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**Quest for Feminine Autonomy -
A Brief Survey of Kamala Markandaya's Novels**

Asha Rani, M.A. and Shashi Bansal, M.A.

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This article attempts to study the place of women in modern Indian fiction in English during 1950-1980 as reflected in the novels of Kamala Markandaya. The study directs our attention to women's awakening consciousness and their quest for autonomy in a male dominated, tradition oriented society. The Indian woman emerges at the end of the study as a human person, essentially Indian in sensibility and likely to remain so in the near future.

Function of Women in Indian Fiction

The study shows us that the Indian woman - passive or aggressive, traditional or modern - serves to reflect the writer's sense of isolation, fear, bewilderment and emotional vulnerability. Often she is also made use of as the agent for the author's quest for psychological insights and awareness. She evokes a continuous discussion of social values; she is the focal point of the contact between the writer's consciousness and the

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ailing world, her experience of reality and her hope for salvation. Most women in fiction and in real life have to grapple with conflict situations. How far to conform, how to break away to assert one's individuality, how to overcome the sense of loss in rebellion, how to resolve the identity crisis- these questions need to be answered.

The Notion of Autonomy

Autonomy comes from the Greek, *autos* (self) plus *nomos* (law), to produce the idea of giving law to one self. According to Merlin Friedman (2003), this principle governs the notion of the self, consciously self-regulating individual, and maybe extended to the group dynamics that justifies democracy and other forms of self-government and self-determination.

Autonomy, therefore, is the principle that ensures individual and collective fulfillment. Autonomy confers legitimacy on collective decision-making. Historically, autonomy has been seen as providing the foundation for the principle of the examined life.

Autonomy requires an individual capacity for self-reflection and self-government and the ability to exercise that capacity within social conditions that enables its flourishing. Autonomy functions as a value, a regulative ideal and a process. It is always a matter of degree because autonomy (even at the individual level) is a social concept that governs relations within a social world.

Individual Autonomy

Individual autonomy is an idea that is generally understood to refer to the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces. Put more simply, to be autonomous is to be one's own person, to be directed by consideration,

desires, conditions and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one but are part of what can somehow be considered one's authentic self.

Autonomy, thus, is a condition of self-governance or the power and right to self-rule. However, self-governance is impossible unless the individual is authentic and independent and capable of self-reflection. Individual autonomy involves one's identity as an independent individual that constitutes one's selfhood and is organized around one's consciousness- awareness of oneself in relation to multiple other selves in a society.

Definitions of Feminine Autonomy Vary

The term 'autonomy' has been defined differently in different fields and has different meaning for different women, the conceptual thread that binds them all is the idea of self-determination - the right of all women to make individual life choices freely and independently without any form of external influence or coercion, in a self-reliant manner, within the constraints of what one regards as morally permissible.

Feminine autonomy has widely been acknowledged as a major factor that contributes to better demographic outcomes. Female autonomy is a multi-dimensional entity, which refers to different aspects of women's life. The well coated study of Dyson and Moore in the Indian context define autonomy as "the capacity to manipulate one's personal environment and the ability- technical, social and psychological to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one's private concerns and those of one's intimates".

Relationship between Man and Woman

The quest for feminine autonomy still remains vital for women as an ideal to be achieved and the theme of autonomy, selfhood and self-realization still forms an integral part of contemporary feminist writing. Simone De Beauvoir analyses in *The Second Sex* the

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relationship between men and women in terms of self/other or subject/object and argues that man's subjectivity- his self-assertion as a free, autonomous and independent being- is established only through opposition to and in dependence upon women's absolute and internal otherness and the imbalance in the male/female relationship can be remedied only by women's assumption of the position of subject, against another/object.

