

Review

Conflicts and Resolutions in the early novels of Kamala Markandaya

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Accepted 16 November 2015

Every human being has a purpose in life. It is up to one's own capacities and inherent talents that one emerges to be successful in life. Success again depends upon one's perception of life. With a positive mindset, one can remain to be happy and peaceful, whatever the situations turn out to be. A strong mind can churn out the best out of the worst and remain contented. With a blend of a little philosophy and maturity of thought, one can lead a conflict free life and resolve the problems as and when they arise. Life is thus a reality show which can be depicted through the pen; writers have been projecting their experiences and imaginations through literature... clarify concepts, understand belief systems and expand their domain of writing skills. Exploration of knowledge and imbibing wisdom through literature enables the readers to widen their horizon of understanding life better. The purpose of literature and especially of fiction is to present a clear and realistic portrayal of life as lived in society and the various forces operating and bringing changes in it. Writers have shared their views on varied topics of interest, mirroring their perceptions through their writings. Kamala Markandaya is one such writer.

Key words: conflicts ,resolutions, literature, knowledge , wisdom, aspirations , dreams.

Cite This Article As: Anuradha V (2015). Conflicts and Resolutions in the early novels of Kamala Markandaya. Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult. 3(11): 277-279

INTRODUCTION

Every human being has a purpose in life. Everyone is unique in his or her own way. It is up to one's own capacities and inherent talents that one emerges to be successful in life. Success again depends upon one's perception of life. With a positive mindset, one can remain to be happy and peaceful, whatever the situations turn out to be. A strong mind can churn out the best out of the worst and remain contented. With a blend of a little philosophy and maturity of thought, one can lead a conflict free life and resolve the problems as and when

they arise. Life is thus a reality show, which can be depicted through the pen; writers have been projecting their experiences and imagination through literature, which reflects people's lives, their thoughts, hopes and despairs, their aspirations and dreams. Some may express and some others may not. Those bestowed with a flair for writing and excel in their talent, share it. Literature gives them a platform to exchange ideas, bring forth their opinions, clarify concepts, understand belief systems and expand their domain of writing skills.

Exploration of knowledge and imbibing wisdom through literature enables the readers to widen their horizon of understanding life better. The purpose of literature and especially of fiction is to present a clear and realistic portrayal of life as lived in society and the various forces operating and bringing changes in it. Writers have shared their views on varied topics of interest, mirroring their perceptions through their writings. Kamala Markandaya is one such writer. She is one of the renowned women novelists of the 1950s in India. Kamala Markandaya's works have proved to be a significant contribution to the growth of the Indian English novel. Kamala Markandaya has made a niche for herself.

Kamala Markandaya being a versatile woman writer in English, has been able to blend both the eastern and western cultures in her writings, giving a vivid picture to her readers about the thought processes of her women characters in her novels. Each character speaks of the undeterred faith in her self during critical situations, facing challenges boldly and tactfully, and rising to the occasion. They project themselves to be positive, having innate confidence and strength. This remarkable attitude in them stands them apart, instilling courage and simplifying problems for themselves.

Indian by origin and having settled in England through Mr. Taylor an Englishman, she had been personally able to comprehend the cultures of the East and the West. Being an expatriate herself, she had been successful in bringing to light, the many clashes that tend to occur, when the East and the West meet. Kamala Markandaya has expressed through her writings, the concept of 'live and let live' trying to strengthen or uphold the two cultures and bring the best out of the two, especially through her later novels.

Kamala Markandaya has dealt in her novels with various themes, mostly pertaining to the mind at the psychological level. She has very finely dealt with subjects on psychology, sociology, alienation, feminism, economics (on the rural and urban sides), politics and the tender human relationships tossing between conflicts and resolutions. Commenting on her typical talent in such portrayals, M.K.Naik writes, "It is only when Markandaya subjects her theme to a far deeper probing that she is able to create living characters in meaningful dilemmas."

Through her writings, Kamala Markandaya has characterized the various issues pertaining to the psychological – sociological, political and rural-urban economy, playing their influences on humans and their reactions to the posed problems. Since ages, man has been living through conflicts and struggling to resolve them. The conflict may arise at the level of milieu exterior or milieu interior. It may be an individual issue, but man is always seen entangled in it, trying to let loose the ties that tie him to do it.

