Predicament of Identity in Kamala Markandeya’s The Golden Honeycomb

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Abstract
Kamala Markandaya is one of the best of contemporary Indian novelists. Her novels are remarkable for their wide range of experience. She has been most successful and impressive, in dealing with the problems of the educated middle class. She has a gift in particular for delineating the self-imposed laceration of the dissatisfied. Women in the novels of Kamala Markandaya are the victims of social and economic pressures and disparities. However, they raise 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. Markandaya’s characters belong to the 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 They also confront with several obstacles emerging mainly from the irregularities in the social system along with economic difficulties. They develop a mature vision of life when they grapple with these forces. Though the desire of autonomy and nurturance leads to disillusionment at every stage, the women characters remain firm without losing courage. Kamala Markandaya’s women are in search of something positive. She portrays a gloomy scenario of Indian life due to changes in social, economic and political spheres. She believes that togetherness and mutual understanding can create a meaningful existence for mankind. The paper attempts to throw light on the identity crisis of the women characters in The Golden Honeycomb.

Keywords: Delineating, Laceration, Triumphant, Unflinching

Kamala Markandaya is one of the best of contemporary Indian novelists. Her novels are remarkable for their wide range of experience. She has been most successful and impressive, in dealing with the problems of the educated middle class. She has a gift in particular for delineating the self-imposed laceration of the dissatisfied. The Golden Honeycomb is set against the backdrop of the struggle for Indian Independence. It is a love intrigue between Rabi and Sophie in the midst of the commotion created by the Britishers. Markandaya cleverly renders the identity crisis experienced by women characters like Mohini and Manjula.
Mohini, the constant concubine of Maharajah Bawahiraj III of Devapur State, is undoubtedly the most powerful woman in the novel. She is the great power behind Rabi though he is influenced by other women also. She is the artist who moulds Rabi’s life. She brings up Rabi from his infancy in such a way that he will never be enticed by the British like his father.

She is a pale and luscious young woman. She is a distant relative of Manjula the Dowager Maharani. She came to the palace as retainer and companion to the widowed Maharani. She is a lively woman. She is a keen observer. She even perceives the moment when she conceived her son when she becomes pregnant.

She is a spirited woman and a woman of forward fashions. She has her own individuality and will not yield to everyone. Even the Dewan admires her and calls her Sir Arthur’s cross because she upset all the Resident’s well-laid plans. He has no control over Mohini, because she is a concubine. He feels that a junior Maharani would have fallen well within his palace but a concubine is well outside it.

She is a foil to Shanta Devi, the Maharani. Though Mohini is Bawahiraj’s concubine she enjoys more power than Shanta Devi. Bawajiraj surrenders before Mohini. She teases him for being a puppet in the hands of the Britishers. She is not like the other women of the palace at all.

She is a common woman and has been nurtured in a common way. She wants Rabi to be brought up in the same way. Bawajiraj is for the ruling class whereas Mohini fights for the common people. She is the spokesperson of the common people. She always stresses that she is not a royal lady and that, therefore, no one can expect her to obey the British made rules. She does not want to be Bawajiraj’s official wife because she wants to be free.

She says that Rabi is an Indian and so he should not be given a British education. As a mother she does not impose any restriction upon Rabi. He is free to play with the children of the palace servants and that of the nobles and with children of Shanta Devi. Rabi is her treasure. She does not want to make Rabi a puppet in the hands of the British. So she brings up Rabi in such a way the he will not be influenced by the British. She is against the plans of Bawajiraj and Sir Arthur to make Rabi a disciplined boy at an early age. She often complains that the British are trying to make Rabi their puppet.

Mohini is a stubborn woman. She speaks up against Bawajiraj regarding Rabi’s education. She tells him that nobody will teach Rabi except a local pandit chosen by her and the Dowager Maharani. While quarrelling over Rabi’s education Bawajiraj wishes that Shanta Devi could take the place of Mohini, because by then, the upbringing of the boy will be exactly as that of his own. Mohini has the courage to protest when Bawajiraj wants a residential education for Rabi. She even threatens him saying that she will leave the place and go to her native village with her son. She forces him to feel that he literally licks her feet and swears never again to interfere in Rabi’s affairs.

