



GENERATIONAL AND EAST-WEST CONFLICT IN THE FICTION OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA

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ABSTRACT :

*Kamala Markandaya, one of the pioneering Indo-Anglian novelists, masterfully explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, rural and urban life in postcolonial India. This paper investigates the cultural conflicts experienced by middle-class families in her fiction, focusing on how class, identity, and generational change manifest in her major works. Drawing on close readings of *Some Inner Fury*, *Possession*, *The Nowhere Man*, and *A Silence of Desire*, the study reveals that Markandaya's middle-class characters are caught in a doorway—neither fully rooted in tradition nor assimilated into modern Western practices. Through this, she underscores the psychological, social, and familial cost of cultural negotiation in a rapidly changing society. The conclusion argues that Markandaya's portrayal is both critical and empathetic, offering profound insights into the dilemmas of postcolonial middle-class life.*



KEYWORDS : Kamala Markandaya, cultural conflict, middle class, East-West encounter, modernity, tradition, postcolonial identity.

INTRODUCTION:

Kamala Markandaya (1924–2004) occupies a distinctive place in Indian-English literature. Her novels reflect her profound concern with the human condition in postcolonial India, particularly as individuals and families negotiate social and cultural transformations. While much scholarship has addressed her depictions of rural life (*Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice*) and cross-cultural encounters, less attention has been paid specifically to the middle-class families in her fiction—those urban or semi-urban characters who are neither impoverished peasants nor elite cosmopolitans, but who struggle with cultural hybridity, generational divides, and identity crises.

This paper explores how cultural conflicts reflect in Markandaya's middle-class characters and families. It examines how the tensions between East and West, tradition and modernity, personal ambition and familial obligation, and individual identity and collective belonging play out in her novels. By focusing on selected works (*Some Inner Fury*, *Possession*, *The Nowhere Man*, *A Silence of Desire*), this study argues that Markandaya uses these middle-class narratives to critique and humanize the psychological cost of social change in postcolonial India.

The Context of Cultural Conflict :

Markandaya's fiction is deeply embedded in the social realities of postcolonial India. As scholars note, her thematic preoccupations often include Eastern vs Western sensibilities, tradition vs

modernity, and rural vs urban life Her middle-class characters typically occupy a liminal space: educated, aspirational, and yet deeply anchored in Indian cultural values.

She often frames cultural conflict on **three dimensions**: social, political, and cultural. These dimensions converge in her novels to depict not merely interpersonal tension, but structural transformations—urbanization, industrialization, nationalist politics, and the legacy of colonialism.

Generational and East-West Conflict in *Some Inner Fury* :

In *Some Inner Fury* (1955), Markandaya presents a British-educated Indian family during the late colonial era. The novel dramatizes a conflict between tradition and modernity, as well as patriotic feelings versus Western influence. The characters reflect a *middle-class intellectual milieu*: they are politically conscious, educated, and cosmopolitan, yet tethered to their cultural roots.

Generational tension: The younger generation (students, freedom fighters) embodies the zeal for nationalist change, while the older generation continues to uphold traditional values and social propriety.

East-West encounter: The novel's familial and romantic relationships illustrate how Western education and ideas infiltrate Indian family life, causing both attraction and alienation.

Identity crisis: The characters struggle to reconcile their mixed identities, torn between the colonial English worldview and their Indian heritage.

Thus, *Some Inner Fury* shows how a middle-class family navigates political and emotional turbulence, as Western modernity both empowers and destabilizes.

Artistic and Cultural Possession in *Possession*:

Possession (1963) offers another dimension of cultural conflict. The novel tells the story of Valmiki, a young Indian artist, and Lady Caroline Bell, an Englishwoman who “possesses” him, bringing him to London. This narrative can be read as a metaphor for colonial possession, but also for the cultural and spiritual ownership that transcends political domination. Markandaya uses the relationship between Lady Bell and Valmiki to explore Lady Bell's fascination with Valmiki is not only romantic but veins of colonial patronage; she wants to mold him into an “exotic” artist for her own aesthetic and spiritual fulfilment.