We read in Kamala Markandaya's novels, such subtle instances which seem universal and we tend to associate

with the characters, through whom the novelist speaks. Some of her earlier novels like *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Some Inner Fury* portray narrator-heroines who speak from the novelist's point of view. Other novels like *A Silence of Desire* and *Possession*, *A Handful of Rice* and *Coffer Dams*, depict conflict and resolutions networking in the minds of women characters.

Kamala Markandaya in her fifth novel, *A Handful of Rice*, has dealt with the economic problem – the existential problem in the lower middle class families of India. It is the same as in her first novel, *A Nectar in a Sieve*, through which, she rose to prominence. *A Handful of Rice* revolves around the theme of urban poverty, unlike the theme of rural poverty in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel is a study of the moral dilemma of man akin to that of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Ravi the protagonist starts from where Rukmini leaves off in *Nectar in a Sieve* in the desperate struggle for existence.

Ravi is shown to be a rebellious and strong – willed youth who is disgusted with poverty in his village and comes to a town to seek a new and better life. With this kind of a new change in opting for a better living, Meenakshi Mukherjee says thus, "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 fulfillment. The fulfillment 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 Chennai, which is depicted by Markandaya in *A Handful of Rice*. Ravi the protagonist leaves his village, his house and everything of 'his' behind, in search of greener pastures. 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 seems 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 sufferings. His venture to the town with a dream of getting decent employment remains just a dream, a wish, and a hope.

The Coffer Dams, sixth novel of Kamala Markandaya, strikes one with its theme and its wide ranging ramifications. It takes a twist when compared to her earlier novels. The novelist focuses attention on the construction of a dam in a south Indian village. The clash that arises here is due to the difference in the material

and human values. There is an undertaking of the dams by two chief engineers, Howard Clinton and Mackendrick, Clinton playing a dominant role in organizing the whole venture.

The stage is therefore set for a lot of interaction between the Indians and the Britishers. Along with interaction, there is also a possibility for differences of opinion to occur among the various groups as they differ from each other in many respects – social, political and cultural. Despite their differences, they collaborate and work together in the construction of the dams.

The growth of science and technology and the consequent repercussions being the theme of the novel, it is dealt with from a new perspective. Man's brain proves competent and with manual labour, a dam is constructed over a turbulent river in India. Here arises a conflict between tradition and modernity. Racial and cultural disparity is very clearly depicted in the novel.

As is the case for every novel idea or a venture to come up, there arises some resentment amongst people for every change and for every new move. They tend to become suspicious, uncertain and insecure with regard to their settled lives. The way of living when disturbed, or threatened to disrupt the normal course, it is expected of people to surmise and revolt and gradually subside, according to the circumstances. So also, as it is in the nature of the evolutionary process, the old yield to the young, to a fresh and new generation and a new change is welcome for a better tomorrow; the age-old traditional outlook of the people may change according to the changing times. The modern trend for improvement and a comfortable living may be adapted. Yet, the age-old experience of the old timers, are positive notes of advice to the growing young of today. This is why, Helen and Mackendrick, the leading characters of the novel, approach the dying chief for a solution to their problem. While the dam represents modernity, the village, with its natural serenity, represents tradition. When the two interact, there occurs the clash between the two. The common man at such times, is the victim. He is made to face the travails of the resulting effects, despite his will and made to feel helpless and homeless too. A similar

situation is presented in the *Nectar in a Sieve* when the British build a tannery in a peaceful village where everybody lives on farming. While some join to work for the tannery, some devotedly work on the land - tilling it and enjoying its crops and bearing its losses. Settings and the circumstances differ, but the basic conflict between the races and the attitudes of the individual members remains the same. This point is variedly depicted by Kamala Markandaya in each of her novels, where-in the characters respond according to the situations they are placed in.

As can be observed in today's society, it is always the common man who suffers silently. The influential can easily manage their ways in all the ways they can. The silent sufferers learn to bear and tolerate patiently; they don't raise their voice as it is of no use. But, one thing is for sure; right will always remain to be right and there will always be a source of light at the end of the tunnel. With that hope, the characters in the novels of Kamala Markandaya lead their lives. As is rightly said by John Milton in his sonnet, *On His Blindness*, "they also serve who only stand and wait."

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