



“I am a stranger”: A Study of Racial Discrimination and Alienation in Kamala Markandaya’s Novel *The Nowhere Man*

Mrs. Moumita Bera

Ph.D. Research Scholar,

Department of English,

Swami Vivekananda University,

West Bengal, India.

mou88bera.tunga@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.37>

Abstract:

The *Nowhere Man* is a novel written by Kamala Markandaya that was published in 1972. Kamala Markandaya was a pseudonym used by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor, who was born in 1924, and lived till May 16, 2004. She was an Indian novelist and journalist, a graduate of Madras University who published several short stories in Indian newspapers. After India got its independence, Markandaya moved to Britain, though she still labelled herself an Indian expatriate. Kamala Markandaya was an Indian expatriate living in London and all of her literary works are marked with a deep sense of Indianness and nostalgia, thus *The Nowhere Man* is considered a prime example of Diasporic literature. The paper focuses on racial discrimination and alienation experienced by immigrants in Kamala Markandaya’s Novel *The Nowhere Man*. The suffering of a migrated man of India in England is depicted with East-West violence and he has no self-identity. This is the very novel mirrors alienation of an Indian Brahmin who had spent one third of his life in England faced bitter experiences though he embraced England life. He was dissuaded, deceived and ill-treated by whites whom he knew in foreign land.

Keywords: Racial Discrimination, alienation, Kamala Markandaya, *The Nowhere Man*.

Introduction

The Nowhere Man is the only novel by Kamala Markandaya that is set in London, Britain. However, the story of this novel too is deeply connected with her Diasporic Indian roots. *The Nowhere Man* is the story of Srinivas, an elderly South Indian Brahmin who has lived most of his adult life in London since 1919. Despite his academic brilliance and entrepreneurial success in establishing a spice business, Srinivas faces persistent racial discrimination, alienation, and a profound sense of not belonging in British society. His wife Vasantha dies of tuberculosis, and his two sons serve in the British army during World War II, with only one returning home. The novel explores Srinivas's internal and external struggles as he confronts increasing racial hostility and social isolation, especially as he suffers from leprosy, which further marginalises him. His relationship with Mrs. Pickering, an impoverished English divorcee, becomes a rare source of companionship and mutual understanding, transcending cultural and racial barriers through mature friendship and compassion. The novel also contrasts Srinivas's traditional, patient endurance with the younger generation's more assertive and integrated attitudes, embodied by his son. Delving into the psychological impact of displacement, *The Nowhere Man* is a powerful exploration of alienation, cultural estrangement, and the human need for connection amid social and racial divisions. Commenting on the novel, Madhusudan Prasad writes, "*The Nowhere Man*, is the most powerful and the maturest of the novels of Markandaya. Although it again depicts the East-West encounter (in a new perspective altogether), it is basically a moving elegy on England's recent racialism which still continues rather unabated" (152).

Kamala Markandaya, herself a product of two cultures, was born and brought up in India and married and settled down in England. She remained in England rest of her life except frequent visits to her birthplace. She had a firsthand knowledge of Indian culture in which she was born and at the same time she described the western one with faithful clarity. As an acute observer

of life, she has presented a clear and realistic description of both the cultures she has been part of. She has presented these cultures face to face in her novels and has portrayed cultural clash between two modes of life on account of certain characteristics of two diametrically opposed viewpoints. This conflict of two cultures has been provided by a number of contemporary creative writers in a faithful and realistic way as Markandaya has done after independence.

