



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH OF CULTURAL QUEST IN MASTERPIECES OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA

**VIKASH RAJ PAL**

Ph.D. Research Scholar

P.G. Department of English & Research Centre

Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya (Bihar) India

Email: [vikashrajpal6@gmail.com](mailto:vikashrajpal6@gmail.com)



**VIKASH RAJ PAL**

### Article info

Article Received: 24/11/2022

Article Accepted: 26/12/2022

Published online:31/12/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.4.253](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.4.253)

### Abstract

In the works of Kamala Markandaya, we see the complex interaction between the contending demands of nationalist ideals and feminist aspirations. Markandaya's quest for cultural synthesis places her firmly as a forerunner in the field of Indo-Anglian fiction. The fact that so many of her novels (Nectar in a Sieve, Some Inner Fury, A Silence of Desire and Possession) are set in the period immediately preceding or succeeding Independence is testimony to the centrality that national identity has in her novels. Her quest can be related to the desire to find unity in a country whose national movement was fraught with factionalism and whose birth into Independence was marred by bloodshed and historical background with which she became very familiar during her years as a correspondent during the Second World War. Her oeuvre charts a development from a concern with the constituents of national identity to a formulation of feminist protest that exposes patriarchal oppression as a cross-cultural and long-standing phenomenon.

Markandaya engages with the concept of gender in terms that are structured by a concern with the particularities of Indian culture, Indian history and Indian thought. This results in a problematic relationship between feminist protest and national allegiance, a relationship that carries through the works of Indian women writers of the new generation. The works of Markandaya provide a broad frame of reference for the analysis of Indian women's fiction a frame of reference which I will analyze. Markandaya shows a consciousness of their cultural heritage which is contrasted, sometimes explicitly, with the norms and values of the West. Their novels suggest that although there are many endemic injustices and oppressions in Indian society, there are many traditions in their culture that are worth preserving. In Markandaya's oeuvre, we see a contrasting portrayal of Indian women and their western counterparts. (This is particularly evident in her novel Possession.) In Markandaya, identity is not only conceived in terms of cultural and national identity but also structured by an understanding of gender difference. This is most evident in Markandaya's novels which explore the nature and form of psychological and sexual oppression in Indian society. The works of Markandaya reveal a formal diversity and

ideological complexity that broaden our vision and challenge us to review what feminism may mean in a different culture and a different country.

**Keywords:** Feminist aspirations, Indo-Anglian fiction, Sexual oppression, Ideological complexity

## Introduction

When India became independent in 1947 its constitutional aims included the granting of liberty, justice equality and fraternity to all. The women of India had played a key part in the nationalist movement through their widespread support for Mahatma Gandhi, their maintenance of the struggle through lobbies and strikes whilst their husbands went to prison, and their support of the struggle from within prison itself. They had an overwhelming claim to the rights they had fought for. Some constitutional changes were brought in to improve their lot and those of other oppressed groups: the age of marriage was raised from twelve to fourteen for girls; the ban on widow remarriage was lifted; sati (which was abolished by the British in the nineteenth century) was officially reviled and anyone aiding a widow to commit sati could be punished by death; dowries were abolished and untouchability was lifted.

Although there are many mythical archetypes, the Indian ideal of womanhood is epitomised by Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana. Abducted by the evil king of Lanka, Ravana, Sita remains chaste and ever loyal to her husband Rama. When Rama finally manages to overcome Ravana and bring Sita back to India he asks her to prove her faithfulness to him by walking through a ring of fire. This Sita dutifully does and is accepted by her husband. Yet, in the course of time his doubts return, upon which Sita, in despair, calls for mother earth to swallow her up the earth gapes open and Sita disappears into it.

