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## Multiculturalism in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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### Abstract:

Multiculturalism is respect for and celebration of diversity of culture including language, beliefs, customs and traditions within the framework of social justice, participatory democracy, peace and non-violence and sustainability. In times of uncertainty and change, racism and intolerance, often develops a multicultural society. It generally refers to a theory promoting retention of various cultural divisions for the sake of diversity that applies to the demographic make-up of a specific place. Multiculturalism is now a universal phenomenon. No country can afford to insulate itself against cultural diffusion. The most distinctive lineament of a commonwealth writer is the duality of selves, the native consciousness and the consciousness acquired from western civilization. Majority of the writers have been both intensely and intensively exposed to western culture. Again the experience of multicultural situation has entrenched into the lives of all people who have ever had the misfortune of being colonized directly or by remote control. Meeting of two cultures cannot be a petty phenomenon. It is a potential challenge for a writer. In fact, in this togetherness there is enough of creative tension. Result may be either explosive or exquisite. Kamala Markandaya is now a major novelist who has projected the image of India, before and after independence, its tradition and change, its modernity, its rural surroundings as well as organization and technology. But what is most striking in her novels is the fact that Multiculturalism forms the matrix of her vision. In novel after novel, Markandaya explores the impact of change in terms of human psychology. To her, culture means essentially an idea which unites a million individuals and confers on each of them what Trilling calls 'integral selfhood'. Kamala Markandaya is now one of the prolific and widely accepted novelists who have projected in her fiction the image of India in its varied phases. The quintessence of Markandaya's novels lies in a fictive exploration of the human self in the context of complex cultural values.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, cultural divisions, cultural diffusion, Kamala Markandaya, modernity

Enduring fiction forges itself into the smithy of reality. Indian fiction in English has also held a mirror up to Indian social life and down the decades it has explored the varied facets of Indian society. The gruesome poverty, Independence struggle, trauma of alienation and anarchy- all these have figured on the screen of Indian novel. One of the significant and vital facets of the contemporary social life of India is the co-presence of dual cultures. Multiculturalism is now a universal phenomenon. No country can afford to insulate itself

against cultural diffusion. The history of human evolution and the rise and fall of various major civilizations of the world bring home the truth that cultural dissemination has been an integral part of human history. But in the twentieth century its place has gained tremendous increase. George Steiner goes to the extent of saying that “the modernist movement can be seen as a strategy of permanent exile.” (Steiner p.26) Alvin Toffler has spoken of the modern man as “the new nomad”(Toffler p.74)uninterested in putting down roots nowhere. These statements may have a flair for exaggeration, but they contain enough grains of truth. And more so in the context of a common-wealth country, cultural dualism is a contingent condition. The most distinctive lineament of a commonwealth writer is the duality of selves, the native consciousness and the consciousness acquired from western civilization.

Majority of the writers with the notable exception of R.K. Narayan, have been both intensely and intensively exposed to western culture. Again the experience of multicultural situation has entrenched into the lives of all people who have ever had the misfortune of being colonized directly or by remote control. Meeting of two cultures cannot be a petty phenomenon. It is a potential challenge for a writer. In fact, in this togetherness there is enough of creative tension. Result may be either explosive or exquisite. The writers, like magicians and painters, try to harmonize the conflicting experiences into a meaningful pattern. Most of the significant commonwealth novelists have responded to the impinging experience of cultural dualism. V.S. Naipaul says “living in a borrowed culture of the west, Indians more than most need writers to tell him who is he and where he stands.” (Naipaul p.73) This multicultural heterogeneity is now a world of reality and no country can afford to be an island of it. Indian fiction is fully aware of bicultural reality. Its response to this experience is variegated and sensitive, ranging on the scale from plebian and protesting to assimilative and complex.

