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Negotiating Culture and Identity: Diasporic Sensibility and East–West Encounters in Kamala Markandaya's Novels

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya (1924–2004) remains one of the most perceptive chroniclers of postcolonial India's encounter with modernity, nationalism, and diasporic consciousness. Her fiction intricately explores the dialectic between Eastern and Western sensibilities, tradition and modernity, and individual and collective identities. This paper examines three of her major novels—*Some Inner Fury* (1955), *Possession* (1963), and *The Nowhere Man* (1972)—to analyze how Markandaya transforms personal relationships into metaphors of cultural negotiation and identity formation. In *Some Inner Fury*, the collision of love and politics during India's nationalist movement dramatizes the moral and emotional turmoil of cross-cultural attachments under colonial pressure. *Possession* allegorizes the dynamics of colonial domination and spiritual resistance through the relationship between the British patron Lady Caroline and the Indian artist Valmiki, revealing the moral limits of cultural appropriation. *The Nowhere Man* extends this inquiry to the diasporic context, portraying exile and racial hostility in postwar Britain through the tragic isolation of Srinivas, an Indian immigrant whose humanity transcends the confines of nationality and race. Across these narratives, Markandaya's diasporic sensibility emerges as deeply humanistic—rooted in Indian values yet responsive to the complexities of global modernity. The study argues that her fiction articulates a sustained meditation on belonging, displacement, and intercultural understanding, thereby securing her position as a crucial voice in postcolonial Indian English literature.

Keywords: Postcolonial identity, Diasporic sensibility, East–West encounter, Cultural hybridity, Nationalism, Exile, Humanism

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya occupies a distinguished position among the leading Indian English novelists of the twentieth century. Her debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) not only brought her international acclaim but also established her as a sensitive interpreter of Indian life in transition. Alongside Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, she helped shape the early contours of Indian English fiction, yet her creative vision evolved in a direction distinctly her own. Her fiction reveals a remarkable range of social, political, and psychological concerns, rendered with linguistic elegance and emotional depth. Markandaya's oeuvre demonstrates an abiding engagement with the confrontation between Eastern and Western values, dramatized through human relationships set against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial change. The East–West dialectic functions not merely as a cultural polarity but as a dynamic field of negotiation—where identities are formed, contested, and redefined. Her sensibility, at once Indian and cosmopolitan, enables her to portray the tensions between tradition and modernity, faith and reason, rootedness and displacement. While early critics read her fiction largely through sociological or nationalist frameworks, more recent scholarship recognizes in her writing a proto-diasporic consciousness that anticipates later postcolonial debates about hybridity and belonging. In her novels, cross-cultural encounters—whether romantic, artistic, or communal—become symbolic of the human struggle to reconcile conflicting loyalties. As A. V. Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon observe, her work constitutes a "creative release of the feminine sensibility" (2), yet its reach extends beyond gender to encompass a universal quest for ethical harmony amid cultural dissonance.

This article focuses on three representative novels—*Some Inner Fury* (1955), *Possession* (1963), and *The Nowhere Man* (1972)—which together trace the evolution of Markandaya's diasporic imagination. These works chart a movement from colonial India's struggle for political self-definition to the postcolonial individual's search for psychological and cultural anchorage in an alien world. In analyzing these texts, the paper argues that Markandaya's fiction dramatizes identity not as a fixed essence but as an ongoing process of negotiation across the boundaries of culture, class, and nation.

Context and Theoretical Framework

Born Kamala Purnaiya in Mysore in 1924, Markandaya grew up in an orthodox Brahmin family and received her education at the University of Madras. Her early career as a journalist in India and her later residence in England after 1948 positioned her at the crossroads of two civilizations. Though she became a British citizen by naturalization, her creative sensibility remained profoundly Indian—anchored in its moral, spiritual, and aesthetic traditions. As she once remarked, "The eyes I see with are still Indian eyes," a statement that epitomizes the cultural rootedness that defines her diasporic identity. Her biographical circumstances resonate with the conceptual framework of postcolonial theory, particularly in the sense outlined by

Homi K. Bhabha's notion of *in-betweenness* or "third space" (*The Location of Culture*, 1994), where hybrid identities are continually negotiated. Markandaya's protagonists inhabit precisely such interstitial spaces, caught between the certainties of inherited traditions and the allure—or coercion—of Western modernity. The idea of "diasporic sensibility" in her fiction can be understood as what Raymond Williams would call a *structure of feeling*—an emergent consciousness shaped by historical experience and expressed through affective modes of belonging. Markandaya's diasporic humanism, therefore, is not an abstract moral stance but a lived negotiation between competing cultural imperatives. Her narratives exemplify what Dipesh Chakrabarty terms the "provincializing" of Europe, reclaiming moral and imaginative autonomy from colonial paradigms while acknowledging their persistent influence. Against this theoretical backdrop, the three selected novels represent successive phases of Markandaya's engagement with the East–West encounter: *Some Inner Fury* examines the clash between nationalist resistance and colonial allegiance; *Possession* dramatizes the conflict between spiritual authenticity and material exploitation; and *The Nowhere Man* extends these tensions into the postcolonial diaspora, where identity is tested by racism and exile. Together, they reveal Markandaya's nuanced understanding of how personal relationships mirror larger structures of power and belief.

