Narrative Techniques and the Use of Symbols in the Novels
of Kamala Markandaya

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ABSTRACT: All the writers of creative imagination employ various techniques and symbols to put their message across or simply to weave a story. While dealing with various aspects of a novel, the major problem which a novelist faces is how to say? And what to say? Although the language of Kamala Markandya is verbose but the use of narrative techniques and symbols reveal not only her tremendous dramatic power but also her remarkable capacity for aesthetic control and selection. This paper tries to shed light on both these aspects in the ten novels written by Kamala Markandya.

KEY WORDS. Technique, symbols, fictional narratives, mood, attention of readers.

A narrative technique (also known, more narrowly for literary fictional narratives, as a literary technique, literary device, or fictional device) is any of several specific methods the creator of a narrative uses to convey what they want, in other words, a strategy used in the making of a narrative to relay information to the audience and, particularly, to "develop" the narrative, usually in order to make it more complete, complicated, or interesting. Literary techniques are distinguished from literary elements, which exist inherently in works of writing. While dealing with various aspects of a novel, the major problem which a novelist faces is, how to say? What to say? For this purpose novelist makes use of techniques to tell their stories. Credit goes kamala Markandaya for her narrative which reveals not only her tremendous dramatic power but also her remarkable capacity for aesthetic control and selection. She has not only employed first person narration but has also made use of images and symbols. The images and symbol patterns in Markandaya’s novel emerge from her narrative technique, which she uses in treatment of major themes, like – the theme of poverty and hunger, the theme of struggle for Indian Independence, the theme of conflict between traditionalism, and modernism the concept of womanhood and the theme of East-West encounter found in her novels.
In ‘Nectar in a Sieve’ projecting the belief that a labour who gets alienated from his work, loses all human dignity, she makes use of first person narration that is, through the sensibility of heroin Rukmani. The mood of narrative is circular in pattern as the novel ends with similar note as in the beginning. Markandaya uses simple narrative as it suits her central character, who is a peasant woman. But the mood of reminiscence and recollection dominated the novel as a whole. K.S.N. Rao observes, “In a detached and yet not wholly unemotional manner, Rukmani recalls the events of her life in a Chronological manner. The dream-like quality of her recollection is particularly impressive. Rukmani recaptures the tragic intonation of her life in a clear lyrical manner. The novel is divided into short chapters which have a psychological advantage of keeping the reader’s interest. The story purports to be narrative of events in the life of narrator.

Some Inner Fury is in first person’s narration and a female point of view. Markandaya casts this novel in an autobiographical from. As Prof. Iyengar observes “The novel is really Mira’s extended recollection of the recent past… the emotions and passions and stolen ecstasies and thwarted purposing recollected in a mood of comparative tranquility.” Markandaya changes her narrative technique from first person to third person narration in her third novel ‘A silence of Desire’. This narrative technique is supported by powerful use of dialogue and stream of consciousness.


Although, ‘Possession’, according to many critics, as a novel, a failure. But for its technical point it is most successful in handling dialogue in smooth easy English way as far as Anasuya’s narrative is in question. But it is in Valmiki that she really meets her challenge and successfully. ‘The coffer Dams’, along with third person narration consists of “short” crisp sustained monologue. For example “I did not wish to destroy he said If you are sure, she replied. And he could not answer that.” In these two lines Markandaya packs in all the clue to all interior monologue that are going on in the novel. Uma Parameswaran observes, “gone is the correct simplicity of earlier novels and in its place is a power rich in overtones and undercurrents gone is the distance of third person narrative in favour of the stream of consciousness technique which plumbs the emotional working of character in a language that cuts clean and sure as a surgeon’s knife.”

The Nowhere man’ is basically written in exploratory style and torrid monologue” and goes silently into stream of consciousness along with third person narration. The novelist
explores the emotional agony of Srinivasa and Vasantha, through the technique of interior monologue, Flash back, and third person narration, and, weaves the major theme very effectively into a story. Kamala Markandaya employs technique of omniscient third person narration in ‘Two Virgins’ through the consciousness of Saroja.

‘The Golden Honeycomb’, again is an excellent example of Mrkandaya’s aptness in handling historical situations and characters. Her novel craft has grown subtle and suggestive. The technique of this novel is one of forceful narrations and occasional descriptions. Its narrative style is rooted in historical and contemporary context. Markandaya was able to tailor her method to the strict demands of a truly historical novel. Her tenth novel ‘The Pleasure City’, on the whole as a novel, fails to grip the attention of reader because it is shapeless. In this novel Markandaya has used the technique of conversation and reverie. Sometime the conversation is pictorial but on the whole it is meaningless and the description of the surrounding is just added to increase the page volume of the novel. Chapter thirteen of the novel is full of meaningless description and story within story. “Tully parked on a fallen tablet with AVALON incisively cut in the stone, virtually heard, yet again, the words of discovery ….. Compliments human beings pay each other…Anyway though there was one eccentric who held out to the end. This mancronym of his mother’s believed that the native of Africa never grew up. Treated them like a Victorian papa Kindly but standing nonsense from the children. His house boys loved him. Winked at each other over his head. Indulged the old man’s notions conspired to see to it that he went to his grave with his delusions intact.”