Multiculturalism is respect for and celebration of diversity of culture including language, beliefs, customs and traditions within the framework of social justice, participatory democracy, peace and non-violence and sustainability. In times of uncertainty and change, racism and intolerance often develop a multicultural society. It generally refers to a theory promoting retention of various cultural divisions for the sake of diversity that applies to the demographic make-up of a specific place, usually at the scale of an organization such as school, business, neighbourhood, city or nation. Some countries have official, or de jure policies of Multiculturalism aimed at recognizing and allowing members of distinct groups within that society to celebrate and maintain their different cultures or cultural identities as a way to promote social cohesion. In this context, Multiculturalism advocates a society that extends equitable status to distinct ethnic and religious groups, with no identifiable ethnical or religious culture treated as a single norm to which everyone has to adhere to. There are many advocates of Multiculturalism particularly in academia and the media. The theory remains controversial and is opposed by those who support particular cultural standards.

According to many scholars, India is the most culturally, linguistically and genetically diverse geographical entity after the Asian continent. India’s democratic republic is premised

on a national belief in pluralism, not the standard nationalist invocation of a shared history, a single language and an assimilationist culture. State boundaries in India are mostly drawn on linguistic line. In addition, India is the most religiously diverse country in the world, with significant Hindu (80.5%), Muslims (13.4%), Christian (2.3%), Sikh (2.1%), Buddhist, Ahmadi, Jain and Parsi populations. Occasionally, however, India has encountered religiously motivated violence, such as the Mumbai riots and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

In fact, this multiculturalism is an essential ingredient of the consciousness of every educated Indian. What is true of the educated Indian is especially true of the Indian writer because “a writer is concerned with human action and motivation behind human behavior”(Mukherjee p.64). Almost all major Indian novelists writing in English like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Manohar Malgonkar, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal and Anita Desai have diluted this factor in their different distinctive ways. Kamala Markandaya is now a major novelist who has projected the image of India, before and after independence, its tradition and change, its modernity, its rural surroundings as well as organization and technology. But what is most striking in her novel is the fact that multiculturalism forms the matrix of her vision. In novel after novel, Markandaya explores the impact of change in terms of human psychology. To her, culture means essentially an idea which unites a million individuals and confers on each of them what Trilling calls ‘integral selfhood’. It thus represents the idea of:

A unitary complex of interactive assumptions, Mode of thoughts, habits and style, which are connected in secret as well as overt ways with the practical arrangements of his society, because they are not brought to consciousness, they are not opposed in their influence over man’s mind. (Trilling p.125)

Almost all important Indian writers carving out novels in English have transmuted the encounter of cultures in their fiction. They have given a configuration to the dynamics of cultural interaction in their novels in different ways. Kamala Markandaya is now one of the prolific and widely accepted novelists who has projected in her fiction the image of India in its varied phases. The quintessence of Markandaya’s novels lies in a fictive exploration of the human self in the context of complex cultural values. The reasons for this complex vision are several. Her predicament of being an Indian writer and thus an exposure to dual cultures is further intensified by her personal life history. Born in Madras in an educated Brahmin family, she studied at Madras University and she worked for sometime in a newspaper in Madras. Later she went to London where she worked in a solicitor’s office. There she married a foreigner and settled permanently in London as an expatriate. She continued to write under the maiden name although after marriage she is Purnai Kamala Taylor. The relevance of biographical details becomes uncertain in the absence of autobiography, biography, diary and collection of letters. In spite of the fact that a work of art has to be judged for the thing as it is, every major novelist has drawn heavily from his own life experiences. D.H. Lawrence aptly observes that “The author never escapes from himself, he

pads along the vicious circle of himself. There is hardly a writer who gets out of the vicious circle of himself or a painter either.” (Phonex p.160)

Irving Wallace, a noted American novelist remarks, “Whatever any character has ever been or could ever be entirely imaginary is still debatable.” (Wallace p.11) As a matter of fact no fictional character or episode can be imaginary in abstraction, because imagination is always deeply noted in reality. Even Helen Hull, a celebrated psychologist, is also of the opinion that imagination is the faculty of rearranging the known, of transmitting it into a new end of sometimes wonderful pieces of creation.