In almost all societies, a woman is culturally assigned norms of behaviour in which standards of conduct, taste and decorum set the boundaries for her as external signs of what it means to be seemingly proper and respectable within the differentiated hierarchy called gender. Any form of deviation from prescribed norms or any display of transgressive potential in violation to the ideal image of womanhood makes her an unruly woman to be ostracized by the society. For Beauvoir, as Bartky points out, the situation of women is such that she, a free and autonomous being, finds herself in a world where she is compelled by man to assume the status of an inferior to whatever man imagines him to be. Women are bound to their oppression by "male control of the dominant institutions and the dominant ideology, by women's lack of solidarity with one another, by the biological necessity that requires coupling, by the very antiquity of oppressive re-arrangements that make them appear natural, hence unalterable and sometimes by women's complicity" (Bartky, 1998: 322) . Hence in order both to gain equality and to realize their human potential, women must transcend their distinctive femaleness to lead the kind of life men do, in other words, they must be autonomous. Beauvoir exhorts women to achieve autonomy, to discover and nurture their authentic self through lived experiences for self-realization.

Womanhood as a Positive Gift

Women should accept one's womanhood as a positive gift and not as a 'lack', to affirm that one is, different, not inferior. Women can fulfill themselves when they are not subjugated and oppressed. Women should be embedded in family yet independent enough to realize their authentic/true self. Instead of being economically, emotionally and

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psychologically dependent on man, they should independently nourish ambitions and pursue goals for self-fulfillment. In the context of the changing world we live in, it has become imperative to do away with separate domains for women and men and to re-define man-woman relationship as equal and complementary and not on terms of domination and subordination. A world without frightened, dependent, trapped, frustrated women is a better world for all of us to live in.

Indian Literature and Women

The Indian literature has been documenting the stories of the Indian women from the classical era up until now. The male authors have naturally dominated the field of literature with their normally stereotyped perceptions of women in their works. It must be said that there has been little truth regarding the lives of women in these male authors' works. The emergence of female authors in India has been successful in depicting new perspectives in the images of women in their writings. Male authors like the Noble Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, Salman Rushdie, R.K. Narayan, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Khushwant Singh, Shashi Tharoor, Amit Chaudhary and Arvind Adiga have carved their names in the international art and have gained a special place in the world literature.

Inadequate Significance Shown to Women Characters

No matter how wide is the universality of the theme in the male authors' works, the significance and position given to woman characters are very small and cast aside, and no other than being a mother, wife, maid, daughter and widow and divorcee. It is very rare to see the strength, empowerment and vigour of women in the writings of male authors in India. The women characters constructed by these male writers have not represented what the women really experience, but instead, these writers have produced and reflected their own views and perception about this gender.

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The portrayal of women's characteristics in these male writers' works is normally weak and passive, as pointed out by Simone Beauvoir. For her, the weakness and passivity of the women's characters in the works of male authors are not reasoned by the factor of female biology but due to the social system that has long been dominated by the power of men.

A New Generation of Writers

The second generation of Indian English women novelists has favourably responded to the changed psychological realities of Indian life especially after Independence. To this group belong writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Nargis Dalal, Shobha De and Bharti Mukherjee, all being well equipped both emotionally and intellectually to treat the situation appropriately. These women novelists have awareness which comes because of their wide acquaintance with the nuances of the life in East as well as the West. Their high educational and intellectual standards have sharpened their observations of life and have imparted a psychological depth to their writings. These women novelists have been able to create interesting personages who successfully oppose the oppression inflicted on women in the society.

Life, Growth and Regression

The women characters symbolize life and growth as well as regression, withdrawal, decay and death. These women characters react against the social discretion meted out to them. The awakening of the women's consciousness and her resultant quest may not always resolve her problems but they certainly provide her with inner enrichment and a sense of satisfaction that atleast she has successfully battled against the harsh verities. They fail in most cases to assert their individuality, to overcome the sense of loss in rebellion, and to resolve the identity crisis. Nevertheless the tortured Indian women, as presented through various novels stands a resilient creature prepared to endure and prevail with the help of her inner strength and integrity.

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Writings of Kamala Markandaya

In the writings of Kamala Markandaya the female characters are subjected to binary pulls torn between tradition and modernity, between the desire for autonomy and emancipation and her need for nurturance; between her duty as a daughter, a wife and a mother and her dignity as a human being. Surprisingly, the Indian woman juggles dexterously with these conflicting ideas and settles down complacently with an attitude of compromise. She cares for and nurtures her family only because she wants to do so; in more than one way this attitude is an expression of her autonomy.