Here the technique of conversation and reverie is not simple but a complex of inter-related movement based on minor episodes, thus the reader only gets lost in multi-linear conversation and reverie. Over Crowding of difficult words makes the reader miss the central point. Above all the mixing of these two techniques does not carry Markandaya too far. “it is true that the creation of the book is not solely the affair of the author and the reader of a novel is himself a novelist” But ‘The Pleasure City’ fails to make the reader himself a novelist because it has small subject, spread out in an immense work extending to three hundred and forty nine pages, forces upon the reader to close the novel and he begins to think why so much ink and paper has been wasted? The sense of wonder, and what happens next?,that grips the attention of a reader, is thoroughly missing in the novel. Markandaya lingers on over at many places on pictorial introduction and gets stuck.

Markandaya’s technique of narration, both first person and third person suffers from artistic errors ‘In Nectar in a sieve’, and ‘Some Inner Furry’, Markandaya muffs herself many a time with the narrator that is, to say she is unable to maintain distance between the
narrator and herself. Secondly, the narration is lacking in vigor and raciness. Thirdly, the narration does not permit the reader to probe deeper into the inner life of its hero, Nathan, in ‘Nectar in a Sieve’, and ‘In Some Inner Fury’, we are only acquainted with Mira’s point of view, similarly in ‘Two Virgins’, it is Saroja’s consciousness that speaks. We know nothing of Lalitha’s emotional and mental suffering. Similarly, ‘Silence of Desire’ also presents Danekar’s point of view and the conflict in his mind between faith and faithlessness but we have no knowledge of Sarojani’s mental conflicts. Nevertheless, Markandaya through technique of narration is able to put across themes and points of views before the readers. She has shown considerable skill in handling various narrative techniques in all ten novels.

Markandaya has also made use of symbols to evoke the central themes and the narration of her novels. In ‘Nectar in a Sieve’ she makes use of two major symbols, ‘jungle’ and ‘tannery’. The powerful ‘jungle’ symbol is used to show the harrowing conditions of drought and its effect. Village peasants have turned into beasts struggling for survival. The entire village is reduced to a state of a jungle where friends have become enemies, fighting for every crumb of food. In the operation of jungle law is that the weakest goes to wall. Nathan and Rukmani move from one jungle to another, i.e. from village to city where cripples and drop-outs are engaged in cruel hunt for food. It is in this jungle city, that Nathan dies under load of work and despair. ‘Tannery’ at one level it invades village bringing with it noise and ugliness and causing inflationary pressures. Are another level, it becomes an instrument of financial assistance to some villagers making them conscious of their right and rising aspiration of better living. ‘Tannery’ also symbolizes the conflicting change from tradition to modernity and Markandaya’s disillusion of Gandhian ideas of small-scale cottage industry.

In ‘Some Inner Fury’ the symbol used is that of ‘chameleon’, lying in sunlight and being tormented by Mira who pelts stones at it. “Nearly, too hot to move. A chameleon lay still… Idly pelted it with gravel, watching while it moved a few lethargic yards and settled now upon a patch of bare ground,… forcing it to move from back ground to background for my amusement, that I might see it change its colours……and now I saw it was hurt not merely drugged with heat as I had supposed, and I turned away sickened, but now, hating myself the impulse grew to torment it further was so strong that I could barely resist it, might not have done if Govind had not come upon me”7. Here Markandaya, identifies Mira’s character with that of chameleon, when tortured will change colours. As when she see’s the fury of the crowd, she abandons her husband and joins the crowd. Rest of the novel contains beautiful description of rains and storm villages, cities and harvest.
In ‘A silence of Desire’ Markandaya to presents the mental conflict of Dandekar and his wife Sarojani through many symbols. The symbolic ‘tulsai plant’ denotes the difference in religious beliefs between the husband and wife. The ‘dwarf’ symbolizes the spiritual crippling of Dandekar. The most significant symbol that the novel has made use of is ‘banyan tree’ as it symbolically stands for Sarojani’s successful operation and Dandekar’s wish to win back his peace as all desires are silenced and Sarojani returns back to him. It’s over at last it’s over ne though he could hardly walk, his legs were like water reeds, and he sat down in the shade of the nearest tree to recover. It was a banyan… Great gnarled roots dug into the ground heavy trusses the soil to earth themselves and beginning new life…”

In ‘Possession’ Markandaya uses the ‘monkey’ as a symbol of Caroline’s possessiveness. Caroline came first all in her shining weightiness leading by the hand Valmiki also in dazzling white and he leading by its chain tiny monkey wearing a scarlet hip length jacket and gilt leather collar.*378 Another symbol used to show Valmiki’s spirit personality and a sense of alienation is through ‘crevice’, “what are you asking me to do make some sort of ghastly mock-up of those conditions? Or take him back-return him to the exact crevice in the racks I found him in?”

