

Vol 1 Issue 8 May 2012

ISSN No : 2249-894X

*Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal*

*Review Of
Research Journal*

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Vision of Global Harmony in Kamala Markandya's *The Nowhere Man*

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ABSTRACT

As novelist, Kamala Markandaya looks at the East-West encounter with a sense of keen discernment and dispassionate objectivity. Cultural dualism forms the matrix of her vision. The way she juxtaposes two diverse cultures introduces us not only with her creative ability and aesthetic response to the different points of view, but also provides testimony of her cosmopolitan outlook. In *The Nowhere Man*, Markandaya presents the immigrants and the English with both their strengths and weaknesses, and demonstrates how they suffer when they give in to their weaknesses, and how they flourish when they come out with their strengths and feel for each other. The novelist suggests that senseless racial antagonism and global violence are detrimental to the entire humanity. The cordial relationship between Mr. Srinivas and Mrs. Pkering suggests that global harmony can be achieved through mutual respect, appreciation, responsibility, commitment, trust, tolerance and understanding, not through ascendancy and aggression.

INTRODUCTION

A close and critical look at the fictional world of Kamala Markandaya reveals that she is endowed with an extraordinary vision of life, and she uses fiction as a vehicle to put it across the different cultures. Her vision is reflected in the way she treats the issues such a racial conflict, temperamental incompatibility, cultural conflict and sexual perversion in her novels. She delineates these issues on the basis of her first-hand experience of both the Oriental and Occidental cultures. Her "mixed sensibility" (Raijada 37)

keeps her away from narrow provincialism and restrictive nationalism, enabling her to dramatize the tension between the two modes of living. She adopts the objective method of narration that enables her to give an unbiased view of characters, events and situations. Her experience of a multicultural situation has made her aware of problems arising out of the cultural conflict between the East and the West. To her, the cultural confrontation is a forceful phenomenon that can change the very core of life. It is evident that her fiction "is essentially a product of the cultural ethos as it moulds and modifies the individual consciousness in the crucible of time" (Rao&Menon 171).

Markandaya, alike other expatriate writers, is deeply conscious of her "Indianness as well as of the difference in the two systems of values: One rather acquired, the other inherited and often taken for granted" (Mukherjee 66). Though she is an Indian by parentage, religion and schooling, yet her contact with Britain has provided her a duality of vision. She neither extols the Oriental view nor condemns the Occidental one; rather she looks at both cultures from an objective perspective. She remains dispassionate and unprejudiced in dealing with the theme of cross-cultural interaction. With first-hand knowledge of the country of her adoption, she perceives the challenges of the divergent cultures from close quarters. Cultural dualism constitutes the matrix of her vision. Markandaya's novels reflect "the strong penchant for Indian values against the spiritual impoverishment of English society but Indians are not spared. Actually her good men and women come from both cultures"

(**Narasimhaiah 1302**). Through cross-cultural interaction she probes human relations from the responses of her protagonists.

In *The Nowhere Man*, 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. The way she juxtaposes two diverse cultures introduces us not only with her creative ability and aesthetic response to the different points of view, but also provides evidence of her broad-based outlook. "Like a double-faced Janus, she can look at both ways of life with keen discernment and dispassionate objectivity. Her treatment of racial relationships is therefore realistic and unbiased. Englishmen and women portrayed by her are also not mere types but individuals infused with vitality of their own" (**Raizada 37**). Markandaya's serious and sincere artistic concerns get reflected in the way she looks at various manifestations of the East-West conflict that impede the smooth course of friendly and lasting relations in the contemporary world. As a humanist, she has firm faith in cordial human relationships and the universal brotherhood.

In *The Nowhere Man*, Markandaya 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 lives in England for half a century and almost becomes a "naturalized Briton" (**The Nowhere Man 93**). As a human being, Srinivas has a strong desire to belong to a wider citizenship. But, despite his long stay in England, he fails to find any space and grace in the alien land and feels like a "nowhere man, looking for a nowhere city" (166). Even after spending a substantial part of his life in England, and losing a son to the World War II, Srinivas is confused as to where he belongs. The novel shows how the immigrants find it hard to adjust themselves to the largely hostile alien environment, and how the English are averse to accept and recognize them as human beings.

During his long stay in England, Srinivas tries to identify himself with the country which is revealed in the words he uses to draw the attention of Mrs. Pickering towards his inclination: "This is my country now" and again tells her, "My country: I feel at home in it, more so than I would in my own." (58) In a similar vein, he tells Abdul Bin Ahmed, "This is where I live, in England" (75).