This ideal of womanly devotion has a wide currency in India. It is an ideal which Gandhi used in order to mobilise women's support although, as one critic has shown, "Gandhi...stressed the moral superiority of female suffering rather than woman's ability for political intervention." [1]

Kumari Jayawardena explores this point:

"Gandhi placed particular stress on the issue of non-violent struggle, claiming that women had great ability to endure suffering. He claimed that the principle of 'non-violence' and political non-violent resistance was suited to women as they were by nature non-violent. 'I do believe', he wrote in 1938, "that woman is more fitted than man to make non-violence. For the courage of self-sacrifice woman is any way superior to man." [2]

This discrepancy between Eastern and Western values reveals a fundamental problem facing the feminist critic of Indian women's writing: how best to analyse the work of Markandaya who belong to a culture where individualism and protest are apparently alien ideas. The demand of western prescriptive feminists for assertive female role-models [3] clearly flies in the face of the cultural referents of her works which is no less concerned with the oppressions of women. In my next section I will analyse this problem in greater detail. I will show how the work of Markandaya ,must not only be analysed from a culturally, socially and historically specific context, but also how some of those critics who may be best placed to undertake such culturally specific readings, namely critics writing from within India, have failed to live up to the challenge.

Markandaya, is married to an Englishman. Markandaya's work focuses on the problems of the working and peasant class. Her first published work, 'Nectar in a Sieve', established her as a major figure in Indo-Anglian fiction. Markandaya's novels focus on polarities, the divisions between East and West, the tensions between the country and the city, and the conflict between traditional ways and modern ideas. These polarities have even been seen as a symptom of her personal history as an Indian who has married an Englishman and settled in England.[4]

But it would be more accurate to describe these polarities, not as separate and antagonistic entities, but as different realms of experience thrown together by history and undergoing the painful and transforming process of mutual accommodation. She registers the interpenetration of contending realities. She does this by focusing on the evolving consciousness of her characters, and presents the impact of change and development on the community through the subjective and often paradoxical experience of the individual.

These concerns with individual experience and the integrity of the individual consciousness form an essential part of Markandaya's humanism. Her fiction is notable in the field of Indo-Asian women's literature in its concern to penetrate the often idealised surface of village life to the actual hardships and endemic physical suffering of its inhabitants the agricultural laborer and peasants who constitute over 80% of India's population. And yet Markandaya herself has been careful to dissociate her work from 'a do-gooding path', saying that in literature there should be "neither black nor white, nor capitalist nor communist: there is only the human brotherhood." (Shimer, pp.359) [5]

Markandaya can be set apart from her counterparts in four important ways; the interaction between the social world and the psychological experience of her characters; the focus on working class and peasant experience, in particular on the impact of industrialisation and modernization on the community; the focus on the distinctive ways of the Indian south where Markandaya herself was born; and a close attention to the social diversity and inequalities within Indian society as a whole.

These differences clearly influence the way Markandaya depicts women's oppression. Markandaya seeks to link the realms of public and private experience. In all but her weakest novel, 'Possession', she represents oppression particularly in its forms of violence and rape as the outcome of multiple factors: economic, cultural, and psychological. Her depiction of violence and rape in 'A Handful of Rice', for example, acknowledges the link between such violence and the individual's sense of his own very real powerlessness.

Markandaya's novels fall into two principal thematic categories: novels which interrogate issues of economic exploitation, racism and the clash of national allegiances 'Some Inner Fury', 'Possession', 'The Coffin Dams', 'The Nowhere Man' and 'The Golden Honeycomb', and novels which analyse the impact of Western, urban, ways on a predominantly agricultural country 'Nectar in a Sieve', 'A Silence of Desire', 'A Handful of Rice', 'Two Virgins' and 'Pleasure City'. Yet to slot Markandaya's novels into these categories is to ignore a more fundamental thematic concern that unifies her entire oeuvre: namely, the quest for synthesis what Nehru has described as "some kind of dream of unity"[6] between apparently polarised cultural, sexual and political realities as they are defined and experienced by individual characters. It is in the contradictions between these contending realities that Markandaya most powerfully portrays an India in the process of radical change. In 'Nectar in a Sieve', which depicts the transformation of village life through the eyes of the wife of a tenant farmer, to her most recent novel, 'Pleasure City', which describes the development of a hotel complex through the eyes of a boy, this category of novels offers a sensitive portrayal of a country at the crossroads. In this paper I will explore Markandaya's quest for synthesis in Nectar in a Sieve, A Silence of Desire, A Handful of Rice, and 'Two Virgins'. I show how this nationalist concern gradually breaks down as Markandaya becomes increasingly engaged with feminist issues.

