



Kamala Markandaya

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While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees the beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for?

— Nectar in a Sieve

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Biography

Born Kamala Purnaiya in 1924 in Chimakurti, a small southern village in India, Kamala Markandaya learned traditional Hindu culture and values. She was raised Brahman. Between the years of 1940-1947, Markandaya was a student at the University of Madras, where she studied history. While studying at the University, she worked as a journalist, writing short fiction stories. In 1948 Markandaya decided to further pursue her dream of becoming a writer by moving to London, where she met her husband Bertrand Taylor, a native Englishman. Markandaya and Taylor had one daughter, Kim Oliver, who currently resides in England.

In her lifetime, Kamala Markandaya published ten novels, all dealing with post-colonial themes in modern India. She is most famous for her novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, which was her third novel written, but the first novel published. *Nectar in a Sieve* became a bestseller in March, 1955, earning her over \$100,000 in prizes. Some of her other novels include: *A Silence of Desire*, *Some Inner Fury*, *A Handful of Rice*, *Possession*, *The Coffer Dams*, *The Nowhere Man*, *Two Virgins*, *Pleasure City*, and *The Golden Honeycomb*.

Quick Facts

- * 1924-2004
- * Indian novelist who moved to London
- * One of her most famous works is *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Kamala Markandaya

Biography continued

Kamala Markandaya is respected by many for her outspoken voice among the Indian people and has often been credited by many for bringing recognition to Indian literature. Charles Larson of American University in Washington wrote, "Most Americans' perception of India came through Kamala Markandaya; she helped forge the image of India for American readers in schools and book clubs." After Markandaya's husband died in 1986, she made frequent trips to India, where she continued to write. On May 16, 2004 Kamala Markandaya died in London at the age of 79 due to kidney failure. Although she is no longer alive, her voice will always be heard through her novels. She will continue to raise awareness about India and teach others in the West about a culture otherwise largely unfamiliar.

Through her novels, Markandaya brings to light the complication of post-colonial and traditional Indian social hierarchy as well as the implications prevalent within both systems. These themes are most noticeable in her novel *A Silence of Desire*, where she addresses the issues of social classes of India and the controversies surrounding this social hierarchy.

A Silence of Desire tells of a life journey of a loving, wealthy, middle class family, living comfortably and enjoying many luxuries. However, things quickly worsen when Dandekar loses respect for his wife, Sarojini, after finding a mysterious picture of a strange man, whom he believes to be her secret lover. This story focuses on the strong bond of love and dedication between the family, and the willingness they have to make things work between them.

Her novel *A Handful of Rice* is one of the first novels to exemplify the plight of rural peasants to the new urban lifestyle. She traces the path of the antagonist in the novel, Ravi, a rural peasant who moved to the city to escape the vicious cycle of starvation in his village. When he moves to the city he befriends an orphan who grew up in the city. Ravi's life becomes full of robberies, alcohol, and prostitutes. He sleeps on the sidewalk and eats perhaps one meal a day. Things change when Ravi falls in love with Nalini, the daughter of a man he robs. Ravi begins to change his ways and begins working for Apu, Nalini's father. Ravi marries Nalini and realizes that even while working, it is very difficult to make a decent living. Ravi becomes obsessed with greed and constantly battles between going back to his old way of life with easy money and freedom and living a middle class life.



Kamala Markandaya

Biography continued

Markandaya conveys the stress of society's standards through Jayamma, Nalini's mother. Jayamma never seems to care about the hardships their family encounters but is more concerned that the neighbors do not find out about their struggles. As Ravi and Nalini have children, financial stresses increase and Ravi becomes more stingy and greedy. He then associates with his old gang friends and starts to abuse Nalini. Finally, Ravi is forced to choose between his money and his son, a choice that in the end claims his fate.

Whereas in *A Handful of Rice*, Markandaya wrestles with issues of social hierarchy, in the novel *Shalimar* she accurately portrays two parallel societies in India. The main character, Rikki, is introduced to both of these societies during his adolescence. Rikki was born into the life of fishing. His father, brother, and cousins were all fisherman. However, at a young age his entire family falls victim to the might of the sea. Rikki is taken in by a family of missionaries. These new guardians show Rikki a completely new life. Markandaya shows that the presence of both cultures has painted the beautiful picture of what has become India. This novel depicts the evolution and development of Indian society and culture by describing the changes of Shalimar. This novel is a nice addition to her already extensive list of work.

Markandaya's best-known work, *Nectar in a Sieve*, is a heart wrenching tale that depicts the hardships and joys of a woman's life in rural India. The story follows the life of a girl, Rukumani, throughout her whole life and all that she witnesses growing up in a changing India. Ruku marries at thirteen to a man she has never met before and moves far from her family to the country. There she has many children whom she and her husband struggle to feed when drought strikes and numerous crop cycles are destroyed. Ruku witnesses the impact that post-colonial influences have on India when a tannery is built in their village and changes their life drastically. Ruku watches her children struggle to survive on what little food they have and her infant baby eventually dies of starvation. Her daughter, rejected by her husband for being unable to bear a child, resorts to prostitution to help supplement the family. Finally, Ruku and her husband leave their village for the city, only to find more depravity and hardship.



Kamala Markandaya

Biography continued

Markandaya's bulk of work is symbolic of her own life duality: born and raised Indian and married to a British man. In *Some Inner Fury*, Kamala concentrates on traditional India in early post-colonialism and the struggle to create their own identity, separate from the British. In this story, which is semi-autobiographical, she talks about a young Indian woman, Mira, who falls in love with an Englishman, Robert, and in the end she chooses her people over him. Markandaya also emphasizes the inherent dissimilarities among Indians and the English during the post-colonial period, by constantly drawing boundaries throughout her writing about the potential fusion of these two very different cultures, and in particular a differing social and political status. She states that:

"You belong to one side- if you don't, you belong to the other. It is as simple as that; even children understand it. And in between? There is no in between. You have shown your badge, you have taken your stance, you on the left, you on the right, there is no middle standing. You hadn't a badge? But it was there in your face, the color of your skin, the accents of your speech, in the clothes on your back. You didn't ask to be there? Ah, but you had no option; whatever you thought, there was no option, for you there was no other place" (Markandaya 195).

Whereas in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya subtly alludes to the need for Indians to forge their own path in the post-colonial era, in *Some Inner Fury*, Markandaya is much more explicit about the need to break from the British rule and influence. This is most noticeable as she decides to leave the man she loves and instead, follow her own people:

"Go? Leave the man I loved to go with these people? What did they mean to me, what could they mean, more than the man I loved? They were my people-those others were his ... But that stark illuminated moment - of madness? Of sanity? - went, and I knew I would follow these people even as I knew Richard must stay. For us there was no other way, the forces that pulled us apart were too strong" (253).

In all of Kamala Markandaya's works, a common theme of social distinctions and the differences between people living in poverty and wealth, as well as the difficulties each class undergoes is prevalent. Markandaya is an evolutionary and a great preceptor of the environment surrounding her as she thinks ahead to environmental and societal problems that globalization and development bring. In some ways, Markandaya was Rachel Carson of India- calling out before we reach a point that is beyond going back.



Kamala Markandaya

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Kamala Markandaya

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