



Impact of East-West Cultural Clash on Women Characters of Kamala Markandaya

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Many Indian English writers have been concerned with the East-West theme in their creative endeavours. An accident of history resulted in a long period of British rule in India. As a result, the Indians were exposed to Western culture very closely which would not been possible otherwise. A natural outcome of this situation was a constant comparison between the two cultures. Sarath Kumar Ghose wrote a novel, 'The Prince of Destiny' in 1909. The novel is about an Indian princess. This was perhaps the beginning of the East-West theme and since then a number of writers have written novels and stories on the theme.

E.M. Forster's A Passage to India is also based on the cultural differences that exist between the two cultures. In the novel, Dr. Aziz, an Indian is a good friend of Cyril Fielding, an Englishman who is the Principal of Chandrapore college. Aziz is accused of raping Miss Adela Quested in the Marabar Caves. Fielding knows very well that his friend is innocent and stands strongly by Dr. Aziz. In the existing political situation. Fielding realizes that they cannot be socially equal. He regrets,

“...socially they had no meeting place. He had thrown in his lot with Anglo-India by marrying a country woman, and he was acquiring some of its limitations, and already felt surprise at his own past heroism. Would he today defy all his own people for the sake of a stray Indian? Aziz was a momento, a trophy, they were proud of each other, yet they must inevitably part”¹.

Thus they can be friends as two individuals but socially, culturally, they are poles apart and hence a lasting personal relationship is not possible.

Kamala Markandaya, an accomplished writer of Indian origin won international fame and recognition with the publication of her very first novel, Nectar in a Sieve. Apart from dealing with themes of Alienation, Rootlessness, Hunger, Poverty, she also wrote on East-West encounter, with an insider's knowledge. The East-West conflict, clash of culture and social and moral values are presented by her from a first hand experience. Her knowledge of the West is as much as that of the East. She well understands the strengths and the weaknesses of both the cultures. She knows that the East and the West can never meet because of cultural differences. C.D. Narasimhaiah, too believed that her novels reflect her penchant for Indian values as against the spiritual impoverishment of the English society, but Indians are not spared. Actually her good men and women come from both cultures. Uma Parameswaram wrote,

“For the un-Anglicized Indian she has the affinity of sympathy; for the British in India she has affinity of association; for the Anglicized Indian she has the affinity of personal knowledge and identification.”²

Kamala Markandaya has a lot of respect and faith in Indian values but believes that Western impact is also necessary for rapid development. In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmini and Nathan represent the East whereas Kenny symbolizes the West. Nathan and Rukmini are victims of natural calamities. They only had a piece of land for sustenance and that is also snatched away from them for setting up a tannery. Dr. Kenny is a social worker and loves the Indian people but is pained at their fatalistic attitude. He has sympathy for the poor and the suffering but does not like their passive attitude and the lack of fighting spirit. Markandaya beautifully delineates the difference between the Eastern and Western philosophies by presenting Rukmini and Dr. Kenny's different attitude towards life. Rukmini said,

"want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons of earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that, which has always been and cannot change."³

Dr. Kenny feels sad about the miseries faced by the poor and innocent people. He consoles Rukmini but also scolds her for her passiveness.

"You must cry out if you want help. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succour the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life? ... There is no grandeur in want or in endurance."⁴

Dr. Kenny, a symbol of Western culture cannot understand how Rukmini can be content with a little rice and hoping that times will change. Dr. Kenny does not like the Indian philosophy of fasting for the purification of the soul. He has a rational bent of mind and is unable to understand Rukmini's philosophical resigned attitude. He feels disgusted,

"Acquiescent imbeciles, do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your body is sick?"⁵

The height of passive endurance is revealed when Ira's husband sends her back to her father's house. Nathan does not blame his son-in-law, "I do not blame him. He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient."⁶

The solution to poverty and disease lies in Western medicine and scientific, rational approach. Rukmini gets her daughter Ira treated by Dr. Kenny. She is cured of her problem but a little late as her husband has already taken another wife. Even in this misery, Rukmini does not blame her son-in-law. Markandaya is well aware of this conflict between the Eastern and the Western attitude to suffering. Rukmini and Kenny stand for different cultures one representing the Eastern and the other, Western. Rukmini stands for blind faith and accepts everything as her fate. Kenny is rational and takes a scientific, modern approach towards solving various problems.

