



Cultural Conflict in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract:

Kamala Markandaya's novels are deeply rooted in the exploration of cultural conflict, particularly between Eastern and Western values, tradition and modernity, and rural and urban life. Her works depict how individuals and societies are shaped by the forces of colonialism, migration, and industrialization, leading to personal and societal tensions. Novels like *Nectar in a Sieve* highlight the clash between traditional rural life and Western industrialization, while *Some Inner Fury* and *Possession* explore the complexities of colonial and post-colonial relationships between India and Britain. In *The Nowhere Man*, Markandaya addresses the alienation of immigrants in a foreign land, depicting the struggles of identity and belonging in post-colonial Britain. Furthermore, *A Silence of Desire* portrays the conflict between modern rationality and spiritual tradition within a marriage. Through her characters' experiences, Markandaya critiques the impact of cultural dominance, racial discrimination, and the challenges of maintaining identity amidst cultural upheaval. Her novels provide a profound commentary on the necessity of adaptation and the complex process of reconciliation in the face of cultural conflict. Kamala Markandaya is one of India's most notable postcolonial writers, and her novels are celebrated for their profound exploration of cultural conflict. As an Indian author writing in English, her works often revolve around the clash between Eastern and Western values, tradition and modernity, and rural and urban settings. These conflicts are intricately woven into the lives of her characters, reflecting both personal and societal struggles. The cultural conflict in Markandaya's novels often represents the broader issues of colonialism, migration, identity, and survival in a changing world.

Keywords:

Kamala Markandaya, cultural conflict, Eastern and Western values, tradition vs modernity, colonialism, post-colonialism, identity, alienation, industrialization, migration, rural vs urban, race, adaptation, reconciliation, *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *Possession*, *The Nowhere Man*, *A Silence of Desire*.

1. Cultural Conflict in *Nectar in a Sieve*

Markandaya's debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) paints a vivid picture of rural life in India and how it is disrupted by industrialization and Western influence. The protagonist, Rukmani, represents traditional Indian values — rooted in the land, community, and familial bonds. However, the arrival of a tannery in her village brings changes that disrupt the traditional way of life. The cultural conflict here is not just between the villagers and the outsiders who bring the tannery, but between the old way of life and the new forces of industrialization, representing Western modernity. Rukmani's deep connection to the land reflects the agrarian culture of rural India, while the tannery symbolizes the intrusion of foreign economic systems and values. The clash leads to economic exploitation, loss of livelihood, and the erosion of traditional social structures. Rukmani's family, like many others, is displaced and suffers from poverty and degradation. The novel showcases how traditional rural life is threatened by the forces of modernization and the global economy, often to the detriment of the local population.

2. *Some Inner Fury*: Love, Politics, and Colonialism

In *Some Inner Fury* (1955), Markandaya explores the cultural conflicts arising from British colonialism in India, particularly focusing on the relationships between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The novel is set during the Indian independence movement and portrays the tensions between the colonizers and the colonized.

The protagonist, Mira, is caught between two worlds: she has been educated in English, exposed to Western ideas, and yet feels the pull of her Indian identity. Her relationship with Richard, an Englishman, symbolizes the broader cultural conflict between India and Britain. Mira's inner turmoil mirrors the struggle of many Indians who, during the colonial era, were torn between embracing Western modernity and retaining their indigenous cultural identity. The novel demonstrates how deeply cultural conflict can affect personal relationships, especially in a colonial context where power dynamics are skewed.

Through Mira and Richard's ill-fated relationship, Markandaya highlights the emotional and psychological impact of cultural conflict on individuals. Their inability to reconcile their cultural differences ultimately leads to separation, mirroring the broader political and cultural division between India and Britain during the period of decolonization.

3. Cultural Hybridization in *The Nowhere Man*

The Nowhere Man (1972) explores the experiences of Indian immigrants in post-colonial Britain, delving into issues of identity, belonging, and racial discrimination. The protagonist, Srinivas, is an

elderly Indian man who has lived in England for decades but finds himself increasingly alienated due to the growing racial tensions in the country.

The novel presents a profound cultural conflict between the immigrants, who seek to assimilate or find a sense of belonging, and the host society, which remains resistant to accepting them. Srinivas represents the hybridized identity of the immigrant who straddles two cultures but finds himself rejected by both. His attempts to build a life in Britain are thwarted by racism, xenophobia, and a deep sense of cultural isolation.

Markandaya portrays the immigrant experience as one fraught with internal and external conflicts. Srinivas's sense of alienation reflects the broader conflict between Eastern and Western values, particularly in the context of migration and diaspora. The novel explores how cultural conflict leads to a crisis of identity for immigrants, who are often forced to navigate hostile environments while trying to maintain their own cultural heritage.

4. Women and Cultural Conflict in *A Silence of Desire*

In *A Silence of Desire* (1960), Markandaya focuses on the internal cultural conflict within a marriage. The novel follows Dandekar, a modern, rational man, and his wife Sarojini, who holds traditional religious beliefs. When Sarojini becomes ill and secretly seeks the help of a faith healer, Dandekar feels betrayed and struggles to understand her reliance on superstition rather than modern medicine.

The novel explores the cultural conflict between faith and reason, tradition and modernity, which plays out within the domestic sphere. Dandekar's adherence to modern, Westernized values clashes with Sarojini's spiritual and traditional approach to life. This conflict reflects the broader societal tensions in India during the mid-20th century as the country grappled with modernization while holding onto its deeply rooted spiritual and religious traditions.

Markandaya portrays Sarojini's spiritual beliefs not as ignorance but as part of a complex cultural and personal identity. The novel suggests that cultural conflict can be deeply personal, affecting relationships and individual identity in profound ways. Dandekar's journey towards understanding and accepting his wife's beliefs symbolizes a broader reconciliation between tradition and modernity.

5. East-West Conflict in *Possession*

In *Possession* (1963), the cultural conflict takes on a more symbolic form as it explores the relationship between Valmiki, a young Indian artist, and Lady Caroline Bell, an Englishwoman who "possesses" him by taking him to England to nurture his talent. The novel critiques the patronizing attitudes of the West towards Eastern talent and culture, highlighting the power dynamics and cultural exploitation inherent in such relationships.

Valmiki's journey from India to England symbolizes the broader post-colonial migration of people and ideas. However, Lady Caroline's control over his life and career reveals the neocolonial attitudes that persist in the post-colonial world. The cultural conflict in *Possession* is one of dominance and submission, where Western culture is portrayed as consuming and commodifying Eastern talent.

Valmiki's eventual break from Lady Caroline symbolizes his assertion of cultural and personal independence. The novel suggests that true artistic and personal freedom can only be achieved when individuals free themselves from the cultural and psychological dominance of the West.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's novels are rich in their exploration of cultural conflict, depicting how individuals and societies are shaped by the tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, and rural and urban life. Whether dealing with the impact of colonialism, migration, or the personal conflicts within families and relationships, Markandaya's works offer a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of cultural conflict in a rapidly changing world.

Her characters often struggle to reconcile conflicting values and identities, and through their journeys, Markandaya highlights the painful but necessary process of adaptation, negotiation, and survival in the face of cultural upheaval. In doing so, her novels offer both a critique of the forces that drive cultural conflict and a compassionate understanding of those who are caught in its grip.

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