In view of this basic truth that the novel draws its sustenance inevitably from the life of the novelist as well as from the creative power of imagination, the significance of Kamala Markandaya’s own life becomes highly relevant to the shaping of her complex vision of life. The themes of uprootedness, racial tension and prejudice, conflict between tradition and materialism, faith and reason, primitivism and technology, a search for one’s true self, the experience of exile and alienation are myriad shades of her fictional prism. All these ring with the unmistakable strain of autobiography because we all know that she was born and brought up in a traditional Brahmin Family of South India and later when she fell in love with Mr. Taylor, she married him and settled permanently in London as an expatriate. Living under an alien sky she has become fully aware of the conflict between eastern and western values and had tried to portray India objectively from a distance. Her fictional corpus consists of a series of responses to this situation of cultural dualism.

There have been basically three different kinds of responses to the situation of cultural multiplicity. There are a few writers for whom the confrontation has not resulted in any tension, creative and otherwise. They have written with the faith that the acquired value alone can sustain their views on life. D.F. Karaka is an example of this kind. He has written novels set in England, using only British characters. His novel *Just flesh* displays the author’s knowledge of English life and culture. But it makes no contribution either to English or Indian literature because it fails to embody realities. His other novels *There lay the city* and *We Never Die* are also facile attempts.

Another group comprises novelists for whom the intercultural tension exists but does not seriously affect the course of events in their fictional world. R.K. Narayan and K. Nagaranjan are successful examples of such writers. Though recently O.P. Mathur has written *The West Blows through Malgudi* trying to explicate a constant awareness of western culture in his fiction, Narayan is a novelist weaving his tapestry out of his own cotton and wool.

The third and the most significant group comprises all those novelists who have tried to locate the various consequences of the encounter between indigenous Indian culture and the western culture. Mulk Raj Anand has fully assimilated western scientific materialism in his sensibility. Raja Rao has forged metaphysical instance that transcends the material, empirical, scientific western civilization taking ones from the upanishadik tradition and philosophy of

India. Nayantara Sehgal vindicates the duality of awareness mostly through man woman relationship. Her female characters, by and large, are hurt individuals seeking fulfillment even outside marriage. In *A Time to be Happy*, Meera and Rashmi, the mother and the daughter swing to tradition and change or to native and alien creature. In *The day in Shadow* there is an attempt at a synthesis through the union of Simrit and Raj where we find a meaning in assimilation without loss to native heritage. Anita Desai shows her tangible concern with the multicultural situation only in her *Bye Bye Black Bird*. In Desai's novels the acuteness of dilemma is lost in the welter of lyricism and her characters, who look like tinsels of loose sentiments or readymade ideas, hardly come out as round figures. Ruth Jhabvala, herself a foreigner, lived in India for long and thus has probed the encounter of two cultures. But reading her novels one feels that she is an outsider floating on the fringe of essential India rather than cutting into its depth. Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai and Jhabvala have explored only one dimension of this impinging reality in their novels. Kamala Markandaya is the only woman novelist who has fully explored and delineated in terms of situation and character, the realities of cultural dualism in Indian life. Her fiction captures the multiple dimensions of cultural encounter. Conflict, assimilation, and acculturation all the possibilities resulting from an interaction of two or more cultures are perceived with candour and intensity in her novels. *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice* and *Two Virgins*, flash formative influences of western culture on Indian life, but other novels are complete metaphors of Indian life and reality shaped by the operative cultural dualism in her consciousness. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a tragic tale of agony and the suffering of a peasant couple, Nathan and Rukmani of a south Indian village. Through their contact with the English Medical missionary Dr. Kennington, affectionately called 'Kenny' by villagers, the author brings out the opposite view point of simple and fatalist creature of the soil. The peasants endure their miseries with calm resignation. The enlightened English man nourished on ideals of liberalism, is both surprised and shocked at the plight of these people and commits himself to the welfare of these innocent villagers. Talking to Rukmani he says at a place that he does not know which his country is. Though at times he is annoyed with the inscrutable ways of Indian peasant, he never turns out to be a member of the oppressive ruling community. He is a kind hearted, sympathetic character. His presence hovers over the novel from beginning to end and like the chorus in the Greek drama; he is both a participant and a neutral observer in the action of the novel. Through the character of Kenny, his ideas and his services and his attitude, Markandaya produces an objective attitude of life.