But Fred Fletcher, the English character, looks at Srinivas as a soulless black man, a trespasser with the mark of a devil. Despite his sincere and sustained efforts to integrate into the mainstream of the alien culture and life, Srinivas is prevented from doing so by the racial fanatics. Besides, he faces harassment and humiliation on account of the racial hatred and animosity, and becomes a rootless, restless and resentful individual disposed of India and disowned by England. He becomes an outsider in an alien society "the homeless, the uncommitted outsider" (**Trilling 111**) Srinivas is "a rootless creature, a product of the meeting of the East and the West" (**Singh 147**). The novelist artistically presents the dichotomy of the East-West conflict through the pitiable plight of Srinivas. The way the novel presents the plight of Srinivas illustrates Markandaya's concern with "cultural values in the context of racist attitudes in England following the decline and defeat of British imperialism" (**Rao & Menon 105**).

In the post-war period, Britain faces such problems as unemployment and housing in the wake of influx of immigrants. The English have an apprehension that the immigrants would one day drive them away from their own country. This is why the immigrants are treated with suspicion and fear. It is insecurity of the English from the immigrants that sows the seeds of suspicion and hatred between them. The English think that the immigrants without means are not human beings. The English youth, who are undergoing the tremendous strain of being jobless, think that the immigrants are the root cause of their miserable plight and adopt hostile attitude towards them: "They come in hordes, occupied all the houses, filled up the hospital beds and their offspring took all the places in schools" (163). Fred maltreats Srinivas with the harsh words that he has "no right to be living in this country" (164). But Srinivas retorts that he is English "by adoption" (165). Fred begins to feel that he "hated that colour and the man, and the untold evil he and his kind were letting loose in his country..." (165). Fred attributes the condition of the unemployed English youth to people like Srinivas and becomes the champion of the cause of English youth who are waging an unholy war against the immigrants:

He would lead his countrymen in the fight to overthrow the evil, hidden forces that were threatening them in their homeland. As the intensive agitation against the black mounts, posters begin to appear in different parts of London carrying "man-sized messages of hate, BLACKS

GO HOME” and opening new hells of fear and desolation in those at whom they were aimed. (168)

Srinivas, tormented by Fred and his friends, comes to realize that he is unwanted and undesirable element in England. Srinivas touchingly tells 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 of oneself” (193). He is considered as a beggar and treated badly. At this, Srinivas ponders over his pathetic plight: “I have been transformation into a stranger” (186). The West, in fact, has reduced him to a nowhere man. Now he realizes that he has nowhere to go to if he leaves England. He feels miserable and agonized in the harsh and hostile environment of England. He tries to make Mrs. Pickering acquainted with his fears: “The people will not allow it. It was my mistake to imagine....I am to be driven outside, which is the way they want it. An outsider in England. (231). Though Srinivas undergoes hardships and humiliations at the hands of fanatics like Fred and his friends, he remains passive and calm, and does not lose his spirit and strength.

Though Srinivas and his wife Vasantha acquire property in England, they fail to fully identify themselves with the alien culture. Healthy and wholesome assimilation with an alien situation and culture is not possible for the immigrants until and unless they disaffiliate themselves from the native traditions and cultural systems. Srinivas tells Mrs. Pickering: “One does not realize when one leaves one’s country, how much is chopped off and left behind too” (67). When Mrs. Pickering tries to console him, “There can be compensations if one is cut off from one culture there is always the adopted one to draw upon” (68), Srinivas replies. “But...my wife and I...I do not think we did” (68). Srinivas, tried of and tormented by racial chauvinism and intolerance, tries to accept his position as an interloper in England. Moreover, the sudden and unexpected demise of his son, Seshu and the death of his wife, Vasantha prove a great blow to Srinivas. Vasantha has been a source of great strength to Srinivas. With the death of his wife, Srinivas finds his life quite blank and barren

On the other hand, Laxman, the son of Srinivas, reacts to the racial problem in a quite different manner. Laxman, born, brought up and educated in England, is almost stranger to Indian culture. Moreover, he identifies himself with the English culture and life by taking part in the

Second World War and marrying an English woman. When he confronts an English woman with the words, “Go back where you belong,” (261) he angrily asserts, “I belong right here” (262). When India is accused of total ingratitude to England for its financial aid, Laxman again retaliates, “Loans totalling one quarter of one percent of the gross national product. Lent at rates of which a back-street money-lender would be ashamed. It is, in any case....less than a hundredth of what has been lifted or looted” (262). In response to the discourteous remark of the opponent, “You’re going to cause an explosion, you and your sort,” (262) he comes out with contemptuous words, “You’ll be blown up with it, what’s more, you and your sort” (262). Laxman, unlike his parents, seeks an entire merger with the British society as adjunct and essential to his living. He resolves to belong to “the country in which he was born and lived and laboured, not in some reservation rustled up within it” (293). Laxman’s resolution raises hopes of his survival in England.

