

From Confrontation to Reconciliation: Kamala Markandaya's Evolution as a Novelist

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Kamala Markandaya's novels have always relied upon confrontation between opposing viewpoints to set the stage for action and thereby convey her ideological concerns. The clash of values, a distinctive characteristic of the Indo-English novel, often stems from a nostalgic idealization of tradition or a compulsive urge for modernity, but in Markandaya's novels it can be traced to generally opposing modes of thought and behavior attributed to the East and the West. Indeed, the East-West encounter as a recurrent theme in her novels is directly related to her experience as an expatriate who inherited Indian values by birth and acquired Western values by choosing to live in England. Like her, most of her characters find themselves in situations where they must confront values rooted in opposing cultural milieus, historical processes, economic systems, political ideologies, and philosophical traditions. Not all of them are able to resolve the tensions and inequities that threaten to disintegrate their own psyche and spirit. But even their defeat is redeemed by their heroic endeavor to overcome their innate weaknesses or the inexorable forces around them.

Kamala Markandaya's first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), portrayed rural India struggling for survival.¹ The story is enfolded in a flashback by Rukmani, an impoverished peasant woman in a South-Indian village. Her marital life with Nathan, a landless peasant, is the chronicle of hardships of tenant-farmers caused by natural calamities and greedy landlords. The clash of values occurs in the novel at several levels, but the most crucial encounter remains between the ideas inculcated by cultural traditions of India and the forces of progress unleashed by Western science and technology. The latter is represented in the novel by the tannery (owned by an Englishman), but the ideology behind the Industrial Revolution that changed the lot of the Western world so dramatically is voiced by Kenny, the English social worker, whose anger at the passive acceptance and resignation of the people fed on the virtues of stoicism reveals the difference between the Eastern and the Western viewpoints (see, e.g., pp. 153-54).

That Kamala Markandaya is not a slogan-raising social reformer or a preacher of a certain political-economical gospel is evident in *Some Inner Fury* (1955) where the focus shifts from a clash of two economic systems—rural-agricultural versus industrial-commercial—to two systems of politics: British rule versus self-rule by Indians.² Out of this clash is born the familiar theme of East-West confrontation. Set against the turbulent years of the Quit India Movement (1942), *Some Inner Fury* tells the story of two star-crossed lovers: Mira, the protagonist, and Richard, a friend of Mira's brother Kit at Oxford, who comes to India to join the civil service.

¹ Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* (New York: John Day, 1955). All references to the novels will be taken from the editions cited and given in parenthesis.

² Kamala Markandaya, *Some Inner Fury* (New York: John Day, 1956).

The East-West confrontation is limited in scope and depth mainly because the character of Richard is too idealized to bring out the clash between his inherited and adopted cultures. His closeness to Mira, the narrator, also hampers objectivity. Instead, the East-West encounter is dramatized in terms of the conception of the West that each character has. The racial disparity between Mira and Richard finds a parallel in the cultural disparity between Kit and his wife Premla. The latter symbolizes the ideals of Indian womanhood: kindness, compassion, and self-sacrifice. She signifies tradition just as Kit represents change. When her efforts to become a part of Kit's world fail, and Kit's affinity with the Government House—an obvious symbol of racial disparity—grows stronger than with his own house, the two become estranged. Their deaths in a freak accident suggests that each represented a viewpoint that lost validity. Only Mira's experience conveys the essential message of the novel: understanding gained through suffering is a pre-requisite for meeting of the contraries.