Love and Nation: Colonial Intimacy in *Some Inner Fury*

Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* (1955) situates its characters at the charged intersection of love and politics, dramatizing how private emotions are destabilized by the historical imperatives of colonial rule. Set during the Quit India Movement of 1942, the novel interrogates the impossibility of sustaining cross-cultural intimacy when the structure of empire defines all relationships in terms of dominance and subordination. The narrative voice of Mira—an educated Indian woman who recounts her tragic attachment to the Englishman Richard—functions as a moral witness to the contradictions of colonial modernity. Their love, initially marked by intellectual sympathy, deteriorates as nationalist resistance intensifies and the moral economy of the Raj collapses. Mira's emotional awakening coincides with her political one: the realization that affection cannot transcend the asymmetry of power. Her lament that the British "drank and danced while India burned" encapsulates her disillusionment with colonial complacency and the moral vacuity of imperial privilege. Through Mira, Markandaya transforms personal loss into national allegory. Her love's destruction mirrors India's own divided consciousness—a nation forced to choose between reconciliation and resistance. The novel's title, *Some Inner Fury*, signifies both political unrest and emotional revolt: a fury directed as much inward, at one's divided loyalties, as outward toward imperial oppression. Secondary characters embody variant responses to colonial encounter: Kit's westernized mimicry, Premala's moral unease within the colonial club, and Govind's radical nationalism. The clash among them dramatizes the fragmentation of the Indian elite under colonial modernity. Govind's willingness to risk death for independence and Kit's alignment with British bureaucracy expose two poles of India's colonial subjectivity—the urge to imitate and the urge to defy. By embedding romantic and familial conflicts within nationalist ferment,

Markandaya renders love as a microcosm of political struggle. Mira's final renunciation of Richard is both personal and symbolic: a reclaiming of selfhood through ethical alignment with the collective cause. The novel thus redefines patriotism not as rhetoric but as an affective duty born of moral awakening. In this fusion of the intimate and the historical, *Some Inner Fury* exemplifies Markandaya's capacity to locate the drama of decolonization within the recesses of human emotion.

Power, Art, and Spiritual Resistance: The Allegory of *Possession*

Published in 1963, *Possession* explores the dialectics of domination and freedom through the intertwined themes of art, desire, and spiritual belonging. The title itself suggests both literal ownership and metaphysical attachment—two registers that Markandaya sets in tension throughout the narrative. The British patron Lady Caroline Bell discovers Valmiki, a gifted South Indian painter, and transports him to England to cultivate and commodify his talent. In her efforts to control his creative life and emotional dependence, Caroline embodies the lingering possessiveness of colonial discourse—an aesthetic imperialism that converts cultural encounter into an act of appropriation. Her desire for Valmiki is erotic, maternal, and proprietary all at once, evoking the ambivalence of the colonizer's gaze toward the colonized subject. Valmiki's relationship with his spiritual mentor, the Swamy, offers a counter-paradigm of possession. The guru's influence represents not coercion but moral guidance—an appeal to self-realization through discipline and faith. The novel thereby constructs two modes of possession: the Western, rooted in material and psychological control, and the Eastern, grounded in spiritual communion. Caroline's eventual failure to sever the disciple's bond with the Swamy signals the triumph of spiritual autonomy over material dependency. Anasuya, the Indian narrator, mediates these conflicting worldviews with empathetic intelligence. Her commentary on Caroline's behaviour exposes how colonial desire masquerades as philanthropy, and how the commodification of art mirrors the commodification of the colonial subject. Valmiki's rise to fame in European art circles is shadowed by creative sterility—his genius reduced to spectacle. When he abandons Ellie, his genuine beloved, at Caroline's insistence, Markandaya underscores the moral cost of aesthetic commercialization. The closing confrontation between Caroline and the Swamy dramatizes an ideological contest rather than a personal quarrel. Caroline's empire is one of money and flesh; the Swamy's, one of spirit and renunciation. When Valmiki ultimately returns to India, his departure signifies the re-possession of his soul and art by indigenous values. Thus, *Possession* becomes a parable of postcolonial recovery—an allegory of India reclaiming its spiritual and artistic sovereignty from Western materialism. Critics such as Rao and Menon have aptly observed that the novel "juxtaposes two worlds—the secular and the sacred—and affirms the endurance of moral integrity amid exploitation" (145). Through the intertwined fates of its characters, *Possession* dramatizes the modern struggle between authenticity and commodification, a struggle that remains central to postcolonial artistic identity.