When the problem of fresh taxes arises, she denies her bed to Bawajiraj because he does not care for the people, but only for his standing with the imperial crown. She is a common woman and she known the problems of the farmers. She even calls him a monster to his own people. When he quarrels over the theme of the play which the children enacted, she admits that the play is about monsters.

Mohini is one person before whom Bawahiraj III is helpless. She is fully aware of her physical charms. She often emerges triumphant whenever she enters into an argument with him. Though she also loves him deeply, she has the guts to convince him of the vitality of her points. She does not like his unflinching loyalty towards the foreign rulers. She usually calls Sir Arthur ‘Bania Sahib’. She tells her paramour that the Britishers are here for their financial and territorial gain and they are least interested in the uplift of the Indian populace.
She shows common sense and worldly wisdom by saying that a king’s first duty is to his country and to his people. She declares that a king is the father of the people. She finds fault with Bawajiraj for forsaking his country, his people, and his life-long partner for serving a foreign country in its war with another set of aliens. She openly says that Bawajiraj is blind to many truths.

She is anxious about her man’s and her son’s health when they are sick. Though she is not a lawful wife, she is an ideal woman. The word ideal does not mean a woman who obeys all the nonsensical things which the husband asks her to do. Mohini possesses a critical mind and she knows what is good and what is bad for herself, her husband, and her son.

She raises her voice whenever she cannot agree with Bawajiraj. She quarrels with him at the Delhi Durbar over the arrangements of the screens. She is courageous enough to say that Bawajiraj can make no demands of her. She adds that he has no right to question her regarding the pilgrimage she plans for herself and her son. She does not even give him an accurate date of their return. Bawajiraj even fears that, she will not come back. Sir Arthur sees that Bawajiraj is completely devastated when Mohini is away. He is anxious about Mohini’s safety because he does not want to harm her by any means. He finds that she bundles up sex with her soulful emotions. He notices a vast difference between his physical contact with Mohini and with Saanta Devi.

Mohini has the power of independent action and speech because she is not bound to Bawajirah by any tie other than that of love and she is never afraid to use her independence for her purposes. She is overwhelmed at the thought of her native village. She is very happy when she comes across mimosa pudica. She points out the plant to Rabi saying that its leaflets will close like a butterfly. Though she is a concubine she is a chaste woman. She regards her son and her husband as the treasure of her life. She accepts the fact that kings have more than one wife or paramour. Before he sets out on expedition to fight the Hum on behalf of his overlord, Bawahiraj tells Mohini that he would not mind if she had trysts with lovers during his absence. He seems ignorant of the true devotion of a good woman like Mohini for whom there will be no lovers. Kamala Markandaya projects Mohini as rebelling against male tyranny.

She is a popular figure in the palace. Manjula is very close to Mohini. It is Manjula who brought Mohini to the palace because she knew that, in the prevailing historical circumstances, the country’s fate can be changed only by a concubine and not by a lawful wife.

She takes Rabi on a pilgrimage so that he can experience the real life of the people other than the luxurious palace. She wants him to meet the common people. She is bent upon being a commoner. As a boy, young Rabi has not seen the places outside the palace. So he does not know the nature of the common people and their underlying difficulties. Rabi is unaware of scarcity and drought. He thinks that the people are given whatever they demand. It is Mohini who alters his thoughts.

Mohini shows a feminist mentality when she thinks of the parity between men and women. During her pregnancy she wonders why the burden of pregnancy should be suffered by women when the sexual pleasure is enjoyed by both man and woman. Bawajiraj misses her much and the palace turns out to be an empty tomb in her absence.

