

## ***The Creative Launcher***

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### **Issues of Alienation and Racial Prejudice in Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man***

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#### **Abstract**

When a person migrates to an alien land, he instantly turns into an outsider—a pariah. He has to struggle a lot both for his new identity and to overcome his feelings of nostalgia. Being accustomed to a social and cultural life, he desires acceptance of the society and assimilation to the new culture. But what he gets is a sense of loss and alienation and hence suffers from insecurity and identity crisis. Gradually, he attempts to adapt to the new ways of life and the new milieu of that adopted land and tends to forget his past. But the irony starts when he returns to his native land only to find himself an alien in his own culture. Hence a migrant who returns finds himself a nowhere man. Markandaya's novels depict diasporic dilemma arising due to migration and the consequential rootlessness, loneliness and anxiety. This article traces alienation and its aftermath as depicted by Kamal Markandaya in her novel *The Nowhere Man*.

**Keywords:** Migration, Settlement, Cultural conflicts, Dislocation, Alienation,

#### **1. Introduction**

Among the Indian writers who have explored the cross-cultural theme in their fiction Kamala Markandaya carved a permanent place for her novels. Markandaya's cynicism of the immigration and the assimilation process is reflected in her stories and her characters. Markandaya depicts the gloom and confrontations of the "Nowhere Man". Markandaya understands that reminiscence obstructs the mission of integration, but she is patient with those who long for the homeland. Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1972) tells the story of Shrinivas, an UN-accommodated Asian, facing a great deal of hostility and intense loneliness in the country of his adoption and self-exile. Unlike Mukherjee, who considers such longing a product of an idealistic, inaccurate, romanticized memory, Markandaya empathizes with the pain of losing a place called "home." In fact, she does not even consider memory to be fallible. It is the early years which are most deeply etched, and the memories persist and are not

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subject to fluctuation. Srinivas, in *The Nowhere Man*, is an alien, rootless and outsider whose alienation results from the estrangement from his native culture and his failure to adopt the westernized manner and mode of living. Throughout the novel, he is probing for his root and identity.

Commenting on the novel, Madhusudan Prasad writes, "*The Nowhere Man*, is the most powerful and the maturest of the novels of Markandaya. Although it again depicts the East-West encounter (in a new perspective altogether), it is basically a moving elegy on England's recent racialism which still continues rather unabated" (152).

## **2. Research Method**

This article analyses the different shades of experiences of the immigrant characters portrayed by Kamala Markandaya in her novel *The Nowhere Man* and posits the findings to those of several postmodern critics.

## **3. Results and Analysis**

In the post-colonial era, there is so much of cultural mixing. It has given birth to hybrid-culture, Bill Ashcroft et.al observes in *The Empire Writes Back*:

Post-colonial culture is inevitably a hybrid phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the grafted European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity, Such construction or reconstruction occurs as a dynamic interaction between European hegemonic and 'peripheral' subversions of them. (195)

Srinivas, a typical Indian, ventures to England, where he tries his luck with his wife Vasantha. He fares well in his business of import-export of spices. He and his wife adapt themselves to the new environment though leading a typical Indian life --of style and thought. Both together face the harsh realities of a new settlement in an alien land. They being total strangers to the land, experience the feeling of not belonging to the place new to them in every aspect. The new surroundings, unaccustomed atmosphere, new food habits, cultural contrast, in fact, everything, every feature made them feel alien to the land. They are blessed with two sons who very much adopt themselves to the land of their birth, It was on his wife's persistence that Srinivas purchased a house a natural inclination towards security and certainty,

"I am tired" she said, "of moving from pillar to post. As if we were gypsies. It is time we bought a new house and settled down. There is no nomadic strain in us, that forces us to wander. Although it may well manifest in our children if we continue this vagabond existence. (17)

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To this, Srinivas tries to convince his wife as he feels that owning a house in London may hinder their return to India ...someday, he knows not when! He tells her, "Hundreds of families live in flats. In Bombay and Madras, not to say London", "What Bombayites and Madrasites do is their concern. As for the other, can you really imagine I am a Londoner?" (p. 17).

Srinivas knew that his wife, neither outwardly nor inwardly, was a Londoner. She "was a Hindu, born and bred in a subtle religion whose concepts, being on the cosmic scale, made no concessions" or, compromises. She remained in thought and deed, a typical Indian. And Srinivas, respecting his wife's values, followed the Indian customs. "During his years with Vasantha. . . exiles both. . . he had longed like her for palm trees and oleander, sighed with her for the rivers of their vanished youth, for the ramifications of family they had sustained and been sustained (68).