Kamala Markandaya's Women

Women in the novels of Kamala Markandaya are beyond doubts the victims of social and economic pressures and disparities. However, they rise above all these and cross the barriers of discrimination only for the larger concepts of universal love and concord. Indeed, their vitality, both physical and emotional is appreciable. The characters in the novels of Kamala Markandaya are extracted from different strata of society viz., peasants, and middle class educated women as well as from the royal families. Nevertheless the common thread in all her women characters is that the quest for autonomy for the self, coupled with nurturance for the family and fellow feeling for the larger community of men and women, a venture in which the women are confronted with several obstacles emerging mainly from the irregularities in the social system along with economic difficulties. As the women battle with these forces they develop mature vision of life.

Refuse to Lose Hope

While the desire of autonomy and nurturance co-exist simultaneously leading to disillusionment at every stage, yet the women characters firmly refuse to lose either hope

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or courage. Kamala Markandaya's women are in search of something positive. She has portrayed a gloomy scenario of Indian life due to changes in social, economic and political spheres yet she believes that togetherness and mutual understanding can create a meaningful existence for mankind. In each of her novels she has portrayed strong women characters who are prepared to meet the challenges of life come what may. The novels of Kamala Markandaya reflect the awakened feminine sensibility in contemporary India. In her novels, she traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation.

Life of Kamala Markandaya

Kamala Markandaya (1924- May 16, 2004) was pseudonym used by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor, an Indian novelist and journalist. A native of Mysore, India, Markandaya was a graduate of Madras University where she studied History and afterwards published several short stories in Indian newspapers. After India declared Independence, Markandaya moved to Britain though she still labeled herself expatriate long afterwards. She is known for writing about cultural clash between Indian urban and rural societies. Fame and success came with her first published novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), a Book-of-the-Month Club Main Selection and bestseller in the United States. In 1955, the American Library Association named it a notable book. That novel was followed by nine others: *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffer Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) and *Pleasure City* (1982).

Her two most popular novels, *Nectar in a Sieve* and *a Handful of Rice*, were taught in hundreds of American courses, both in the public schools and the universities. From the 1960's onwards it was a common sight to find Markandaya's novels on the shelves of used bookstores throughout America, as well as in every public library. Many thesis have been written in American and British universities analyzing Markandaya's writings.

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Indo-Canadian poet and academic Uma Parameshwaran, who has studied Markandaya's oeuvre and interviewed her, is of the opinion that she is a pioneer member of the Indian Diaspora and her best novel, *The Nowhere Man* foreshadows many diasporic issues with which we are preoccupied today. She died in London on May 16, 2004. Indian-American author Shashi Tharoor put it succinctly when he admitted Markandaya was a pioneer who influenced all of us Indians writing in English.

Nectar in a Sieve

Kamala Markandaya's first novel *Nectar in a sieve* is the story of a peasant woman in a primitive village in India whose whole life was gallant and persistent battle to care for those she loved. It tells the story of one woman's quest for happiness and peace amidst hardship and sufferings. Despite attempt to ignore comparisons, one is indelibly reminded of Pearl. S. Buck classic *The Good Earth*. The heroine Rukmani narrates the rise and fall of her family as India grows and changes around her.

Some Inner Fury

In *Some Inner Fury* Markandaya projects a national image and patriotic consciousness in myriad forms by presenting the peculiar sensibility of the modern educated and progressive Indian women. In fact, like the author, her woman character Roshan has a cosmopolitan outlook and seems to be truly liberated woman of modern India. Meera and Roshan, like Markandaya have close affinity and sympathy with the individual Westerner and like the author again they participate, at least by heart, in the political struggle. Both of them love the Western values yet they have a deep love for their motherland. Roshan sacrifices her parents, her husband and aristocratic life at the altar of national loyalty and does not hesitate to go to jail. Roshan stands as a symbol of new awakening among Indian women during the period of national struggle for freedom, who do not mind giving up the comforts for their life for some noble cause.