*Some Inner Fury* is a novel of many dimensions. The author highlights in the novel two prominent aspects of India's confrontation with Britain: the impact of western education and civilization on the outlook of Indians and the conflict between India and Britain arising from the latter's political dominance over the former. The novel has a variety of characters representing western culture, Indian culture, those who hate each other, and also characters that assimilate the qualities of both cultures. The novel has political dimension- it is an exploration into personal relationship of characters belonging to two different races. The traits of political theme and the story of love-relationship intermingle with the Quit India

movement or struggle for independence. The beauty of the novel lies in unifying the various planes of experiences, emerging from the co-existence of two cultures.

In *A Silence of Desire* cultural dualism metamorphoses into a juxtaposition between spiritual faith and materialism. The crisis in the life of Dandekar whose wife Sarojini goes to seek faith cure for her tumour from a Swami is the crisis resulting from a clash between Indian spiritual faith and rational modernism emerging from a contact with the western culture. The character of Swami remains mysterious and the situation is also not fully resolved but the tension constitutes the vital experience of the novel.

*Possession* enacts the further dimension of conflict between Indian spiritualism and western materialism. This novel may be described as an allegory of the direction. The independent India has to follow the onwards march to its progress. In the story of Valmiki and Caroline the novel suggests that India has to draw sustenance from life giving springs of its own culture. Valmiki is a rustic Indian artist, a symbol of the raw independent India, for the possession of soul, Caroline Bell, symbolizing the western civilization, makes an all out effort. Alienated from spiritual root of the country Val's artistic talents stifle and smother. His final return to the Swami is suggestive of the reality that while a brief contract with the western culture is useful, finally, India's fulfillment lies in its own nourishing spiritual power.

*The Coffer Dams* transmutes cultural dualism into a conflict between technological power and the forces of nature and primitive living. This is a more ambitious novel and here the novelist jostles a throng of British and Indian characters into cross cultural situations, ways of life and attitude of mind. Clinton is the typical representative of European technological civilization and who looks upon India as the vast sprawling enigma. He represents the ruthless efficiency of business minded British Engineers. The chief of the tribe symbolizes sufferings and tensions as well as underlying hope and faith of uprooted inhabitants of the hills. However Helen and Bashiam symbolize the forces of moderation and human attitude. Helen gets peace and fulfillment when she experiences her union with Bashiam. For the first time she gets in her life a sense of belonging and a sense of universal inclusiveness. Helen and Bashiam represent blends of culture and the indispensable human links. This novel gives a wider backdrop to the theme of culture encounter because here in the form of Helen a British character is seeking fulfillment and her true identity in her alien culture.

In *The Nowhere Man* cultural dualism emerges through still another dimension of human reality. Like Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* it is the story of Indian immigrants. Srinivas and his family make an island India on the English soil. Vasantha, his wife, is Indian in essence. Her sandalwood box and the Ganges water which are immersed with her ashes in the Thames river become a cultural metaphor. Srinivas has settled in England and he tries to assimilate the acquired culture into his life. But finally he becomes a victim of racism. Both the hater and the hated are finished. The alien remains an alien. The novel takes a deeper binging into human reality. It is a novel configuring the need for racial integration, crossed cultural understanding and a cosmopolitan outlook in order that man survives as a human

being in the contemporary existential chaos. In fact, the novel reflects a more contemporary awareness of Kamala Markandaya than her earlier novels had done. It can be compared with the novels of Anita Desai and Arun Joshi or the fiction of the western writers like Camus, Malamud and other existentialist novelists. Like their fiction *The Nowhere Man* in its final evaluation is a fable on human isolation. Other novels of Kamala Markandaya like *A Handful of Rice* and *The Golden Honeycomb* also, in lesser degree, indicate an awareness of multiculturalism.