Fredric Jameson in Post-Modernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism says, "Post modern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a Whole new Wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror." (6)

Sailing between the shores of certainty and uncertainty, the couple Srinivas and Vasantha lead their lives when finally they become the owners of "Chandraprasad", the name they give to their house (after their home in India). Yet, it is never identified so, but only as N0.5, Ashcroft Avenue, South London. Feeling proud of her own home, Vasantha claims, "At last we have achieved something. A place of our own, where we can live according to our lights although in alien surroundings, and our children after us, and after them theirs" (20).

Such were Vasantha's visionary hopes. But Srinivas, as the novelist features, had "no such emotions. He did not feel like a founding father". He felt that their purchase of a house "was to shackle themselves to bricks and mortar", and it filled him with a kind of uncertain feeling. As long "as they were mobile, he liked to believe the way back to India, from which events and people drove them, lay open".

Though in his heart of hearts, he knew it could not happen as, each year passed, and their children grew, it was "difficult for them to thrive in another climate" as they got very much habituated to England and its way of living. They grow up imbibing the English culture and choose their line of vocation. Laxman, the elder son, becomes an engineer in the army and Seshu, the second son, joins as a trainee in navigation with the Royal Air Force. With both the sons going on their ways, the aging parents feel the hollowness in their absence. Which they were not incapable of doing, having ridden out similar battles of will and strength, but possibly felt it more now, being older, and the previous struggle having taken its toll" (23).

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Laxman betrays the hope of his parents by marrying an English girl Pat and settling in a firm in Plymouth. The telegraphic message that he sends his parents is received by his mother with shivering hands .... the mother, "Vasanth, however, had elements in her that would keep her upright ... it was just that it took sometime, and some calling, upon inner resources, for unlike her alien-bred sons, she had no instantly available disguise" (31).

Having nothing to do, the old couple are reconciled to the fact that their son belongs to the younger generation and he would have his own likes and dislikes. They welcome home the young couple warmly. Yet, Laxman feels disappointed with his own parents who have given him birth --as he finds them wanting in their total adaptability to England and its culture. Unlike his parents, he considers himself to belong to England, as its citizen by birth, though, his skin is a reminder of his origin. He feels hurt, when a small boy, unknowingly imitates the feelings of his elders. "He'd (Joe's father) blow his top", explained Joe, "If he saw me with a black man. He hates blacks. Especially if they are rich ... He says it isn't right, them coming and doing us out" (257).

Laxman who considered himself to be a Britisher, could not digest the fact that he was an Indian by parentage. So, in spite of the harsh comments made by the Britishers sometimes, he ascertained himself saying, "Whatever anyone might say or think or do he knew he belonged, and where he belonged. To the country in which he was born and lived and laboured" (p.259).

Laxman's feelings of dissatisfaction regarding his mother are conveyed by the novelist thus: Laxman had a silent complaint against his mother that, after all those years, she could not change; though he could not exactly tell his wife, what he wanted of his mother; he knew that, "something: anything that she could do that would sink her indistinguishably into England, instead of sticking out like a sore thumb" (33).

But Vasanth had her own identity and never thought of imitating the West. This disparity between the son and the parents widened even more and the relationship ceased to be a harmonious one. The parents accepted the weaning away of their son without brooding and thought that their son, "like many other things, had been taken out of their hands" (23).

The parents face another fatal blow --that of the death of their younger son in the war. The mother, for whom he was the apple of her eyes, never recovers from the great tragedy.

When the old couple hear of the birth of their grandchild, Vasanth expresses her desire for visiting, to see the baby, but Laxman specifically writes not to visit, as his wife's parents were there to help her out and that they couldn't spare another bedroom, "What does that matter?" asked Vasanth, bewildered. Is a room essential? I would have slept anywhere. In a corridor, or the kitchen. Just to see the baby". "They don't do things like that in this country", said Srinivas" (35-36).

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So was Vasantha quietened by her husband Srinivas, and her wish to see her grandchild remained so, until, owing to her please, they were invited to visit, six months ahead, for the summer. But by then, Vasantha had developed tuberculosis and hence, could not go to see the baby, a vulnerable infant. When Srinivas expresses his wish of treating his wife by a private doctor, shows his displeasure and prefers the National Health Clinic centre where his parents were members. At this, "Srinivas did not argue with his son. He has moved far away from us", he told himself. And Laxman. saw his father as a man of sound but monument useless principles. They parted ..." 5 (36).

Srinivas gets his wife treated in the best possible way but far from improving, her condition only deteriorates and, having nothing left to cling to, in the alien land, Vasantha puts forth her wish to her husband to "return to our country. There is no reason, now that India is free, why we should not. Nor "she said painfully", is there anything really to keep us here any more" 6 (36).

