

# East Meets West in the Fiction of Kamala Markandaya

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**Abstract** – Themes of most of Indian novels of post-independence era revolves around struggle India was going through. In Indian English literature, Kamala Markandaya is one women author who has created pedestal place in English literature. East west encounter has emerged as prominent theme in the fiction of Kamala Markandaya apart from feminism. Here in this research paper, i will discuss, different ways east meets west in her novel. She has used characters, cultures, way of life to differentiate between east and west. We can see in her novels, indo-British interaction in india and outside india, cultural conflict, rural versus urban, mysticism versus science, faith versus reason. How plot shifts when east meets west. How people behave differently to culturally different people. Her characters struggle at individual level, social level, cultural level, political level and racial level. All her novels are of post-independence era, novelist truly present what a developing country goes through. Novelist has herself lived both the life, in India and abroad, so she justly presented this. In some case, she presented western characters as savior while in some case they are brutal racist. I will discuss in my paper how conveniently she showcased east west theme in her fiction.

**Keywords** : Kamala Markandaya, East-West, Culture Conflict, Post-Independence, Uproot

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Post-independence era was a very crucial time for Indian women writers. Writers like Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Arundhati Roy, they enriched Indian literature with their creative paradigm. Amongst them Kamala Markandaya is one of the novelist whose life and novels represent east and west interaction. She has written ten novels, all of them shows her artistic expression. If we dig out the plot of her novels we will find clash and interaction of east west at every level of life in her fiction. Her characters struggle at individual level, social level, cultural level, political level and racial level. She presented transition Indians were facing after independence. Her fictions are filled with east west encounter, not only at human level but also at way of life. Conflict between tradition and modern, rural versus urban, faith versus reason, mysticism versus science, spirituality versus materialism and indo-British relationship. Kamala Markandaya's life has given her understanding of both the east and the west. Before moving to England, after marrying Bertrand Taylor in 1948. She spend her time in the village of South India, this made her aware of drastic and tough situation of Indian peasants, Indian women, poverty and starvation people facing in a country who has just got freedom. After that she settled abroad, her bringing in Europeans characters in fiction, is because she lived a long time amidst these people. Both east and west has different way of living, is quite evident in her fiction. She has

adapted both the culture and represented them effectively without taking sides. In some of her novels, Britishers or Christians are drawn such as Dr. Kenny in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Miss Mendoza in *Two Virgins*, Helen and Clinton in *The Coffey Dam*, Richard in *Some Inner Fury*, they react differently on the ways of indian culture. She bring in perception of both the sides, east through eyes of west and west through eyes of east. A kind of love-hate relationship germinate between them but failed to grow. (Pattanaik 186)

In most of Indian novels of post modernism, authors delineated Britishers as rulers and Indians as patrons. In Kamala Markandaya's novel, *Possession*, *Some Inner Fury*, *The Coffey Dams*, she tried to show these western people that they do not understand the Indians and their way of life. They still trying to be as ruler, arrogant, conceited and govern over the Indians. Following a policy of 'divide and ruler' to gravitate British rule in India. In hangover of their power Britishers forgot all the decencies in their authority. They forget that they have no right to disrespect natives and their culture. Their culture is not inferior, it is just that Europeans do not understand it.

In her fourth novel *Possession*, Kamala Markandaya has metaphorically depicted britishers through Caroline. Caroline's over possessiveness

over Valmiki, her desire for taming the crude, go parallel with British imperialism in India. Caroline's dominating nature uproots Valmiki from his native ground. These British characters show they want to possess Indians not only politically, but culturally and artistically also. Caroline takes Valmiki from his country to England, where she gives platform to his artistic venture of painting. She takes pride in giving wings to him; she has no understanding of Valmiki's art. She just admires his art superficially without even knowing the deeper meaning attached to it. She acquires him as her personal possession. While Valmiki finds artificiality in British people's demeanor. It is Anasuya who points all this she is doing for Valmiki not for altruism but so that she can take pride, prestige and applause. Through this novel, Kamala Markandaya showed artistic richness of Indians and how Britishers through their power, wants to become pioneer of discovery, wants to westernize people and their country. They actually do not know that there is no need to westernize if you want to upgrade someone. Apart from Caroline, who has no humanly attachment to Valmiki, there are other characters in Kamala Markandaya's novels, where she showed sympathetic side of Britishers towards Indians such as Dr. Kennington in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Hickey in *Some Inner Fury*, Helen in *The Coffer Dams*. Kenny comes in the life of Rukmani as savior, when Rukmani was not conceiving, he came to her rescue, treated her and later her daughter Ira also gets treatment from him. Helen and Kenny, they both emerged as generous, kind hearted and sympathetic people, who treated Indians with humanity and selflessness. They are good at heart and there is no kind of racial superiority in them. Dr. Kenny settled in India, left his family and children to serve people of India. Unlike other British administrative, who treated Indians not as humans, but he does best for a backward country like India without ostentation or vanity. Through him novelist shows a kind of sympathetic outsider and that not all Britishers are rude to Indians. Just having a sympathetic attitude towards Indians does not make Dr. Kenny to understand spiritual believing of Indians. He hates passive acceptance towards any situation by Indians. He accepts them to be rebellious. Sometimes he rebuked Rukmani for her just crying and not doing anything about her situation. He does not fall prey to entangled philosophy of Rukmani, which shows, at the end there is lack of mental compatibility between Indian and Britishers. Another such missionary is Hickey in *Some Inner Fury*, a noble soul, worked for the benefit of Indians. He build hospitals and orphanage, but as time passes, transition occurs in his attitude, after all he is a white man first and then a missionary. When the school is burnt down by terrorists and Premala got killed. His reaction as he is deeply hurt, kneels down for prayer of anguish soul. But contrary to this he does not hesitate to give false witness against Govind at trial of murder. He emerged as in conflicting state of mind. He did good work for the benefit of the people but on the other hand having