Mira K. Bai points out:

The confrontation between the East and the West, the strange love-hate relationship that exists between the two, the cultural alienation and the loss of identity faced by the expatriates and immigrants are some of the aspects that are presented with a deep insight by writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai and Nayantara Saghal. (117)

Markandaya has presented in her novels various instances of cultural clash resulting in misunderstanding of the peoples of the differing cultural background. There are several English characters, who do not understand Indian culture deeply and clearly, nor do they try to know its faith and philosophy; but invariably want to see the thought process and the workings of the Indian people in the modern way which is rather western oriented. For this and many other similar reasons, they want to diagnose through their own parameters and provide the solution which is totally different from and overtly opposed to the real situation of the land. Such characters abound in Markandaya's fictional world who want to resolve the Indian issues through their inherited cultural ideology, which they believe to be superior to others in the world, though it is well known that the same treatment cannot be administered to everyone and everywhere, so it differs from person to person and place to place based on various grounds. Hence, second situation can be observed in the Indians who are anglicized or have adopted and adapted to the western thoughts and conditions. They have thrown away their traditional past with both the hands and have immersed up to the neck in the Western culture and tradition. They are estranged to their own culture and sing the hymn of Western one and its superiority.

They are ignorant of their own glorious past and enthusiastically criticise their own culture as backward and outdated, and therefore it should be discarded and improved as soon as possible. However, they see its replacement as nothing but the Western one. The third category is of those Indian people who frown upon any change and want to stick fully to the inherited order. Any change to their culture and tradition is unbearable to them and they see the western one as senseless and useless and also inferior to their own. Even, living in an alien surrounding, they do not want to follow the rules of their adopted land, and often aspire for their own inherited one though they are often seen as rootless and restless unable to remain in either of the two. Some of them seen in a dangling situation cannot balance their condition. Therefore, the situation demands adaptation and coexistence because the proximity of both these cultures has created a situation where a mutual understanding from both sides is required. Kamala Markandaya's bifocal vision perceives the cultural confrontation of East and West with a clear perspective. The proximity of both the cultures acts and reacts upon each other and leads towards a situation which is difficult to be easily understood by the people of the opposed viewpoints. Markandaya's whole fictional world is replete with such descriptions as how two world views contradict each other and a compromising outlook and harmonizing situation is denied on account of so many reasons. She observes and describes these situations with sincere clarity without being partial to either of the two cultures. “Kamala Markandaya's sarcasm against the chauvinistic Indian is as revealing as her irony against the complacent English” (Chauhan 144). The dichotomy between two diverse cultures can be well expressed by writers like Markandaya, who had direct access to these cultures. Dorothy Shimer pertinently states: By far the chief interest is in the relationship of India and Indians to Western powers and peoples, which perhaps is not surprising in view of Ms Markandaya's East-West marriage and her personal life now shifting between English and India. Few creative writers could speak with more insight or authority on the subject. (360)

Being a part of both these worlds Markandaya has extensively reflected upon this issue and presented them in her works. In *The Nowhere Man*, Markandaya presents Indian people living in alien culture and the sinister problems they face in the adopted land. The people who migrated and adapted themselves in the foreign soil have dual citizenship: they nostalgically look towards their motherland whose culture they have inherited; on the other hand, they have the adopted land where they have adapted according to the tradition and customs of a new found culture. However, the difficulty arises when their own children identify themselves with the place they are born and brought up. “The generation gap is particularly wide in the case of immigrants. Parents identify with the mother country and children with the adopted one” (Joseph 76). Markandaya very clearly treats this problem and presents how the generation gap has affected the life of the people living in a foreign culture. Srinivas’s wife Vasantha does not see any rhyme or reason in the foreign culture and follows her own in an alien surrounding. However, their children are brought up on the western culture and when they distanced themselves from their parents, she could not bear the culture shock and passed away. Srinivas is left alone in his old age as a rootless, restless person living in existential crisis. He improves upon his condition in the company of Mrs Pickering, an elderly English divorcee, who teaches him how to belong in the adopted culture. When he gets the opportunity to understand and enjoy the adopted culture, he becomes a victim of racial hatred. The question remains unanswered as east and west can never meet. In this novel, Markandaya has also treated “issues such as race-relationship, the east west encounter, the rootlessness and identity crisis” (Pathak 78).

The Nowhere Man is a powerful novel dealing with the theme of East-West encounter. Indian Immigrants in England are its central characters. The novel is a psychological study in the problems of alienation and rootlessness. Srinivas, his wife, Vasantha, are Indian immigrants in England. They carry Indian habits and live in an alien land without assimilating its culture.