Exile and Ethical Humanism in *The Nowhere Man*

With *The Nowhere Man* (1972), Markandaya turns from the colonial homeland to the diasporic margin, where the East–West encounter assumes new, violent forms. The novel's septuagenarian protagonist, Srinivas, epitomizes the ageing immigrant caught in the paradox of belonging nowhere—too Indian for England, too anglicized for India. His condition exemplifies what Homi Bhabha calls the "unhomely moment" when "the borders between home and world become confused." Having migrated to Britain decades earlier, Srinivas builds a modest life with his wife Vasantha. The deaths of both their son Seshu and Vasantha dismantle his fragile stability, leaving him exposed to the racism and isolation of postwar England. The eruption of racial violence, culminating in the torching of his house by Fred and his gang, lays bare the hostility that festers beneath Britain's multicultural façade. Markandaya's depiction of racism avoids sensationalism; instead, she traces its psychological toll—the erosion of dignity and the slow disintegration of belonging. Srinivas's tragedy is not merely that he is persecuted, but that he continues to love the country that rejects him. His compassion toward Mrs Pickering, the English widow who shelters him after the attack, underscores Markandaya's faith in interpersonal ethics as the last bastion of humanity. In the symbolic reversal that Fred dies in the same fire he sets, hatred literally consumes its agent, while Srinivas survives through endurance and moral grace. The title *The Nowhere Man* encapsulates diasporic alienation: the impossibility of locating oneself within national narratives that remain exclusionary. Yet Markandaya resists despair. Through the fragile bond between Srinivas and Mrs Pickering, she envisions a microcosm of reconciliation—a fellowship founded on empathy rather than ethnicity. In its restrained prose and moral clarity, the novel extends Markandaya's inquiry from colonial possession to postcolonial displacement. If *Some Inner Fury* exposes the political impossibility of equality within empire, and *Possession* critiques its aesthetic and erotic afterlives, *The Nowhere Man* confronts its social residue in the racial hierarchies of the metropolis. The arc of these three novels thus charts the movement of Indian subjectivity from subjection through negotiation to ethical universality. Srinivas's endurance, marked by silence and forbearance, epitomizes the diasporic humanism that underlies all of Markandaya's work. His life gestures toward what Emmanuel Levinas calls the "infinite responsibility for the Other," transcending nation and race. Through him, Markandaya affirms that moral survival depends not on belonging to a place but on sustaining compassion amid estrangement.

Toward a Diasporic Humanism

Across the trajectory of Kamala Markandaya's fiction, the dialogue between East and West evolves from confrontation to negotiation, from separation to tentative reconciliation. In *Some Inner Fury*, the colonial encounter ruptures intimacy and exposes the moral limits of affection under imperial power. *Possession* transforms this dynamic into a spiritual allegory, contrasting the materialist will to dominate with the ethical imperative of release. *The Nowhere Man* relocates these tensions to the diasporic metropolis, where the postcolonial subject must reconstruct identity within an alien, often hostile, social order. Through these works,

Markandaya establishes what may be termed a diasporic humanism—a vision that affirms ethical interdependence beyond the binaries of race, nation, and culture. Her protagonists are rarely triumphant; rather, they endure, negotiate, and forgive. Their resilience reflects an insistence on moral agency even within systems of domination. Markandaya's creative sensibility, rooted in Indian values yet cosmopolitan in outlook, transforms exile into an occasion for insight and compassion. Her fiction also complicates simplistic postcolonial narratives of victimhood or resistance. By foregrounding the interior conflicts of individuals—Mira's divided loyalties, Valmiki's moral confusion, Srinivas's dignified solitude—Markandaya brings philosophical depth to the politics of identity. The self, in her world, is never static: it is a process of continual redefinition through encounter with the Other. In this sense, she anticipates later postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, who conceptualize hybridity as a productive, if painful, space of cultural transformation. Markandaya's legacy extends far beyond the immediate milieu of Indo-Anglian fiction. For contemporary diaspora studies, her work offers a vital precedent for examining questions of belonging, exile, and transnational empathy. Writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, and Amitav Ghosh continue to negotiate similar terrains of displacement and moral responsibility, yet Markandaya's early articulation of these dilemmas remains singular in its ethical clarity. Her novels remind readers that cultural identity is not an inheritance but a dialogue—an ongoing act of translation between memory and modernity.

Conclusion

In sum, Kamala Markandaya's fiction is not merely an archive of colonial and postcolonial experience; it is a moral cartography of the modern world. Through her sensitive exploration of love, loss, faith, and endurance, she reimagines literature as a bridge between civilizations—a space where humanity, stripped of possession and prejudice, may yet discover its shared home.

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