In *A Silence of Desire* (1960), Kamala Markandaya probes the world of spirit with the same zeal as she had explored the world of flesh and senses in her first novel.³ Here the clash between spiritual faith and scientific reason is intertwined with the archetypal conflict between tradition (East) and modernity (West). This conflict is dramatized through the interplay of central characters, Dandekar and Sarojini, who share the proverbial conjugal bliss without really having any interaction at other levels—for instance, intellectual and spiritual. Their family happiness is shattered when Dandekar suspects Sarojini of harboring a secret, probably an extramarital affair. Minor happenings confirm his suspicion leading to confrontation and accusation of infidelity. Hurt and insulted, Sarojini tells him the truth: she has been visiting a swami hoping to be healed of a malignant growth in her womb. Lacking belief in faith-healing, Dandekar wishes for his wife to seek medical help but he does not want to enforce his will on her in respect for her religious beliefs. Tormented by her suffering and his own helplessness, he goes through an emotional and psychological crisis. Dandekar's self-torment is heightened, in part, by his own divided psyche: his "part-western mind fought against alleviations which his part-eastern mind occasionally hinted might be wise" (p. 117). While belief in spiritual realities is presumed in the Indians, skepticism as a natural characteristic is attributed to the British. Such thinking is reflected by Sarojini when she tells her husband: "I don't expect you to understand—you with your Western notions, your superior talk of ignorance and superstition when all it means is that you don't know what lies beyond reason and you prefer not to find out" (p. 87).

In her next novel, *Possession* (1963), Markandaya returns to the theme of East-West conflict in a simple narrative, marked by bitterness and cynicism.⁴ Unfolded by Anasuya, a young woman writer, who reminds one of Mira in *Some Inner Fury*, the story revolves around Valmiki, a rustic boy with an unusual talent for painting. Deserted by his impoverished family, the boy is sheltered by a swami who inspires him to paint Hindu gods and goddesses on rocks. By chance, Valmiki's talent is discovered by Lady Caroline Bell who "buys" him from his family and takes him to England for training as an artist. After years of travel on the Continent and painstaking training, Valmiki is established as an acclaimed artist. Caroline is now in full "possession" of Valmiki but only at the physical level, for spiritually he remains rooted in his Indian heritage. The swami's visit to England helps him realize that Caroline has simply turned him into an exotic object for exhibition.

³ Kamala Markandaya, *A Silence of Desire* (London: Putnam, 1960).

⁴ Kamala Markandaya, *Possession* (New York: John Day, 1963).

Disillusioned and demoralized, Valmiki returns to his swami in India.⁵ Caroline follows to reclaim the prodigal, and even though she fails in her mission, she is confident that one day he will return to her.

On the surface Lady Caroline appears as a stereotyped portrait of an imperialist, but deep down she is a complex character. Although her major traits—self-will, pride, dominance, possessiveness, arrogance—are meant to exemplify the British Empire, her egocentricity and acquisitiveness attain a universality beyond the allegorical conflict between the exploiter and the exploited. The narrator, herself a participant in the East-West drama of love-hate, reflects the prevalent Indian attitude toward the British. She feels that Caroline's influence over her "possession" leads to his moral and spiritual decadence that culminate in his inaction over the loss of his lover, a Jewish survivor of the holocaust, and her unborn child. Thus, Caroline's exploitation of Valmiki is supposed to parallel a historical paradigm: "undiluted East had always been too much for the West, mutely asking to be not too little and not too much, but just right" (p. 116). Consequently, the ending of the novel regresses the dialectic of East-West confrontation to the point where it was left off in *Some Inner Fury*.

Just as in *Nectar in a Sieve* Rukmani's son Murugan flees to the city to escape grinding poverty and deprivation. Ravi, the protagonist of Markandaya's next novel, *A Handful of Rice* (1966), leaves his village to find a better life in the city.⁶ The main source of conflict in the novel is his predicament in the city where he quickly learns that injustice and exploitation are spawned not by geography, but by economics. He realizes that it was not the poverty and misery of the village people that had sickened him so much as their "wholesale acceptance of life as a culture for the breeding of suffering" (p. 58). His anger is directed less at the hopelessness of the situation than at the "way people accepted their lot and even thanked God it was no worse" (p. 58). When he encounters the same fatalism among the city folks, his anger doubles.