The East-West encounter is also highlighted in Kamala Markandaya's novel *A Silence of Desire*. In this novel, the East-West conflict takes the form of clash between Indian spiritualism and Western modernism. There is no Western character in this novel. The clash is depicted through Indian characters with western education, once again in this novel, an unending conflict between Eastern tradition and Western progress can be perceived. Sarojini and Dandekar have divergent attitudes. Sarojini holds Eastern views and has no excuse for her blind, unreasonable, instinctive fear of death in a hospital. She says,

"But I do not expect you to understand me 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. To you the tulasi is a plant that grows on earth like the most ordinary

common plants. And mine is a disease to be cured and so you would have sent me to hospital and I would have died there.”⁷

But when Dandekar or Chandru fall ill, she calls the doctor and administers the “Western” medicines rather than running to the faith healer. Markandaya has presented the clash of two modes of life, the Western and the Oriental and the resulting process of modernization. The British influence was conducive to the growth of a new approach towards life. Sarojini does not like to visit hospitals but when it is a matter of life and death, she does not hesitate. Perhaps this symbolizes the change that was coming among the natives regarding their views towards Western culture and medicine.

In her novel, *Possession*, Kamala Markandaya has presented the East West theme in the context of Indian spiritualism. Among other things, the writer is indeed emphasizing colonial confrontation, Prof. H.M. William wrote,

“This novel is one of the most forceful artistic explorations of the distortions of India’s national character in the British embrace and of her consequent urge to be free.”⁸

Lady Caroline, an aristocratic English woman comes across an illiterate young man, a goat-herd, Valmiki in a remote area of South India. She takes him to England where he becomes a celebrated painter but loses his soul. He gets involved with Ellie and then Annabel and has to ultimately return to India to recover his true self. In this novel, Kamala Markandaya has presented the theme of colonialism and also colonial confrontation through her characters and events like the frequent confrontation between Caroline, the English Lady representing Western culture and Anasuya, the Westernised Indian, who is self-respecting and is true to her culture. The novel suggests that a brief contact with the West may be good for India’s development, growth, modernization and cultivating a scientific, rational approach but ultimate fulfilment can be attained only by holding on to our own spiritual values, culture and heritage. The Western philosophy is too materialistic. India’s relationship with the West may be good for progress but not to the extent of the possession of its soul by the West. Valmiki resents Caroline’s attempt to possess his soul. Anusuya feels,

“Possession I thought appalled: attenuated form of the powerful craving to have, to hold, which was so dominating and menacing a part of Caroline; which left a grey and ugly trail of human misery such as, horribly swollen but not unrecognizable, one saw stumbling in the wake of power-societies and empires.”⁹

Caroline is a typical representative of her Western culture with her pride, possessiveness, ego, cunning and Valmiki too never ceases to be an Indian in his honesty, simplicity, large heartedness and compassion Valmiki work makes an American critic say,

“This young painter paints as if unknown to himself he had glimpsed, beyond the horizon, the transcendent powers of Universe, and the refracted light brings a hint of the power and the menace into his own painting.”¹⁰

Perhaps this was due to his Indian spiritual heritage. Like Kamala Markandaya, Anusuya is an Indian influenced by the Western philosophy on the intellectual plane. Kamala Markandaya’s exposure to Western life and culture enabled her to take a balanced view of both the cultures. Margaret P. Joseph wrote,

“Her achievement lies chiefly in her artistic first position of the sustaining values of the Indian spirited tradition and the soulless prurient of a western virtuoso ‘sans’ the sense of enduring values of life, and in breathing into their polarized

symbols the unmistakable sense of feltlife.”¹¹

Indian writers writing in English have been concerned about the clash of cultures at the level of people and at the level of ideas right from Sarath Kumar Ghose (1909) to Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, E.M. forsters followed by Kamala Markandaya and many more. Markandaya not only studied the clash but also traced its origin to the beginning of the process of modernization without misrepresenting the Indian or the Western culture,

“Mrs. Markandaya born and bred in India, and settled in England is very sensitive to the clash of the East and the West and the tension born out of this clash.”¹²

The East West theme has been focused upon by Markandaya in a number of her novels, *Some Inner Fury*, *A Silence of Desire*, *Possession*, *The Nowhere Man*. The philosophy of endurance and stoicism is so deep rooted in Indian life that everywhere emphasis is on large-heartedness, generosity and contentment. In the depiction of personal and cultural life of India and also that of the West, Markandaya has been impartial. England failed to attract India's sympathy because of being the political ruler. It is equally true that it was due to close contact with England and Western culture that certain social evils could be eradicated from India and an era of science and technology ushered in. Markandaya's views on India and the West is to a large extent unbiased and balanced. She has no bitterness about the English rule and she also does not flatter the West uncritically. The West fails to understand the East. India, while keeping her cultural heritage intact can imbibe the best that the West has to offer.

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