Vasanthas keeps with her a handful of Indian soil and a bottle of Ganga water. She lives rooted in Indian values and ways of life. However, for Srinivas and his son Laxman, there is no Indian soil and no Ganga water. They are nowhere men. They have no connection with India. They are living a peaceful life in England but in 1960's racism rears up. Srinivas becomes the target of Fred Fletcher, a neighbour, who torments him in various ways and finally burns him alive by setting fire to his house.

The novel is set during a time of rising racial tensions in Britain. Politicians like Enoch Powell (especially with his “Rivers of Blood” speech) stirred up fear against immigrants, claiming that immigration would destroy British society. These ideas gave ordinary people a reason to treat immigrants with suspicion, hatred, and even violence. No matter how peaceful or assimilated an immigrant is, racism can still label them as permanent outsider, “dissuaded, deceived ill-treated” (Chidar and Agnihotri).

“I am a stranger. He muses over his situation as: An alien whose manners, accents, voice, syntax, bones, build, way of life all of him shrieked alien!” (*The Nowhere Man* 16)

In the novel, *The Nowhere Man*, sense of rootlessness is a recurring motif, dwindling between England and India. With the death of Vasanthas, something vital in Srinivas snaps, and he feels the void impossible to endure and survive. His emptiness could be noted through the lines, “That period, for Srinivas, was a dust bowl of being. Empty, without meaning, scooped out, picked clean, no climbing up the slippery sides. A skull, from which all matter had gone. Sea urchin shell, from which the living lights had been brutally plucked, leaving the pearly skeleton to serve as an ornament for the mindless, the surf-riders of life”. His isolation is heightened by the generational divide with his son, Laxman, who adapts more readily to British culture. The relationship between Srinivas and his son Laxman highlights the generational conflict with immigrant families. Laxman's assertiveness and integration into British society contrast

sharply with his father’s traditionalism and passivity. “Laxman is a defiant Indian youth in England – self-righteous, assertive and vehement – who fully integrates into the adopted culture and is no more an alien in England. But Srinivas cannot understand him.” (Chidar and Agnihotri).

The cultural conflict between India and England is dramatized on a broader plane. The conflict is simply not between two countries; rather, it is between two modes of living of universal dimension and significance (Shende 198). The novel delineates the pains and privations: anguishes and agonies of the Indian immigrants in Britain through the pitiable plight of Srinivas who migrates to England a few years before the collapse of British Empire. He had been living in England for half a century and is almost the ‘nowhere man’ who, after passing two-thirds of his life in England, during which he sacrificed a son to war, is heckled by racist hoodlums to travel back to his own country (Shende), as Fred tells “You got no right to be living in this country (*The Nowhere Man* 8). Fuller remarks “man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin but from inner problem ... a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence” (qtd. in Shende 198). Srinivas shares his pathetic plight with Mrs. Pickering, “It is time...when one is made to feel unwanted, and liable, as a leper, to be ostracized further, perhaps beyond the limit one can reasonably expect to oneself” (*The Nowhere Man* 193).

Kamala portrays character of Srinivas as a typical Indian who is generally India called as brain-brain. He could have got an opportunity in India for his academic excellence and intellectuality. But he also ran after like other of pre independent period to migrate to England and earn pounds. He wished to see himself a successful trader in an alien land. His dreams came true and he migrated to England and became a successful trader. An East brain worked in the West whereas his colour, creed, race and religion were completely at stake. He was called as ‘Black’ by native of England. Vasantha is synonymous of a perfect Indian who could think of

associating the pomp and circumstance of the few with the agony of the many. She used to remind her husband about the business laws that they buy things at cheap and sell them at dear price, it is the foundation of their prosperity and human beings and their colour is not material whereas it had hand in both transactions. The entire plot made readers to know owes and difficulties of the East who migrated to the West. The plot had developed as the vacuum found in Srinivas 's life. Srinivas could see love of a Westerner at his old age through Mrs. Pickering whereas he faced racial discrimination, identity crisis and alienation more than his second wife's love. He had tasted bitter experiences and lost his life as he was treated as 'black' from the East.

