

Kamala Markandaya's Cultural Tour from Confrontation to Reconciliation

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Abstract

There is no doubt in denying the fact that Kamala Markandaya occupies a prominent and towering place among those Indian writers who have faithfully depicted the cultural conflict in their works. Her novels represent this conflict through the clash of Eastern and Western ideas. Her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is a powerful exploration of the transparent cultural struggle through the main protagonist, Rukmani and Dr. Kenny. Nathan and Rukmani are the representative s of Eastern values, whereas Dr. Kenny and industrialisation is symbolic of Western values. This conflict can be traced in her works as she first depicts the confrontation of these cultural aspects which leads towards the reconciliation at the end of her works.

Key-words: Culture, hegemony, clash, preserved, confrontation.

Literature and culture are inextricably associated with each other. Culture is preserved and carried forward by literature and language. Moreover, literature, like culture, is dynamic, it is living, pulsating activity that grows, evolves and transforms with the passage of time. It witnesses changes corresponding to the change in ideological, social, political, economic and ethical values and thoughts. Each historical period has literature with its specific and distinguishable features. The conflicts and compromises, revolutions and their outcomes, the hopes and aspirations with their fulfilment or frustration, scientific and technological progress with their positive or negative impacts directly influence the lifestyle of people and their relationship which find expression in literature.

Post-colonial literature is an offshoot of Post-modern literature assays a resistance to Euro-centric, hegemonising, and universalizing literary paradigms. But the post - colonial literary artists and theorists have developed alternative literary genres, styles for syntax to pose a challenge to the canons decided by the literature and literary theory of the colonial literatures so that this literature may cope with the demands of commitment to the assertion of national identity, pride, and dignity on one hand and aesthetic integrity on the other? Literatures in various post-colonial countries project authentically their respective

cultures and at the same time synthesise their literature with global literary scenario. Today, the international community is facing various challenges to sort out numerous harsh and violent conflicts peacefully. This challenge is posed on two levels. The first includes the temporary management of the conflict; it generally allows for negotiation, meditation and arbitration. It depends on leaders and elites, although it still requires support by the general population. The next level is deeper and it incorporates reconciliation. It demands change in the societal repertoire that feeds the conflict must involve into a new, repertoire that can serve as a basis for a culture of peace.

The conflict between East and West, especially, India, on the one hand and Britain and America, on the other, is a rearing theme in Indo - English literature. The conflict is viewed from many different perspectives by Indo - English writers, and possibilities of mutual understanding between the two sides have been explored by them in their works. The theme is given a rich variety of treatment in poems, short stories, novels and dramatic works.

The theme of cultural confrontation can be traced in the novels of Kamala Markandaya also. This theme is directly related to the experience as an expatriate who inherited Indian values by birth and acquired Western values by choosing to live in England. Like Kamala Markandaya, 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 endeavour to overcome their innate weaknesses or the inexorable forces around them.

The novelist Kamala Markandaya does not believe with Kipling's remark that the "Twain can never meet"; at least her novels show that such meeting is always possible on the personal level. The message of her novels is the message of compromise; India must assimilate the best that is there in the Western way of life, in western science and technology. It is in this way that India will be transformed and modernized and the two will come together.

Kamala Markandeya's first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* portrayed rural India struggling for survival. The story is enfolded in a flashback by Rukmani, and impoverished peasant woman in a South- Indian village. Her marital life with Nathan, a landless peasant, is a 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 novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, the western culture is represented by Dr Kenny, and also by the Tannery which stands for modern science, technology and industry. Dr Kenny is a through gentleman, a devoted missionary who was among the rural poor who does his best to ameliorate their lot. His family is in England and he has settled down in India to serve the poverty stricken, dejected and their suffering. He is frank, sincere and genuinely interested in the people for whom he works. It is to him that Rukmani and later her daughter Ira go for treatment of their childless condition.

Doctor Kenny is extremely reticent, never speaking about his family or his worries. The building of the hospital in his life's work and he accomplishes it through untiring efforts and with some assistance of Nathan's son, Selvam. Primarily he is a good foreign missionary doing his best for a backward country without vanity. *He is also a neutral observer of life in India and provides the novelist with an opportunity to observe and image of country as seen by a sympathetic outsider.*¹(NIS) However, he too fails to understand the soul of India, her spiritual culture, and is often impatient of the Indians, attitude of passive acceptance. They must cry out and revolt against injustice and oppression. When Rukmani hopes for a better life, Dr Kenny angrily shouts at her that the better time will never come unless they cry for it. He loves Indian and works for them but he also hates them. It is a love-hate relationship, for another occasion he angrily asks Rukmani to go away, for he does not want to be entangled in her philosophy. As he himself tells Rukmani, *"I work among you when my spirit wills it I go when I am tired of your follies and stupidity, your external shameful poverty, I can only take you people in small doses"*. (NIS)

We know, Kamala Markandaya married an English man and settled in England. Thus, she acquired a sympathetic understanding of the English character. When she took to writing, she introduced a number of English figures in her novels. In her novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Dr Kenny is one such figure. He is a sympathetic observer of the Indian scene and a representative of the final traditions of the west. He plays a significant role in the life of Rukmani and does his best to ameliorate the suffering of the poor he comes in contact with.