The delineation of the relationship between Srinivas and Mrs. Pickering after the death of Srinivas’s wife, Vasantha, transforms the entire novel into “a perceptive work of art” (Singh 29). Their relationship is, undoubtedly, founded on a steadfast commitment to human values based on true freedom. True freedom is essentially commitment without either coerce or compulsion. Mrs. Pickering, a middle-aged divorcee, has lost her physical charm and attraction, but she continues to be exceedingly kind, considerate and caring woman in her attempt to embalm Srinivas’s wounds---both physical and emotional. For him, she does all the household chores like cooking food, cleaning house, mending clothes. Though they have a chance-meeting, it develops into a warm, harmonious and enduring relationship. Through the cordial relationship Srinivas realizes his responsibilities and duties to Mrs. Pickering and also towards the society which has sheltered him. Through this relationship, the novelist suggests the possibility of harmonious cultural relationship which is founded on deep human sympathy, care and compassion despite the racial and cultural barriers. The relationship between Mr. Srinivas and Mrs. Pickering presents the harmonious relationship between the two modes of life---the Oriental and the Occidental.

The novelist employs the technique of juxtaposition to mirror the complete and comprehensive picture of English society. The

racial fanatics and their supporters are juxtaposed with men of good sense. On the one hand, there are self-styled hardcore racial campaigners like Fred and, on the other, there are compassionate and considerate persons like Dr. Radcliffe, Mrs. Pickering, Mr. Glass, Mrs. Fletcher and Kent. If on the one hand, the self-styled champions vent their hatred and anger against the immigrants, on the other, the broad-minded and kind-hearted persons provide solace and support to the distressed immigrants. Fred, the hardcore racist, bursts out, "They're all devils." Mrs. Glass expresses her rancour, "They keep coming here, who asked them? One day they're poor, living off the rates, the next day they could buy us all up" (197). But on the other hand, Mrs. Fletcher apologizes to Srinivas for the unseemly conduct of her son. The way these people come out with good sense and service introduces us with the superb English cultural tradition. Despite the strained East-West relationships, Markandaya presents "English characters that are deeply human and compassionate" (Asnani 56).

The characters like Dr. Radcliffe, Kent, Mr. Marjorie and Mrs. Marjorie sustain hopes of cordial relationship even in the face of racial revulsion and rancour. Dr. Radcliffe is agonized at the mounting hostility, fanaticism, distrust and envy of the so-called sophisticated people against the immigrants. He keeps the belief that it is the racial intolerance and the callousness that quickens the death of Srinivas. He is quite comfortable and friendly with the leprosy patients like Srinivas. He sacrifices his own comforts and pleasures for the sake of his patients. Srinivas is impressed by his professional gentleness, "he knew to be sick and beyond his skill to cure" (15). Radcliffe is sympathetic, sensible and strong-willed English man who always blames "his own people to intensify the final tragedy of Srinivas death by fire" (Bhan 66). He always warns Srinivas against the possibility of physical assault on him outside in the streets. He tries to comfort him with soothing words; though he is sure of the inevitable tragedy that would befall Srinivas.

Markandaya's frequent and skilful handling of the theme of the East-West encounter reveals her real and resolute concern for the contemporary global situation. As a sincere student of history, Markandya is quite conscious of the view that the meeting of East and West is really conducive to the growth and development of a new social vision in the life of both the worlds. But, at the same time, she is acutely conscious of the fact

that cultural snobbery, acute political differences, colonial supremacy, racial consciousness and the ensuing tension have divided the world into two hostile camps. It is conspicuous that Markandaya is really aware of the latest developments in the international relations. Thakur Guruprasad observes that *The Nowhere Man* is "a very objective, balanced and truthful account of Indo-British relations" (Guruprasad 200).

The novelist suggests that senseless racial antagonism and global violence are detrimental to the entire humanity. The way she treats the menace of violence and aggression underscores the imperativeness of racial harmony, tolerance and universal brotherhood. She keeps the view that racial bigotry poses a serious threat to human existence and mars the prospects of global peace and harmony. To Markandaya, culture means essentially an idea which unites a million individuals and confers on each of them what Trilling calls "integral selfhood." (Trilling 111) The way she treats the issue suggests that conflicts could be resolved through love and understanding. Mutual respect, not domination would help the immigrants to emerge out of their conflicts and confusions. Markandaya's vision of a better world stems from her belief in the global harmony which is presented through the development of cordial relationships between Mr. Srinivas and Mrs. Pickering. Through the simple mode of narration, the novelist tries to uphold the concept of a happy global world in the context of cultural pluralism, advocating unity in diversity.

The foregoing discussion reveals that the vision of Markandya as a novelist is positive, constructive and broad-based dealing with the fate of the entire human race. The way the novelist dramatizes the disvalues and inadequacies marring the prospects of international peace and healthy relations suggests that the virtues of trust, tolerance, compassion, cordiality, involvement, responsibility and commitment can forge universal harmony by bridging the gap between the two divergent modes of living. It is obvious that the survival and development of humanity lies in harmony and happiness, compromise and cordiality, not in hostility and haughtiness. The relationship between Srinivas and Mrs. Pickering demonstrates that the core of living lies in caring for one another. Broadly speaking, global harmony can be achieved through mutual respect, appreciation, responsibility, commitment, trust, tolerance, involvement and understanding, not through ascendancy and aggression.

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