In Markandaya's quest for synthesis, she not only navigates her way through contending and contradictory realms of individual experience and belief, she also explores the adequacy of different generic forms to the task of describing a world whose instability and multiplicity serve to breach, subvert or transform formal generic conventions. For example her novels reveal great stylistic diversity, moving from the epic to the comic with surprising fluidity. Her intention would appear to be the creation of multiple perspectives within the text, a rendering visible and accessible of the dynamics of human struggle. To interpret Markandaya's novels in purely sociological terms (Shimer, pp.368) is not only

to deny their formal complexity, it is also to misrepresent their meaning.

As Eagleton, commenting on Lukacs' arguments against crude attempts to raid literary works for their ideological content, puts it:

"...the true bearers of ideology in art are the very forms, rather than the abstractable content, of the work itself. We find the impress of history in the literary work precisely as literary not as some superior form of social documentation." [7]

Markandaya's use of multiple genres also constitutes a quest on her part for clarity; a way of making language reveal rather than obscure the worlds of her characters. This is a reaction to what she has elsewhere described as 'a hangover from the past, when Indian novels were wordy, metaphysical and unreadable'. Markandaya places herself in a new tradition of "Indian writing which has shed its curlicues and is both limpid and readable." (Harrex,pp.66)[8]

It is odd, given the generic multiplicity of Markandaya's novels, that certain critics have slotted them into a generalised category of 'formula fiction' a critical strategy that operates by isolating one aspect of each novel to the exclusion of all others. 'Nectar in a Sieve', 'A Handful of Rice' and 'Two Virgins', for example, have all been characterised as Mythical or Epic narratives [9] despite the fact that they differ dramatically in their formal strategies. Other critics notably K. S. N. Rao have argued, incorrectly, that Markandaya's work is limited by the one-dimensional characterisation of popular fiction, "almost all the characters ...are emphatically true types rather than sharply marked individuals." [10]

Markandaya's presentation of women's oppression emerges from a nationalist concern for what Larson has described as "cultural renewal." (Larson,p.151) The majority of her novels are written or set during the time of massive industrial - growth in the Fifties and Sixties, and describe the deleterious effect of urbanisation and westernisation in a predominantly agricultural country. No other Indian woman novelist writing in

English has devoted so much of her work to the study of the impact, both psychological and cultural, that imperialism and industrialisation have had on India. The peculiar effects of this industrialisation on women are now beginning to be studied by sociologists such as Duley and Edwards, who argue that:

"The cultural and economic forces of industrialization and Western imperialism interacted with the existing social order in ways that often increased stratification along gender and class lines.

Colonialization ... introduced new patterns in the sexual division of labour such that in many instances more egalitarian relationships were replaced by the marginalization of women in political decision-making spheres, in access and control over resources, and in rural rights and privileges." [11]

These views are echoed in some of Markandaya's novels which show the West as a 'corrupting' force in Indian society. Western women too, such as Lady Caroline Bell in 'Possession', and westernised Indian women such as Miss Mendoza in 'Two Virgins', are portrayed negatively. These characters tend to be direct antitheses of their more traditional Indian women counterparts. Caroline Bell, for example, belongs to a privileged, exploitative and oppressive class and her power is described as inherently evil, "Whatever its manifestations however excusable its manipulations, or well favoured the end it would never be other than evil" ('Possession',p. 184). Similarly, in 'Two Virgins', the Christian teacher Miss Mendoza is satirised because she introduces incongruous practices such as flute-playing and maypole-dancing in the village school. Her lofty endeavour to "develop ... the character of the girls, especially the moral side " ('Two Virgin',p. 14), collapses when her star pupil, who masters these skills, is seduced by a film-director, falls pregnant, and leaves for an uncertain future in the city.