racial prejudice at individual level gives us an illusion of his conflicting mind. Although, main character of *Some Inner Fury* is Mira, she does not represent Indian culture. It is through her sister-in-law Premala who shows eastern values, her calm behaviour and passive acceptance shows Indian roots. Through Mira and Kitsamy, novelist has tried to mingle values, they are Indian with westernized attitude but still thinks in a traditional way. Kitsamy tries hard to fit in the western slot, he does not want to be ridden with Indian norms. His inclination towards western culture and forcing his wife Premala to be like him was giving incompatibility to their marriage. Richard being an Englishman, falls in love with Indian girl Mira. May be because at some point she has adopted western behaviour, but at some point she is also traditional thinker, that's what makes Richard fall for her. Kitsamy efforts to westernize his wife Premala, at some point she tries for the sake of her husband but later on she give up. She cannot be unreal for long. Premala and Govind are two characters in *Some Inner Fury*, who are actually more grounded in their roots. We can see here clash of eastern and western values. Incompatibilities can be seen between Kitsamy and Premala, because of their approached towards life is totally different. Whereas Mira and Richard they have understanding between them but political turmoil of struggle of India's independence, did not let their love to flourish.

Novelist has used various ways to coalesce east and west. East meets west in various ways, may be in form of conflict, clash, adaptation etc. She has tried to showcase some Indian characters who have adopted to west, such as Kitsamy and Roshan in *Some Inner Fury*. They both respect the way Britishers handle the administration. But Roshan is someone who has friendly terms with individual westerners but when the country comes she takes active part in the political struggle against Britishers.

There is mental image of cultural domination, novelist tried to present. Britishers feel cultural domination over Indians. Not looking Indians and their rituals with respect. That's what Caroline in *Possession* feel towards India. She wishes to take away Valmiki from India because she thinks his talent does not belong to this place but a better place like England. She does everything to glorify him and his talent but still she could not find place in his heart. She tries to possess him.

On the other hand, Swamy whose spiritual enigma attracts Valmiki, he does not even put efforts to possess Valmiki. At the end, Valmiki return back from England to his roots. He was filled with feeling of alienation and rootlessness. Comforts and glamour of west cannot hold him back and he return to his nation where his emotional satisfaction resides. Here, novelist showed the virtue of both

the east and the west. Novelist does not pen anything directly, she left it to readers to side.

West is also presented in her novels by gate of modernism. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, intrusion of technology in form of Tannery, unsettled the life of Rukmani and Nathan. Their simple, serene rural life filled with clamour and noises from industry. Novelist here tried to show transition phase of a village which has just now encountered triviality of western ways. Peasants were getting uprooted from their land to make space for Tannery industry. Farming was only occupation they had, this leads them to poverty. Rukmani and Nathan could not feed their children, they are ridden with poverty, hunger. Tannery engulfs their two sons and are forced to move to the city to search for their third son, Murugan. But on reaching there, their situation worsens. City does not welcome them, they cannot adjust themselves in new westernized city. Their all possession got stolen and is forced to work as stone breaker in a mill. All these drudgery Nathan could not bear and dies. Rukmani returns to village with empty hand. Here Kamala Markandaya has tried to depict east west meet in form of rural versus urban. The moment their village enters the phase of urbanization, this creates havoc in their life. Everything changes as industrialization progresses. This modernism did no good to their life. It did gave hope but sooner all the expectation goes in vain.