In *The Nowhere Man*, the East -West conflicts has been portrayed on the human as well as cultural level. On the human level, the wide gap between the Eastern and Western cultural values is effectively depicted by the novelist. Fred, Mike, Joe and Bill the young men of England feel that the black peoples are depriving them of their jobs. Fred is so much obsessed with the feeling of hatred that he challenges a coal black man sweeping the streets: "Here, you have got no right to be in this country. You beggar off, see?" (138). But the black man retorts, "I got my right when you lot carved my country" (171). Srinivas, the hero of the novel, is an old man of seventy who leaves India and spends nearly two third of his life in England. He considers England his country. "This is my country now. My country, I feel at home in it. More so than I would in my own" (61). Once when Fred assaults him, he realizes that he is in a foreign country. He finds himself an unwanted man and tells Mrs. Pickering, "It is time when one is made to feel unwanted and liable, as a lopper, to be ostracized further, perhaps beyond the limit one can reasonably expect of oneself" (202). However, all the Englishmen are not apathetic and indifferent Mrs. Fletcher, the mother of Fred urges Srinivas not to leave England and to treat it as his own country. The racial conflict in England has been dealt with Marakandaya effectively and with an authentic touch. Srinivas's feelings are the feeling of

thousands of Indians and other Asians living in England, who are the victims of racial conflicts and who are forced up to think like Srinivas.

Madhusudan Prasad writes in these words “Srinivas represents millions of men who for some reason or other leave their own roots and fail to strike roots in the alien soil. And die as rootless and restless individuals. Srinivas lives in England for one full generation of thirty years only to be a nowhere man.” (192)

Srinivas is unable to understand and adjust in the English surrounding and is seen nostalgic for his motherland. His sons are also distanced from him due to English education and culture. Under the influence of Mrs. Pickering, he identifies himself with the English culture and condition, but very soon to his utter surprise he finds that racial hatred and religious fanaticism can make the situation poisonous and one can be enemy of one's own brethren. In this way, one's adaptability and belongingness is questioned though he has lived there for one full generation. The next two novels under discussion are set in the post-independence India when Britishers came to India as the constructors for its developmental plans where English people with Indian tribals and the fisherman class are placed together. Both these classes, though different in their outlook, contribute and co-operate in the developmental plans of the country and influence one another during the encounter. There arises so many instances which proves cultural confusion between the people of two cultures.

Conclusion

In *The Nowhere Man*, Srinivas is The Nowhere Man of the title. He represents those thousands of wretched persons who suffered much in the atmosphere of the social conflict and attack on the nonwhites in England. Markandaya settled in England and saw the inhuman treatment meted out to the expatriates there. So, Srinivas's tragedy is the tragedy of thousands of nonwhites in England. The novel, *The Nowhere Man* superbly depicts the theme of racial

discrimination and alienation in the writing of Kamala Markandaya. As far as the individual's situation is concerned, Markandaya sees that the individual has no “freedom from” the curbing situation of inter-racial hostility and it is left to him to achieve a degree of maturity as Srinivas does and a sense of positive freedom which helps him to perform his duties within the circle of constraints. Markandaya’s sensitive portrayal is of the individual as subject to tensions induced by society because he is helpless in the context of racial relations unless there is a combined effort to achieve a greater degree of inter-racial understanding; The rejection that Srinivas faces at the hands of a radical racist like Fred is the objective counterpart of the rejection of a whole race. Markandaya stresses the utter shamefulness of such total rejection through violent imagery. The cross-cultural impasse which she hinted at in the earlier novels and in *Possession* is now dramatized in the form of open injustice. While in *Possession* she envisages no possible meeting-point as Val goes back to the wilderness and Caroline seeks in vain to bring him back to “possess” him, she projects, in *The Nowhere Man*, a possibility of a meeting in deep human compassion as in the Srinivas-Pickering relationship. What does *The Nowhere Man* achieve? It brings to the fore, artistically, racial issues founded on illogical standpoints that curb the individual through gigantic forces that compel, divide and destroy.

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