In her novel ‘A Handful of Rice’ again ‘jungle’ as a symbol is used to bring home the struggle of Ravi. The struggle of Ravi to make an honest living in city is compared to the animals who have to struggle for existence in jungle people swarm like ‘ants’ Jayamma, his mother-in-law watches like an eagle. People who pinch and scrape are called cattle. “The modern city is a man made jungle … full of snares and traps.”10 The symbol of the ‘bougainvillea’ is used to show the difference in religious ceremonies of Hindus and Christian “they were all sorts he noted, Hindus would only use certain flowers for their religious ceremony, roses, jasmine, chrysanthemums or the feathery fragrant rosemary : but Christians seemed to throw anything that come to hand, for mingled in with the others he saw scattered the petal of sunflower and zinnia, and even the papery petals of the bougainvilleas creeper”.11 Markandaya, not only shows the difference in ceremonies but she also shows the superiority of Hindu religion over Christian, that is to say that Hindu will only throw selected flowers, which are considered pure and have smell where as Christians will throw anything. Through the same symbol Markandaya also shows the shallow roots of Ravi, who is trying to replant himself in city soils. “It was a pretty creeper, the bougainvillea; he thought lovely bright colours although the flowers had no smell. “He had not realized how pretty it was until he saw the way they used it in the big houses, against white washed walls where their brilliance could show, and the flowers hung down in great heavy trusses of crimson and
purple. But you had had that wide expense of wall first. If one planted creeper here not that you could there was no earth to set a root in it would hardly show against the drab bricks and title, except perhaps to brings out the drabness more. That was the one thing about his village life, though he had not dwelt on it much before there had been a small plot of ground beside their hut, which his mother had planted with chilies and brinjal and pumpkins and how pretty that had been in season, golden swelling ground among the vivid green vines;” 12

The symbol of ‘pebbles thrown in stream’ throws light on the life of city and Ravi’s conscious feeling of rootlessness, “He walked away from the man, who had begin throwing pebbles into the turbid stream of gutter. There were, he saw, a good many men throwing stones into the gutter…No wonder it got clogged and overflowed, making an unholy mess of the street…”13 In the ‘Coffer Dams’ Markandaya to evokes the theme of freedom of Helen from her husband Clinton, by making use of the ‘release of birds’ which are in cage and brought to the market for sale “what of the countless birds that she could not free, for a trade that she could not block. Yet… at the end when she saw the bird go, fluttering on cramped wings and then soaring up in headlong flight… Jackson kept the pair in a cage… someone told him neither would sing or speak unless in solitary confinement and so he gave one away. Sometimes Helen went to see the one that was left.”14

In ‘The Nowhere Man’, Markandaya has made use of powerful symbols. The ‘leprosy’ of Srinivasa symbolizes tragedy of racial hatred and senseless violence. The symbol, ‘house with its grimy curtain and peeling paints’ points to Srinivasa’s life falling apart. It also stands symbolically as his attempts to bridge east-west when he rents it out to brown, black and whites. Beside this Kamala Markandaya has also made use of ‘animals’ as symbols. Srinivasa is opposed to the ethos of white race and he thinks, “The shapes of grids which it laid upon natural patterns…of animals to cherish and experimental animals … white men and other man, the degree of concern for each other regulated by the grid.”15 The experimental animal is equated with the black men. The ‘rat’ symbol is evoked for Indians in England. “We had rat once”, contributed spotless Joe, “We had to smoke them out once you get rats on the premises” he said “you gotta smoke them out”.16 This symbol pre-figures Fred’s attempt to set Srinivasa house on fire.

Markandaya in ‘Two virgins’ makes use of symbols not only for the sake of some artistic design but to enhance the thematic effects. The title, of the novel itself is symbolic, representing the development of the psycho-sexual life of Lalitha and Saroja. There are other symbols which give us best cues for the interpretation of this novel. Saroja accepts a bi-cycle, in the teeth of protest from aunt Alamelu, that is, Saroja in some aspect accepts modernity.
From Clingleput, Saroja continues to accept sweets and admire his pleasant company. This means Saroja accepts another aspect of modernity that is male friendship. K.S. Rama Murthy observes “the ending of the novel for all its crudeness, is symbolic of this wonderful stability Saroja has achieved and in fact Saroja herself becomes a symbol of healthy reconciliation of two different attitudes of life.”

Markandaya has employed symbols sparingly in ‘The Golden Honeycomb’. It is deficient in symbolism because its historical framework prevents the author from indulging in symbolic movement. The only symbolic connotation is the Gold like Honey which is enjoyed by the predators Britishers, but the ‘bees’(Indians) rise swarming and angry revolt and the predators ultimately run away leaving the honeycomb to the bees.

Markandaya’s tenth novel ‘The Pleasure City’ is lacking in symbols. There is no picture spread out neither there is an impression of neither life nor action of character. The scenes are laid to the scenes but these are nearly snap-shots. You open the novel with curiosity and close in disappointment.

The symbol pattern in Markandaya’s novel are marked by continuity and has become internal strategy of her fictional art, Markandaya’s novels abound in zoological symbols. The jungle and animal symbols are recurrent in almost in all her novels. The symbol patterns are supported by the use of various colour images. To conclude Markandaya has made use of images colours and symbols with an aim to bring out its function in evoking the vision of the novelist.

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