Vasantha breathes her last and Srinivas performs the rites as his son Laxman was in bed with influenza. He scatters his wife's ashes according to the Hindu custom into a river, from the London Bridge. Along with it, he also carried her sandal wood box which she had filled with earth from India and brought with her hair oil bottle half full of Ganges water. A policeman mistakes Srinivas for his peculiar deeds: "You are not allowed to tip your household rubbish into the river". "It was not rubbish", said Srinivas and found to his dismay that his throat was working painfully. "It was my wife" (39).

After his wife's demise, Srinivas realises that he is all alone with no one to call his own or someone who cares and waits for him. He leads a solitary life, alienating himself all the more, from the surrounding society. As a result, his business comes down and his house becomes neglected.

He finds a *dhoti*, and parading around the streets in yards of flowing muslin, manages to alienate himself even further. Markandaya very expertly details the various reactions this type of foreignness engenders. This, after all, is a major concern of her novels. In *the Nowhere Man* hostility manifests itself in the behavior of several breeds of bigots. The easiest to identify are the young, arrogant skin-heads like Fred. Unabashedly bitter, they make no pretense of accepting the newcomers. They tar and feather the old man and burn his house. Then, there are the neighborhood women. Catty, gossipy, obtuse, and domineering, they make quick, baseless judgments. Although never outright rude-they are much too well mannered for that-they are the ones who truly isolate Srinivas. For them, Srinivas is just an oddity-neither English nor Indian.

To them, he is seemingly a harmless old man, but one never really knows, does one? After all, his clothes are strange and his habits even stranger. Srinivas's reputation as an eccentric spreads on the wings of misinformation. A rumor starts that year after his wife's death; Srinivas keeps a jar of her

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ashes in the house. "It was a big tea caddy," notes Mrs Glass, a neighbour. "What's more, from what our Bert saw, it still has her ashes in it, to this very day."

Their Bert, one of the reigning racists of the lane, had neglected to note that Srinivas had actually floated his wife's ashes down the Thames (there, a constable had reprimanded him for "polluting" the chocolaty river), and the jar in question now contained Indian soil, one of Vasantha's favourite belongings. Ultimately, the neighbours have determined that no matter how respectable the Indians seem, they will never quite be one of them. In the following passage, for example, the women speak of Vasantha: Mrs Glass considered. "She was a nice little thing, really," she said fairly. "Of course, she was Indian. I mean, she couldn't help it, could she? But I will say she kept her place spotless. Like one of us, although she wasn't if you follow what I mean." (254)

Mrs. Fletcher followed these non sequiturs quite easily. Mrs Glass had known she would. As she often said, that was the advantage of living in a good locality: everyone understood, they knew what you meant, you didn't have to spell it out. These women's husbands could point out the inequities to which their logic leads, but captive to their meekness, they refrain.

Markandaya is a complex enough thinker, however, to understand that not all differences arise from mean-spirit. Sometimes, the gulf is widened by a genuine lack of understanding even from those who love Srinivas. When a neighborhood kid leaves a dead mouse on his doorstep, for instance, Srinivas finds it and gives it a somber, respectful cremation. "It had been killed and left," he says. "I am of course, in a way, responsible for its death." After all, the mouse was used to terrorize him, he thinks. When Mrs Pickering also fails to understand the man she is living with, the man who seems to her on the brink of dementia; he continues reasoning with himself: "And the loss, he thought, it involved: so great, so terrible. Shall I, he asked himself, tell her? That a mouse has entitlements no less than a man?" (279)

## **4. Conclusion**

To Sum up, Markanday seems to suggest that the efforts toward assimilation prove largely futile. She points out that Srinivas's desire to cradle those memories of India and to find comfort in his new country are not mutually exclusive. A humble, well-intention man, he readily admits his own shortcomings and shortsightedness. After his wife's death, for example, he befriends Mrs Pickering, a widow who awakens him to the beauty of English clothing and climate. He confesses then that with Vasantha, he had lived like an exile-always trying to recreate the India of his memories in England, but now: "She—the brisk, weathered Englishwoman—made him see the beauty of a crisp winter morning, where before—infected by Vasantha, shivering in unsuitable clothes—he had been conscious only of a cold that pierced to the marrow. . ." (212-13)

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Even the surviving son, who had wished so fervently that his parents would lose the embarrassing accents and the ridiculous outfits, finds himself treated like a foreigner by fellow Scotsmen. While Markandaya does not wholly condemn the West or modernization for the woes of such lost souls, she does bemoan the heavy toll they levy. Srinivas, the Nowhere Man, had tried going back to India, but found that once departed, one can never return.

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