Ravi believes he must fight the "savage delusion" of divine protection that has been fed him since childhood. He attributes the plight of the young to this "claptrap, brought on, taught and used by old men to keep young men content with their lot, because they wanted no rebels in their midst" (p. 277). His revolt against the old order and his inability to practice the new eventually result in a moral and spiritual confusion which makes him wonder: "Who had been the sinners though—those who kept their standards and sacrificed their families, or those who went out to grab what they could?" (p. 221). As time goes on, his confusion turns into resignation. Yet his defeat by his own moral dilemma is not without grandeur because he fought the invisible nemesis as long as he could.

In her next novel, *Coffer Dams* (1969), Kamala Markandaya returns to the theme of racial tension by bringing a group of British and Indian technocrats together to build a dam in a hilly tribal region in the south of India.⁷ The British engineers and technicians interact with their Indian counterparts as they have been conditioned. Eager to complete the dam before the monsoons set in, Clinton, the chief engineer, steps up the pace of work that causes tension among his subordinates, mostly Indians. Accidents happen along the way and expose racial disparity in the response they evoke from the British and the Indians. The blatant disregard for

⁵ Significantly, the Swami in *Possession* is a more sketchy and less convincing character than his counterpart in *A Silence of Desire*. It is clear that Markandaya uses this character simply as a ploy in the East-West confrontation, and he does not rise above his cardboard stature.

⁶ Kamala Markandaya, *A Handful of Rice* (New York: John Day, 1966).

⁷ Kamala Markandaya, *The Coffer Dams* (New York: John Day, 1969).

the concerns and values of the tribal people by the British fills Helen, Clinton's wife, with disgust. She finds herself drawn to the jungle—"its rampant furious growth affected her in a way that the ordered charm of a restrained civilization would never do" (p. 35). Alienated from her husband who knew her "only by night when they lay together and loved," she goes to Bashiam, a hill-man, with whom she finds "a peace that was to do with her mind as consummation had been for her body, the fusion making her whole in a way that she could not recall having achieved before" (p. 160). Ironically, her fears about the industrial civilization's onslaught on the traditional values run parallel to her recognition of the inevitability of change. In this dramatization of clashing values, Markandaya seems to suggest that preserving outdated traditions that perpetuate dehumanizing poverty is as futile as jumping on the bandwagon of technological advancement simply for the sake of change.

Kamala Markandaya's experience as an expatriate is evident in her depiction of racial interaction in *The Nowhere Man* (1972), a penetrating study of the predicament of a man who becomes alienated from both the culture he inherited by birth and the culture he adopted.⁸ The protagonist, Srinivas, migrates to England as a young man and eventually makes it his home. His two sons fight for the Union Jack in World War II where the younger one is killed in action. Nearly a half century later, Srinivas finds that he is not accepted as British as he had always thought himself to be. Racial prejudice and intolerance, caused by socioeconomic pressures, have made him a "nowhere man" in a white society because his skin is not white. In this story, punctured by occasional melodramatic undertones, the most touching element is the cultural disparity between the Eastern/Indian and the Western/British ways that often leads to misunderstanding and tragedy.

The clash of values appears sporadically yet significantly in Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973), perhaps the most sensitive portrayal of a young girl's maturation into adulthood in Indo-English fiction.⁹ Young Saroja's childlike awareness of the human body grows slowly as she observes her surroundings and listens to older friends on matters incomprehensible to her. The process of sexual knowledge goes on subterraneanly until she comes to terms with her own sexuality. Her internal metamorphosis parallels her gaining understanding of the rapidly changing world surrounding her. Her initial awareness of life in the village and its problems grows through observation of, and participation in, events that involve the familiar conflict between traditional/rural and modern/urban values. The impact of the West on the changing fabric of the Indian society is stressed but almost always negatively. Miss Mendoza, the Western educated school teacher, and Mr. Gupta, the Western-trained film producer, are both portrayed as corrupting influences. Saroja's decision not to settle down in the city, which obviously contributed to the moral and social degradation of her sister, is an indication of her maturity. Nonetheless, it also seems to be motivated by Markandaya's belief in the importance of India's maintaining its own cultural identity in the face of encroaching Westernization.