A Silence of Desire

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In her third novel *A Silence of Desire*, Kamala Markandaya portrays the assault of the views of western skepticism on the oriental faith of Sarojini, the female protagonist. It reveals how men and women torment themselves and each other by silence on many occasions when they actually require to unburden their hearts by giving vent to their feelings. The novelist focuses on the psychological torments and internal conflicts of Sarojini.

Possession

In her novel *Possession* the female figure Anasuya has closed affinity with and sympathy for, the individual Westerners, but is patriotic at heart and does not relinquish her Indian values though she is mentally liberated and not confined to the four walls of her home. Though Kamala Markandaya had been living in London for a long time and realizing her artistic potentialities there, yet India, its culture and its people are never erased from her memory.

Kamala Markandaya's novels present mostly the female protagonist and their quest for self-realization in a chaotic world of conflicting cultures- 'one dead, the other powerless to be born'.

A Handful of Rice

Kamala Markandaya's fifth novel - *A Handful of Rice* concerns itself with the theme of conflict between oriental stoicism and western revolt. Like the first novel, this novel also gives vent to Markandaya's anguish over social justice. In the first novel she has treated it in a village, now she shows its effects in a town. Here the writer probes deeper into the misery of human predicament, and sows the seeds of revolt in the heart of its hero.

The Coffer Dams

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In her sixth novel, *The Coffey Dams*, the writer delineates the theme of east west encounter in the form of a clash between the human values of India and the technological views of the west. Here again the writer highlights the character of the woman, Helen, the young wife of Harward Clinton, the British engineer. The inhuman behaviour of her husband towards the Indian tribals rebels her from him. To her, human beings are superior to inanimate machines and to inhuman Clinton and other English officials. Infact Helen, the English lady belongs, by heart more to the mysterious and humane east than to west. She wants to sow the seeds of revolt in the heart of the Indians against the inhumanity of the Britishers because she only thinks of them as human beings.

The Nowhere Man

In her next novel, *The Nowhere Man*, the writer delineates the problem of identity of elderly Indian immigrants. The protagonists, Vasantha and her husband Srinivas, find it not only difficult but impossible to create their own identity in England, the land of their adoption. Vasantha, who embodies the Indian traditional values and virtues of patience, tolerance, love and fellow feeling, dies of despair and frustration in this atmosphere of racial antagonism, leaving her husband in a state of shock. In this novel, women are shown in a better light than their counterparts. The novelist makes us hear the distinct voice of a woman for the cause of mankind.

Two Virgins

In her eighth novel, *Two Virgins*, the writer portrays encroachment by the modern western values on the traditional beliefs and old established relationship within the family and the village. The writer has presented the story of two virgins, Lalita and Saroja, in this novel. The need for individual freedom is the central concern of this novel. The female characters so deeply rooted in the Indian culture, struggle to be free and pure human beings.

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The Golden Honeycomb

Kamala Markandaya's ninth novel, *The Golden Honeycomb*, a saga of princely life in India portrays the life of a maharaja who is merely a puppet in the hands of the British. The novel is written in a political background and is fully charged with the feelings of patriotism and nationalism. In this novel also, the writer has glorified the life of a woman, Mohini, who is a liberated woman and is not confined to the four walls of maharaja's palace. Unbounded by the familial or homely ties, she enjoys complete freedom of movement, and though living in colonial days, she appears to be a liberated woman of modern India.

Pleasure City

In her last novel, *Pleasure City*, the writer strives to bridge the gulf between two cultures of east and the west by developing love and intimacy between Rikki, a poor and rustic Indian boy and Tully, an English officer.

Constant Search for Autonomy

The study of Kamala Markandaya's novels tells about the constant search of autonomy, mainly by the female protagonists. Nearly all of Markandaya's women characters exhibit a positive and optimistic outlook on life and emerge much stronger than their male counterparts. By exercising their own freewill, exhibiting their own self, they get fulfillment and recognition in life. In this way, they are able to establish their true feminine autonomy.

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Asha Rani, M.A.
 Associate Professor in English
 Government P.G. College
 Hisar 125001
 Haryana, India
ila.singh@hotmail.com

Shashi Bansal, M.A.
 Associate Professor in English
 Government P.G. College
 Hisar 125001
 Haryana, India
bansal_d_k@yahoo.com

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