Valmiki's growth as an artist is deeply tied to his Indian roots (the caves, the swami) but also to his exposure to Western forms. His identity as an artist is hybrid.

Valmiki eventually returns to India, suggesting a rejection of Western commodification and a return to spiritual authenticity. His struggle reflects a broader middle-class dilemma — balancing Western opportunities with rootedness in native culture.

Through *Possession*, Markandaya critically assesses how art, love, and cultural exchange become means of both empowerment and exploitation.

Diaspora and Alienation in *The Nowhere Man*:

The Nowhere Man (1972) shifts the setting to London and portrays Srinivas, an elderly Brahmin immigrant, and his family. Here, the middle-class conflict is filtered through diaspora: belonging, alienation, and generational estrangement in a foreign land.

Key aspects of conflict can be given as -

Generational Divide and romantic and social belonging . Srinivas faces racial hostility in Britain. His cultural identity is marginalized, and he struggles with his sense of self in a society that does not fully accept him.

His son, Laxman, is embarrassed by his father's “traditional” ways and wants to assimilate. This represents a middle-class immigrant family's generational conflict: the older generation holds on to Indian cultural values, while the younger seeks to integrate.

Srinivas's relationship with Mrs. Pickering, a down-at-heel divorcée, offers him emotional solace, but their peace is threatened by neighbourhood prejudice. The personal becomes political, as cultural belonging is challenged by external societal structures.

Markandaya thus uses diaspora to expose the vulnerabilities of immigrant middle-class families: caught between their past and an uncertain present, they inhabit a no-man's-land of identity.

Rationalism vs Spiritualism in *A Silence of Desire* :

In *A Silence of Desire* (1960), Markandaya explores a more philosophical cultural conflict: faith versus reason, mysticism versus science. Scholars such as Shyam Asnani note that although this novel is not directly East-West in terms of geography, it dramatizes the conflict between Eastern spiritual traditions and Western rationalism.

Spiritual heritage for middle class families in this context shows characters rooted in Indian traditions (Hindu beliefs, mysticism) face internal doubt and external scepticism in a rapidly modernizing society.

Western-style medicine, psychology, and rational inquiry challenge long-held beliefs and familial customs are mentioned to show scientific modernity.

Moral and existential conflict is reflected through the family's stability which is threatened as individuals question inherited beliefs, seeking personal meaning in a changing world.

Through this tension, Markandaya poses deep ethical questions about identity and progress for the aspirational Indian middle class.

Identity, Hybridity, and Psychological Cost :

Across these novels, several recurring patterns emerge such as -

Hybridity: Markandaya's middle-class characters often embody cultural hybridity—educated in Western ways, but emotionally and spiritually tied to Indian traditions. **Alienation:** Whether in India or abroad, they experience alienation—from their culture, their families, or society itself.

Psychological struggle: The negotiation of conflicting values is not smooth. Characters face guilt, disconnection, and crisis of self.

Social critique: Markandaya's representation is not romanticizing hybrid identity; she critically examines power — colonial, cultural, familial — embedded in relationships.

Her portrayals, therefore, offer a nuanced critique of postcolonial middle-class life: it is not merely a progressive story of upward mobility but a fraught negotiation with history, belonging, and transformation.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's fiction provides rich terrain for examining *cultural conflicts among middle-class families*. By focusing on her middle-class characters—intellectuals, artists, immigrants, conflicted believers—she dramatizes the dilemmas of identity in a changing world. The tension between tradition and modernity, East and West, and familial belonging and personal freedom is ever present in her narratives.

Markandaya does not offer simple resolutions. Her characters often remain caught in liminality, neither fully integrated into Western modernity nor entirely preserved in traditional Indian life. This ambiguous space, however, is where her strongest critique lies: the psychological and social cost of postcolonial change is high, and the negotiation of cultural identity is deeply personal and often painful. Her work remains relevant because the questions she raises—about hybridity, belonging, and transformation—continue to resonate in contemporary globalized societies. Middle-class families, whether in India or the diaspora, still grapple with these tensions. Markandaya's empathetic yet critical voice invites readers to reflect on the price of cultural evolution and the enduring quest for identity.

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