In *The Coffey Dam*, India is on its developing chariot, some engineers from Britishers came in India to construct a dam. Here Indians get a direct interaction with British people while *Nectar in a Sieve*, technology enters the rural area, but there is no English people involved but here west comes in form Tannery. Novelist here showed western superiority in technical field. Clinton, main engineer in this construction, who is obsessed with his work and he has no connection with Indian people on human level. They all are just workers who works under him and they are paid their wages. This superior complex in Clinton and his friends, does not allow them to mingle with Indians. Contrary to this Clinton's wife Helen, who finds relief in "tribal wilderness". She is a women of kind heart, keeping all racial prejudice aside. She is the one Britishers in *The Coffey Dam* who goes to villages. Novelist has used two way process in this novel, by third person omniscient narration. Helen and Clinton is seen from Bashiam's eye, who is an Indian and Bashiam is shown from point of view of Helen and Clinton. To understand their mental state, narrator gulps into the mind of character to give realistic touch to the novel. A kind of love hate relationship is drawn by Kamala Markandaya, here Helen develops affection towards Bashiam. She wants to explore strange and mystic reality of India. She finds solace in company of Bashiam for that she even inconsiderate her husband. She is the one who actually gets connect with Indian people and treat them with respect. She sometime failed to understand why there is racial

prejudice. Clinton neither interacts with Indians nor respect them and their culture. He could not believe that Indians can excel in technical work, while seeing Bashiam doing his work well. In this novel, India has got independence, still Britishers do not treat them well, It needs deep understanding and a sympathetic heart to understand Indians. Here east meets west, but cultural and spiritual understandings keep them apart.

In *The Nowhere Man*, an Indian man Srinivas, an elderly Brahmin get settled in London. He himself willingly uprooted himself from his own country. Despite his son served British army and lost his life, still Srinivas has to face racism after years of stay in London. After death of his wife Vasantha, loneliness surround him and situation worsens when he hit by racist attack. At that time London was repeling immigrants. Seeing people hostility he thinks of going to India, but stops. Because after thirty years of stay in London made him more English than Indian. Where would he go in India, he has no one there, no place to go. Atleast in London he has his rented house. Novelist has used flashbacks in this novel, she brought in some past incidents of Srinivas, when he faced the same racism humiliation in India under British colonialism. This is like continuum of discrimination from the same people, first in his own country and later in theirs. Through Srinivas novelist has shown harsh reality of east meets west.

In *Two Virgins*, novelist has presented contradict behaviour of two sisters Saroja and Lalitha. Saroja, simple, plain and practical girl whereas Lalita, pretty, notorious girl. Saroja lives a simple life, uncomplicated, she finds joy in small things of life, like birth of a calf or Chingleput's sweets. While Lalita is an ambitious girl, takes pride in her beauty, she finds herself unfit to live in village. Here in this novel, novelist has tries to show glamour of west which attracts Lalita and ruins her life. She desires to be a film star. One filmmaker casts her in one of his documentary film and later molest her. This story is about a child losing her innocence. East is always painted by rural and simple life and west by glamour of city life. The luxury and comforts which is not possible to gain in rural life. In this fiction novelist underplayed, there is no western or English characters like in rest of her novels. But she has totally used way of life, westernization of cities, factors responsible to discriminate a village and a city to show east meets west. Until Lalita was living in her village, everything was good, but as soon as she goes to city, her and her family's life changes.

## CONCLUSION

As Kamala Markandaya lived both in India and in London, she has closely looked both the cultures. And she has drawn east west encounter in her novels very effectively. Readers can actually

understand the dilemma and conflict of her mind while writing the novels. All the novels are written post-independence era. Racial prejudice existed at that time is quite evident from her narration. West never understood Indians and their culture. Clinton and Caroline shows Britishers behaviour in India while Fred Fletcher shows their behaviour in London, situation is same. Amidst all these, novelist also showed sympathetic side of west through characters like Dr. Kennington, Hickey, Helen, Richard. A love bond between Mira and Richard and a ray of affection between Helen and Bashiam showed that this east and west is just mental propensities, if they had given a proper environment their love and affection would have germinated. Apart from delineating characters novelist has also presented east and west through the culture. Like in *Two Virgin*, unforbidden desires leads Lalita to her destruction. Novelist has tries to show that people should be rooted to their roots. The warmth , care, love you will get in your nation is priceless. And in *Nectar in a Sieve*, west is shown through modernism. Industrialization of rural life snatches main occupation of villagers that is farming. It not only effects people but birds, animals life also get effected. Many authors has tried to explore theme of east west but Kamala Markandaya is one author who has explored this in her novels. We can see friction, clash, love, affection, hatred between people of both the culture. English people failed to understand submissive, passive resistance behaviour of Indians, this makes them misunderstand them. Despite efforts from some good English people still difference between them cannot be filled. Problem comes when western culture gets infused in their life. Whether in the form of industrialization in the life of Rukmani and Nathan, love for glamour of city life by Lalita, all these makes them feel uprooted and later divested their life.

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