base of a man’s pride’. (Ibid:28:2010) But it didn’t help and he found himself incapable of getting a job, in fact it had taken away his ‘ability to work with his hands except in amateur capacity’. (Ibid:26-27:2010) He becomes friendly with Damoder and gets to unlawful ways in order to earn a living. On one such unlawful expedition,
he broke into Apu’s house, a tailor by profession and falls in love with Nalini, Apu’s daughter. Apu offers him a decent job of being an assistant to him and he takes up the job to earn a decent living. He gets married to Nalini and tries to settle down but the society at large does not allow him to live peacefully. The class structure of the rich and poor widened the gap with the poor being deprived of basic needs like food, housing and proper medical care. The rich considered themselves to be superior and they are cold and aloof. They treat the poor in an inhuman way and Ravi could not accept the way they made him use the backstairs, underpay him an shout at him at times.

It is this desire to lead a better life to earn more and have a good family life that turns him into a range angry man beating his wife and behaving rudely towards his family. He puts in his best effort but the society fails to do justice to him. Ravi had options either to lead a poor life by sticking to the values or to follow Damodar’s way and become rich. Damodar advises Ravi:

“There’s enough wealth going around, you have to help yourself to it, that’s all. Nobody’s going to bring it to you on a platter.

‘I’ve tried’, said Ravi miserably. ‘You know I have. But now my wife – she – she doesn’t want me to do anything dishonest, she and her family I mean, they’re respectable – ‘

‘Respectable? Dishonest?’ Damodar laughed softly. ‘What a peasant you are! Tell me, those people up in the posh houses you and your old man go to, are they respectable?’

‘Yes’, said Ravi.
‘You never used to,’ said Damodar evenly.

Ravi was silent. It was in the old days, but not all that long ago, that he had railed at them, called them miserable hypocrites for allowing their left hands to fill nefarious coffers while their right hands remained above board, silently proclaiming their innocence.’(ibid: 134:2010)

What comes forth from their conversation is that the political system is inept in handling the society at large leading to mismanagement and widespread corruption.

There is a reference to government policies by Puttanna when he says that they have more or less put the old moneylenders out of business. His own father had been the owner of a shop, but because of the government policies he has lost it. When Damodar advises Ravi ‘to take him a bolt or two, brocade’, from the ware house in order to please the old man, we get an idea of the working system of some department. Ravi lets us know that the warehouse was in effect a bonded warehouse although the goods in bond had never come under customs scrutiny or suspected that the complex system of rate fixing and exaction of dues was operated by a ring at least as efficient and well organized as any of the more respectable commercial warehouses. Ravi also comments on the government:

“Commercial interests would have catered for their needs: but these post – British days there were bans, quotas, import restrictions imposed by a government more interested in fostering national industry than in pandering to the rich. So the black marketers took over.”(ibid: 31:2010)
The death of his son Raju devastates him. He blames the society for it. It is the political situation which leads to the vast difference among the rich and the poor, which could not even provide a job to a young man.

“He could read, he could write – not only the vernacular but English – English because that had been the language of the overlords when he was a boy, and if you aimed anywhere higher than the rut you were in, learning it was one of routes. He was young, able bodied, healthy. He had a certain quickness of hand and eye and mind which gave him a fractional advantage in his dealings with men. With these assets then, which added up sizably, was it still true to say that in this city of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, each with a hundred needs, there was no job for him between coolie and clerk?”(ibid: 28:2010)

Ravi found a new job by which he got some additional earnings but it was not enough to pay the backlog of arrears and debts. He worked out economics with a paper and a pencil and became optimistic of being able to pay but Nalini, the wiser of the two, comments that only if things remain stable they will be able to do so. Ravi throws a hint behind the rise in prices. According to him he would have resisted all knowledge of the vicious manipulations that were squeezing grain prices up, submerging Damodar’s confidences in the darkest pools of his mind, but for the fact that his money bought less and less. According to K.R.Srinivas Iyengar: “The significance of the title of the novel can be grasped only by people who have witnessed the spiraling of grain prices in India. Bad monsoon have caused havoc in the lives of millions, and governments have proved incapable of effectively holding the price line.”(Iyengar: 446:1973)
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