Manjula is aware of Mohini’s ability and power. So she entrusts Mohini with the duty of making her grandson a rebel against the British and succeeds in her endeavour. The Pandit also plays an important role in bringing up the child to rebel against the British. Mohini is Bawajiraj’s weakness. She knows it very well and exploits his weakness. She admits openly that Manjula is her teacher. Markandaya rightly points out:

Manjula and Mohini are rebellious and independent very like each other. Because Mohini has a large sphere in the action of the novel, she achieves some measure of individuality. She is self-willed, and out spoken, vivacious and and volatile, shrewd and intelligent sensual and loving, absolutely feminine in her caprices, her sense of humour and her independence. She is realistic in
her assessment of India’s involvement in England’s war, in contrast to the Maharajah’s idealistic fervor, which sends him to the battle fields of Europe (Honeycomb154).

The Golden Honeycomb marks the culmination of Markandaya’s quest for cultural synthesis. The rise of nationalism and the awakening of the ideals of independence within the country are well brought out in the novel. Stories about a variety of characters from all walks of life combine to suggest the diversity of Indian society. These stories form a complex interweaving of narrative strands that effectively reconstruct the historical period and social organisation of the British Raj.

The movement towards national unity, with its partial erosion of caste and class barriers, is embodied in the union between the central characters, Rabi, the illegitimate son of a native prince, and Usha, the daughter of an influential Brahmin teache bound to the other by love and a commitment to the national movement. Yet in many ways this unity remains embryonic. Rabi and Usha are only shown at the early stages of their relationship when Independence is little more than an anticipated event. According to Markandaya, cultural unity is a dream that has yet to be realised. Indeed, she is concerned less with representing the potential unity of the Indian people than with demonstrating the similarities between one ruling class and another.

Markandaya explores the mechanisms of power in India’s past in order to isolate and interrogate inequalities particularly the caste and gender that persist in modern India. She explores the various and diverse positions of Indian women by demythologising ‘public’ history and reconstructing the past from the dual perspectives of Indian nationalism. In The Golden Honeycomb Markandaya uses the historical saga-a literary principle used for politically subversive purposes.

The Golden Honeycomb clearly and decisively establishes Markandaya’s reputation as a leading novelist. The novel is not only her best imaginative effort to project the development of national consciousness but also her most ambitious and brilliant work of art. It reveals her extraordinary sense of conscious realism and historicity that is rarely evident in contemporary British fiction. Although Mulk Raj Anand and Manohar Malgonkar have attempted to portray the lives of the royal people in their novels — The Private Life of an Indian Prince (1953) and The Princes (1963) seem somewhat incomplete in the artistic reconstruction of the decline and fall of the institution of monarchy. Markandaya’s novel, in contrast, creates a sense of history in the reader’s mind by depicting the events that rocked the State of Devapur for three generations. She, therefore, achieves a sense of historical continuity — a quality of tradition — while recording the tribulations of fortune that befell Devapur, a representative princely State. She describes the details with meticulous care and delineates the characters with a sympathetic attitude. Markandaya shows exemplary respect for the recorded facts of history but uses them with a stunning irony and biting economy of phrase in dramatizing the saga of princely patriotism and the growth of individual consciousness. The inventive imagination of Markandaya exhibits the usual pomp and pageantry of an imperialistic regime. The growth of Rabi’s individual consciousness in terms of cultural awareness is well integrated in the novel.

The Golden Honeycomb divided into three parts sums up the trials and tribulations of our country under foreign rule through a succession of moving events. It brings to light the pitiable strikes, round-the-clock agitations and lockouts. It is undoubtedly Markandya’s memorable fait accompli in which she turns her all-absorbing mind to the momentous historical events shaping and affecting India’s fate during the British regime.