It could be argued that, in the bulk of her novels, Markandaya needs to present a negative picture of the West in order to provide a foil for a more affirmative view of Indian culture. S.C Harrex

has argued just this, claiming: "the sense of identity in her work is noticeably most affirmative in the "philosophical" rather than the "sociological" context, most positive after it has been tested against English values and most vulnerable when confronted by internal Indian sociological adversities. " (Harrex,p.67) Yet such a view denies the conscious ambiguity of her work, her refusal to endorse the manichean morality of simplistic nationalism. In 'The Coffer Dams' for example Markandaya's, most self-consciously crafted novel, the key character is an English woman who manages to break with convention and find spiritual fulfilment in her affair with a tribal Indian. The balance she achieves between social independence and spiritual harmony is an uneasy but significant one because it is something denied Markandaya's Indian heroines. In the world of Markandaya's novels, a world constructed within the ambit of Indian social mores, tradition and history, the Indian woman is necessarily constrained in her actions.

In Markandaya's oeuvre we see a general development from endorsing women's passivity to extolling their protest. Both these perspectives are analysed from a number of different angles revealing Markandaya's understanding of the social, historical and cultural factors that shape individual response. It is an understanding which has reached its culmination in 'The Golden Honeycomb', one of Markandaya's most recent works. The complex narrative portrays, interrogates, and draws parallels between three forms of power: colonial rule, caste privilege, and patriarchal domination. This engagement with the uses and abuses of power in every area of Indian life is a testament to the complexity of Markandaya's attempt to formulate what she has described as "a literature of concern." (Shimer, pp.370) Most literary critics have, I believe, elided or ignored this complexity. The following study aims to redress this imbalance.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we can say that it is not through domination but through mutual respect, appreciation and understanding that a harmonious union and happy lasting relationship between the East and the West can be established. The

experience of a multicultural situation has filtered into the lives of the people who have had the misfortune of colonial experience.

### **Works Cited**

- [1]. Alexander, Meena, 'Outcaste Power: Ritual Displacement and Virile Maternity in Indian Women Writers', p. 23.
- [2]. Jayawardena, Kumari, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London and New Delhi, 1986), p. 97.
- [3]. Register, Cheri, 'American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction' in *Feminist Literary Theory*, edited by Mary Eagleton, pp. 171-74.
- [4]. Jain, Jasbir, 'The Novels of Kamala Markandaya', *Indian Literature*, pp. 36-43.
- [5]. Shimer, Dorothy Blair, 'Sociological Imagery in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya', *WLWE*, 14 (1975), 357-70.
- [6]. Nehru in 'The Discovery of India' quoted in S.C. Harrex, 'The Historical Sense and the Commonwealth Writer', p. 150.
- [7]. Eagleton, Terry, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London, 1976), p. 24.
- [8]. Harrex, S.C., 'A Sense of Identity: The Novels of Kamala Markandaya', *JCL*, 6, no. 1 (1971), 65-78.
- [9]. Larson, Charles, 'The novels have been variously, described as 'a saga of the triumph of human spirit', and a 'story of mythic proportions, an archetypal story of the loss of innocence', in, respectively the Indian PEN quoted on the book cover; p.134 and 151.
- [10]. Rao, K.S.N., 'The Novels of Kamala Markandaya: A Contemporary Indo-Anglian Novelist', *Literature East and West*, 15, 2 (1972), 209-18.
- [11]. Duley, Margot I., and Mary I. Edwards, *The Cross-Cultural Study of Women: A Comprehensive Guide* (New York, 1986), pp. 48 and 53.