In *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), Markandaya returns to the subject of the Indo-British relationship in colonial India from an Indian point of view.¹⁰ Educated by an Englishman who had "a touching and unshakable belief in the soundness and moral integrity of the Empire and is convinced, in all sincerity, that Indians can do no better than to submit to the British presence," Bawajiraj III becomes isolated from his own people when he ascends the throne of Devapur (p. 17). His son Rabi,

⁸ Kamala Markandaya, *The Nowhere Man* (New York: John Day, 1972).

⁹ Kamala Markandaya, *Two Virgins* (New York: John Day, 1973).

¹⁰ Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977).

on the other hand, is brought up in the wake of growing nationalism so that he is able to learn about the India that lay outside the guarded gates of the palace: impoverished, exploited, and degraded. In a curious mixture of fact and fiction, Markandaya shows the alienation of royalty from their own people through an ingenious scheme, the Subsidiary Alliance, which reduced the princely states to mere "golden honeycombs." Rabi rejects his father's acceptance of the status quo and aligns himself with the "victim" rather than the "aggressor." Thus, his choice of Usha, the prime minister's daughter, over Sophie, the British Resident's daughter, as his life partner is inevitable. What stands between Rabi and Sophie "whose presence convinced him of the existence of secular heavens" is "her race. A golden race seduced by an arrogant philosophy and tainted by pride" (p. 423, 454). With Usha, on the other hand, he feels that "their lives interlocked at more than one level, with whom, it pleased him to feel, he could wait, or not, to come together" (p. 455). Yet Rabi's cordiality to Sophie and "her people" at a time of increasing antagonism between the Indians and the British is clearly indicative of Markandaya's relaxing attitude toward the West.

Markandaya's most recent novel, *Shalimar* (1983), is a continuation of the subject of the Indo-British relationship from where she left off in *The Golden Honeycomb*.¹¹ Set in post-Independence India, its central theme—the collision between primitive innocence and technological sophistication—echoes *The Coffer Dams*. The story revolves around Rikki, an orphan, who is brought up in a South-Indian fishing village. The pastoral serenity of the community is broken by the building of a luxury pleasure complex, Shalimar, by AIDCORP, founded by an Englishman and run by a group of "technological mercenaries." The project assaults the life of the community in a remarkably subtle way. Smart and ambitious Rikki is drawn to this modern Xanadu and finds work as a tea boy, waiter, life guard, and excursion guide. He is attracted to Tully, an Englishman working for the AIDCORP, because he sees in him "a man who could advance a horizon, a dream" (p. 51). However, their friendship is not without a latent consciousness of racial irreconcilables. "There is an ocean between us," Rikki tells Tully, and the latter agrees even though he feels that "there were times, long serene stretches in which they were within touching distance, when they touched" (p. 147). Nevertheless, the novel ends with optimism in the possibility of a Rikki and a Tully "connecting" in "a language that went beyond English, and was outside the scope of mere words" (p. 340).

In *Shalimar*, the usual confrontation between the East (India) and the West (Britain) in a Markandaya novel is strikingly absent. The occasional skirmishes between the Westerners and the Indians do not lead up to big scenes. Indeed, the Western characters show a remarkable sensitivity to the spirit of India; the Indian characters go out of their way to blame their lot on fate, mutability, and inevitability rather than blaming it on the West. Consequently, in *Shalimar* nobody raises an impassioned protest against the "intruder" responsible for broken traditions or family disintegrations. Not surprisingly, the narrator's opposition to progress forced upon the fishing community is only lukewarm. As Markandaya shifts her focus from conflict to resolution, *Shalimar* marks a definite stage in the evolution of her own thought and art. Her interest in India's past and its impact on the present remains intact, but the dialectic of confrontation between the East and the West has now given way to mutual understanding.

¹¹ Kamala Markandaya, *Shalimar* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).