The point of departure for this study of the novels of Kamala Markandaya is the hypothesis that literature is the product of a given milieu, language and individual sensibility. Together they constitute a cultural entity, rooted in the changing traditional value system of people. It is nevertheless a critic's "occupational hazard" to raise as well as answer the question of identity of a writer with an extraordinary cross-cultural background such as Kamala Markandaya's.

While it is well impossible here to enter into a conclusive debate on the thorny issues of expatriation, immigration, nationality vis-à-vis a writer's identity, it may be mentioned that there are at least two clear approaches to an understanding of the problem: one is that of Prabhakar Machwe who, in an article, politely refuses to consider Shanta Rama Rao and Kamala Markandaya as Indian English writers because they are "not probably fully Indian...they have non-Indian nationalities (even though), their understanding of India is so realistic and feelingful. (*Journal of South Asian Literature* p.148 )

Machwe's view is political in that it suggests the "nationality" a criteria to determine the identity of a writer. The second approach is that of C.D. Narasimhaiah who argues that a writer's "operative sensibility" is more important than a "national standpoint".

"What one has in mind is a shared tradition, a community of interests, and a set of values that a people live by, all of which give a sense of identity to individuals and nations. The individual artist has to 'discover' as well as 'create' his own identity; he does not find it ready-made." (Narasimhaiah p.18)

The notion of "nationality" in the context of a writer's identity does not seem to be more valid than "sensibility" except probably for the award of literary prizes. (e.g., Dom Moraes is eligible for Sahitya Akademi's Prize but not A.K. Ramanujam or Kamala Markandaya on the basis of their citizenship i.e. "nationality").

It is interesting to note that Bharti Mukherjee insists on being recognized as an American writer and Kamala Markandaya does not disown her Indian sensibility. As Doireann Macdermott inform us:

"Markandaya has acquired a duality of vision, enabling her to observe both British and Indians with cool detachment...as she herself has said, in spite of being an outsider by choice, 'the eyes I see with are still Indian eyes'. (Macdermott p.966)

Markandaya's statement is proof-positive that sensibilities which inform a writer's vision is more definitive of his or her identity than nationality.

An interesting aspect of the modern Indian Renaissance has been the creative release of the feminine sensibility. Women in modern India have not only shared the exciting though dangerous roles in the struggle for Independence but have also articulated the national aspiration and the consciousness of cultural change in the realm of literature. In the development of the Indian novel in English, the feminine sensibility has assuredly achieved a certain degree of imaginative self-sufficiency which has been recognized by Indian as well as foreign critics of Indian writing in English.

Kamala Markandaya's novels, in comparison with those of her contemporary women writers, seem to be more fully reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India. Markandaya, in her fiction, projects the image of the changing Indian traditional society in terms of the growth of the individual consciousness. The variety and the complexity of the achieved content of her novels represent a motor trend in the history of the Indo-English novels. In her novels, Markandaya not only displays a flair of virtuosity which orders and patterns her feelings and ideas resulting in a truly enjoyable work of art but also projects the image of national consciousness on many levels of aesthetic awareness; the variety and quality of the 'felt life' in her fiction renders it label-proof in that it indicates the direction to a plausible resolution of, rather than offer definite solution to, human problems. The accent in her fiction is on the drama of life rather than the dogma of an ideology in the given context. The novelist's attitude to the society can be therefore termed as ambivalent in so far as it does not make undue demands on her creative autonomy and intensely moral vision. Ideological commitment is thus conspicuously absent from her fiction. That is why her art is free from propaganda and polemics. She is content to hold the artistic mirror up to society from a realistic and moral point of view and permit the readers to draw their own conclusions about the image which itself is not constant. The changing image of man and society is thus subtly projected in the kaleidoscope of the dynamics of change. William Walsh rightly observes: "Her particular strength lies in the delicate analysis of the relationships of the persons, especially when these have a more developed consciousness of their problems and are attempting to grope towards some more independent existence. She has been most successful and at her best, an impressive best, in dealing with the problem of the educated and middle class, and she has a gift for delineating the self imposed laceration of the dissatisfied." (Walsh p.19) Walsh, however, complains that Markandaya fails as yet "to establish a context as impressively real and as sympathetically grasped as her control of character." (Walsh p.20) In fairness to Walsh, it should be mentioned that at the time of making the comment, Walsh did not have the opportunity of reading Markandaya's latest novels, namely *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Passengers* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) and *Pleasure City* (1982). Markandaya's range of experience is so remarkable and varied that the contextualization may appear to be a serious lacuna in her fiction, particularly from a western critical view point. R.K.Narayan tries to resolve it by sticking to Malgudi as a place symbol. Markandaya tries to resolve it by peopling the landscape in the most impressive and