Bawajiraj III has received European education through English tutors, and has attended the Chief’s College, the Military Academy, and the special coaching in civil administration under an experienced I.C.S. officer. He is, therefore, well-suited to carry on British interests even at the cost of his own people and their resources. He acts as an intermediary between the rulers and the ruled. He often feels the progressively growing levies and restrictions on his people, but is
helpless to offer them any relief. In spite of these weaknesses, Bawajiraj has subtle positive streaks in his character. He is a fond lover of his family and his subjects. There are individuals for whom he can sacrifice all, such as Mohini and Rabi. He never says a word against his mother. He counts on the devotion of his people to him. He knows that the Dewan is a man with an unquestionable record of sincerity to the State and of honest dealings with one and all. Mohini is one person before whom the Maharajah is helpless. In any argument with him, she often emerges triumphant. Though she loves him deeply, she has the guts to face him and convince him of the validity of her point. She does not like his unflinching loyalty towards the foreign rulers. She tells him that the Britishers are here for their financial and territorial gains. They are least interested in the upliftment of the Indian populace. Her strong views are also shared by her son, Rabi, the Pandit and the Dewan. The powerful, irrepressible Manjula, the Dowager Maharani is also on her side. She enlightens her grandson at times and fuses into him the anti-British feelings. Similarly, the Pandit and the Dewan are deeply attached to Rabi. The Pandit injects nationalistic feelings and thoughts into the boy and prepares him for the fight ahead. The Dewan, Tirumal Rao, is a shrewd person entirely devoted to his Maharajah and to the people of his State. He is one who can be favourably compared to the Englishmen in talent and manipulations. Narsimha Rao, his father and also his ancestors were incisive. These illustrious race of Brahmins are conscious of their intellectual superiority over others.

Rabi born as Rabindranath in the Palace of Bawaji Rao III to Mohini, his concubine, grows before the readers’ eyes. He gets his early education and training by Panditji. He develops ideas and tendencies prejudicial to the British and at times to the Maharajah too. Unlike his father, Rabi is taught by an Indian tutor on the insistence of his mother. He does not attend the Chief’s College or the Military Academy. He learns a lot through his tutor, mother and grandmother, about the golden past of his land and about the heroic deeds of his ancestors. He has the opportunity to mingle with the commoners and their children in the palace grounds as well as in the open countryside. Naturally, Rabi develops as a contrast to his father. His father is compared to a salt because he does not protest against Salt Taxation whereas Rabi is identified with Water, as he undertakes to build a dam for his people. He does not like the rotten British Raj, who relentlessly pursues the ‘divide and rule’ policy. He is devoted to the Dewan, but is opposed to the Agent. He visits the Delhi Durbar along with his father and other members of his family, but he is not worried about the official or princely duties bestowed upon him. Rabi is shocked when he sees his adored father bow to the Viceroy, and back away like a messenger. Rabi develops a fondness for Sophie, the daughter of the resident after the Grand Durbar. Rabi grows up by witnessing the privileges of the palace and residency and also the hardships of the common people owing to famine and drought. Sir Arthur Copeland breaks the news of the Viceroy’s decision of accepting Rabi as the heir of Bawajiraj III. Bawajiraj is delighted at the news but Rabi is not particularly overwhelmed by the news. He is mature and realizes that the concept of princely states and their British-approved rulers is little more than ‘a fragile golden honeycomb’.

They soon leave for Shimla for a sojourn. Then, they decide to proceed to Bombay to receive the delivery of a fleet of Rolls-Royce cars. Bombay is in a maze due to strikes of mill-workers and dockers. The royal family encounters a tense situation. The Maharajah and Rabi are seriously injured. Rabi gets wounded when he joins a group of striking labourers on Chowpatty Beach and the procession is lathi-charged by the police. The Maharajah recovers at the Imperial Hotel whereas Rabi is looked after by Jaya, a mill-worker in her hut. She not only nurses him back to health but also teaches him to love. Rabi also has a firsthand experience of the dreary life led by the poor.

The royal family returns to Devapur, where the national awakening has made its inroads too. On his return, Rabi’s intentions are firm. He is determined to improve the lot of the people of his state.
In contrast to Rabi, the Maharajah is so loyal to the Empire that he raises a force and leads it to the Western Front during the World War I.