Western culture 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 the resignation of the people fed on the virtues of stoicism reveals the difference between the eastern and western viewpoints.

In India the English rulers followed the policy of "divide and rule". These rulers and patterns are treated with due irony and sarcasm but there is also another set of characters, kindly, symphonic and generous, who may be called missionaries to serve India with a missionary zeal and devotion. They are gentleman to the core and free from any feeling of racial

superiority. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, we have Dr. Kenny, who has left his family and his country to serve the poor and suffering in India.

In the novel the eastern culture is represented by the characters of Rukmani and her husband Nathan. Rukmani and Nathan are representatives of thousands of uprooted peasants under an industrial economy. Rukmani is a woman rooted in tradition, and so she does not like from the beginning the construction of the tannery on the outskirts of their village. She herself gives a graphic account of the ugliness, sordidness and meanness, which invade their villages with the coming of the tannery. It was a sudden change that came into their life and blasted it in one stroke. It despoiled the beauty of nature spread ugliness around and worked havoc in the life of the rural community. The cool and sequestered way of life in the village, "*Far from the Madding Crowd's* ignoble strife" is invaded by the din and noise, filth and dirt.

In the novel, Rukmani and Nathan are very attached to their native land and they are not ready to leave it. But this land is needed by the tannery and it is purchased at a high price by the owner of the tannery. Nathan feels desperate, when the land is being taken away from him. Nathan sadly articulates "where are we to go? What shall we do? (NIS) That is why, Rukmani and Nathan are forced to leave their land and their mud house. They migrate to the city and suffered a lot of hardships there. Rukmani and Nathan are fatalist and they don't prefer even to die at a strange place. But unfortunately Nathan die in the city. Rukmani's son Murugan flees to the city to escape grinding poverty and deprivation. In this way, the family disintegrates and this disintegration of a single family is a symbol of disintegration of the Indian agricultural way of life into the impact of Western ways and western technology.

Kamala Markandaya's pleasant personal experience encourages her to convey a message of compromise between the Eastern Culture and the Western Culture. Her experience provides a touch of lubricity in the novels.

According to writer Uma Parameswaran Kamala's messages is that there should be a compromise between Eastern and Western values. "Compromise, the author seems to say throughout her novels; compromise so that the best traits may mingle and produce a better race"². Her idea of compromise consists of assimilating a large portion of British culture as spread in India. "Kamala Markandaya aligns herself with the moderates to tilted the scale in favour of the British because their personal experience had been pleasant. She knows the English in India better than she knows the peasants and clerks of India. The English belong to the world in which she has lived whereas Rukmani, belongs to a world which she loves but which lies on the other side of the wall. For an un - Anglicised Indian she has the affinity of association; for the Anglicised Indian she has the affinity of personal knowledge and identification."

Kamala Markandaya's national pride is seen in the fact that in each one of her novels it is the East which finally wins. But, critic Meenakshi Mukherjee says, "The triumph of the Indian values does not emerge out of the situations depicted, but is often arbitrary. One strongly suspects that this is so because the novelist herself, like her protagonists, feels alienated from these values and she, therefore tends to sentimentalize and idealize them. The denouncements of the novels seem unsatisfactory not only because such facile solutions are patently false in real life where neither East nor West ever really wins, but also because it does violence to the integral logic of the novels." But Kamala also recognises that neither the East nor the West have been correct to each other. "Generally speaking the, West has been self-consciously inferior." In the words of the novelist, "Undiluted East had always been too much for the West; and soulful East always came a lapdog fashion to the West, mutely asking to be not too little and not too much, but just right." A meeting between East and West at a personal level is always possible. But political and other forces have the power to estrange and to separate where the union of individuals is not based on mutual respect and understanding but proceeds from the desire of one party to dominate over the other.

The messages in Kamala Markandaya's novels is that India should confidently pursue her own path holding fast to her traditional values and using methods appropriate to her culture, but also try to assimilate what is best in Western culture. It is true that while the novelist recognises the evils and deficiencies in Indian life and society and warns her countryman against a slavish imitation of the West, she does not offer any readymade solutions to the many problems facing the country, Her emphatic teaching is that India should preserve her soul and carve out her own destiny. In religion, she should be proud of her great legacy and her constant aim should be the attainment of the purity, equipoise and altruism represented by various characters in her novels. But on the materials level she can learn much and she should try to learn, from the West. In the end, it can be said that as a novelist Kamala Markandaya gradually moves confrontation to reconciliation.

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