convincing manner. She does, of course, view the problem of human relationships in different contexts in order to arrive at a most sympathetic grasp of it. Her technical control and artistic competence are, in this regard, more evident in her later fiction than in her earlier novels. Her early novels, nonetheless, dramatize the agony and ecstasy of cultural changes in India, involving innumerable persons. Markandaya's Indian sensibility enables her, it is true, to grasp the plights of her Indian characters more easily than her British characters set in the Indian context. She is thus on *terra firma* when she depicts a Rukmani or Mira rather than Caroline or even Helen in the Indian milieu. She is equally convincing in her affirmation of the *elan vital* of Indian tradition, while recording in a coolly detached way the temporal and secular changes in India.

The quintessence of Markandaya's fiction consists in an artistic exploration of the human psyche in the context of complex cultural values. This concern for individual consciousness and its growth and refinement is the hallmark of Markandaya's fictional art. The purposive direction of her creative sensibility endows her novels with a certain representative character that marks them out as a significant entity in Indo-English fiction.

In view of the above fact, it is found that Markandaya's fictional corpus is highly influenced with Multiculturalism. Cultural dualism is her contingent condition, her personal predicament and it is also the constant shaping spirit of her version. An encounter of two cultures is a very potent phenomenon. It has far more powerful consequence than atomic fission. It changes the very stance of life, the core of our philosophy of life. The results of the encounter can be varied. To outline it in precise terms, it has been of three significant kinds: acculturation, deculturation and ambivalence or transculturation. These factors which come as an outcome of Multiculturalism can be easily traced in her work.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *A Handful of Rice*, *Two Virgins* and *Pleasure City* are novels that have given a congruent fictive form to this phenomenon of acculturation in varied ways and varied degrees. In *A Handful of Rice* the theme of cultural interaction is not at all obvious; not that apparent. However, it shows covertly how the modernism set in by the western influence aggravates the protest of the protagonist against the traditional environment in seeking his fulfillment by carving his career independently. *Two Virgins* also reveals the consciousness of cultural dualism indirectly through the polemics of modernism and tradition in Indian life. *The Golden Honeycomb* also catches the princely India rooted in loyalty to the British empire and the emerging modern democratic spirit that comes as a challenge to the old rule of exploitation and a heraldic of new social, economic and cultural values. Deculturation is still another facet of the dynamics of cultural interaction in Indian novel in English. Kamla Markandaya's *Possession* and *The Nowhere Man* are significant novels given an authentic voice of the phenomenon of deculturation in Indian society or in the life of Indians living in India or abroad. However, the most pervasive cultural situation in our modern Indian society is the situation of transculturation or co-existence of dual traits. Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire & Pleasure City* beautifully fictionalize the dilemma of a modern India who is neither purely western, nor

wholly Eastern in nature. Western rationalism, scientific temper and a matter of fact as well as traditional stance of spiritualism play equally dominant roles in the life of a contemporary Indian.

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