He shows his mettle there and wins laurels for his gallantry. He takes the opportunity to get Sir Arthur Copeland reinstated as the Resident of his State in place of the stubborn and offensive Mr Buckridge. Markandaya weaves into the main plot two other sub-plots involving the other two institutions, namely, the story of the Agent s and Residents Sir Arthur Copeland as well as Mr Buckridge. The Indian masses are in no mood to cooperate with the foreigners, who levy new taxes on them day by day and render their lives miserable. In Devapur, things seem to be going against the Maharajah who does not resist these taxes and harassments. Rabi whole heartedly supports the people. He derives strong support from Usha, the youngest daughter of the Dewan. Once, she stages a subversive play depicting the rulers as monsters to the horror and distaste of the Resident (Mr Buckridge) and the Maharajah. Rabi and the Dewan enjoyed it immensely. The people become totally restless. The Maharajah, the Resident, and the Dewan realize the change of time. Mohini, Rabi and Usha, the symbols of Independence, emerge triumphant as India attains Independence on August 15, 1947. Bawaji Rao III, blissfully ignorant about and shamefully insensitive, develops an awareness of his responsibility for the people of the land. Manjula and Mohini play pivotal roles in the affirmation of the continuity of the essential cultural values amid the myriad political changes in modern India. They represent the best of India’s traditional womanhood in guiding and shaping the destiny of Bawaji Rao III and Rabindranath.

Markandaya’s The Golden Honeycomb is a representation of the bourgeois class, the princes of India, who alienated themselves from the common man of the country by their manner of thought and style of life. Rabi, the protagonist is disillusioned by the incongruities involved in the concept of the princely states and the role of the rulers. This alienation and disillusionment is the direct result of the search for identity. Critics believe that the search for identity is a recurrent theme in Indian Writing in English as the writer often feels alienated from his society and suffers from “culturalschizophrenia” for he is himself in search of an identity. S.C. Harrex relates this search specifically to Markandaya.

It is rightly noted that Markandaya’s literary sensibility projects itself in this novel as an acute perception of the different and distinct forms of national consciousness. Her contribution to Indo-English fiction lies in her capacity to explore the vital and formative areas of individual consciousness. She projects the images of cultural change. She may not be one with the day-to-day lifestyle of the common Indians, particularly in this novel; yet she is aware of an all-encompassing national consciousness. This consciousness has always prevailed in all her novels. The Golden Honeycomb does very little to justify her claim of Indianness.

The various predicaments of identity in the novels of Kamala Markandaya are affected by the East-West clash of codes that is part of modern India. In The Golden Honeycomb, Bawaji Rao III is blissfully ignorant and shamefully insensitive to the problem of his true identity under the mask of a Maharajah. He develops an awareness of his responsibility for the people of the land towards the end. His identity lies in awareness and acceptance of his responsibility for his people. This is a splendid beginning of the people’s struggle for freedom in the state of Devapur. Manjula and Mohini play pivotal roles in the affirmation of the continuity of the essential cultural values amid the myriad political changes in modern India. They represent the best of India’s traditional womanhood in guiding and shaping the destiny of Bawaji Rao III and Rabindranath. The Dewan is responsible for running the state. He is a vital link between the king and the people. He plays a key role in the development of the princely states of the British Raj.

Usha and Mohini are the embodiments of the two races, one representing the past and the other the future. The novel highlights the rancor and the sadness of the British-Indian relationship. The
only solution to the problem was to break the association by withdrawal. Eventhough there are wide disparities, the novelist ends the novel on a note of reconciliation.

Markandaya has been very creative in presenting her character, Mohini. She depicts her self sacrifice in a realistically. It is a journey that results in self realization to that of self assertion. In short, the female characters are depicted as the ultimate victims and nurturers. They struggle a lot and overcome their predicament in an exemplary mode.

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