To Study and Explain the Cultural Polarity in the Novels of Kamla Markandaya

Jyoti Malik¹, Dr. Asha Sharma², Vinay Sharma³, Sandeep⁴

¹Research Scholar, CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalaya (India)
²Dr. Asha Sharma, Asst. Prof., Vaish College of Education, Bahadurgarh, Haryana, (India)
³ Research Scholar, CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalaya (India)
⁴ Research Scholar, CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalaya (India)

Abstract

The interaction of different cultures is the major theme in most of the novels of Kamala Markandaya. The Cultural and Religious differences can be overcome if the persons involved were prepared to give up their angularities for the sake of mutual love and happiness. She points out clearly how the east and west would always remain poles apart but the paper explains that is possible with compromise.

Keywords: Cultural Polarity, Novels of Kamla Markandaya.

Explanation of Novel Nectar in a Sieve

Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya is a relatively short novel that introduces Western students to life in rural India and the changes that occurred during that country’s British colonization. Although easy to read, the novel is lyrical and moving and can be read on a variety of levels. On the most basic level, it is the story of an arranged but loving marriage and rural peasant life. On another level, it is a tale of indomitable human spirit that overcomes poverty and unending misfortune. Finally, it is a novel about the conflicts between a traditional agricultural culture and a burgeoning industrial capitalistic society. The novel touches on several important social phenomena: the importance of traditional cultural practices, people’s reluctance to change, and the impact of economic change.

Nectar in a Sieve was first published in 1954, a few years after India gained political independence from Britain. Particularly appropriate in English or social studies classes, students can examine the novel’s strong character development and cultural significance. For English classes, the novel provides opportunity for vocabulary study, examination of imagery and symbolism, and oral and written response to its themes: the indomitable human spirit, the nature of love, and human responses to suffering. The novel also can be examined as a tragedy or can be compared to novels with similar themes from a variety of cultures. In social studies, students can study the novel in units on India, the British Empire, and the role of women in agricultural societies.
evolving economies, the effects of poverty, and Hinduism. They also can examine the themes of conflicts between cultures and the benefits and problems of change. The novel poses several problems for young readers that teachers can help them overcome. Although short, it is monotonous in parts. There are gaps in the episodes with some incidents not fully explained by Markandaya. This teacher’s guide attempts to fill these gaps by explaining the various cultural practices and providing background information necessary for a full understanding of the story. It is divided into several sections: Biographical Sketch of the Author; Synopsis; Main Characters; Background Information about India: Family Life, Religion, Birth, Marriage, Dress, Food, Education, Economy, and Communication; and Teaching Ideas: Prereading Activities, During Reading Activities, After Reading Activities, and Bibliography. Each of the activity sections will list activities for English and social studies.

The Main Characters

1. Rukmani (Ruku) is the hard-working and devoted wife of Nathan. She is willing to accept challenges in order to achieve her aims. Like her husband, she hopes their situation will improve. She seems to have an aversion to change.
2. Nathan is hard working and supportive of his wife. He, too, hopes for better times and is disappointed that his sons do not want to work on the land. He dies in the city after they lose their land and he and Ruku go to look for their son, Murugan.
3. Kennington (Kenny) is a benevolent village doctor, probably British, who discharges his functions diligently. His ambition is to build a hospital in the village with foreign aid, and he devotes much time and energy to this project. He adapts well to Indian culture, speaks the language, and eats Indian food. However, he cannot understand the peasants’ unwillingness to accept change.
4. Old Granny, sells fruits and vegetables in the street market and serves as a matchmaker. Her moment of glory is when she successfully finds an acceptable groom for Ira, but this glory dissipates when Ira is separated from her husband.
5. Kunthi is an attractive woman of the village who becomes a prostitute after the opening of the tannery. An opportunist, she successfully blackmails both Nathan and Ruku to obtain food from them during the drought.
6. Kali is a village woman who talks a great deal about seemingly unimportant things.
7. Biswas is the avaricious money-leader who capitalizes on opportunities to extort gains from the villagers.
8. Puli, a cunning, young, orphaned boy, learns to survive on the city streets. He helps Ruku and Nathan find work and survive in the city and eventually becomes a member of the family.
9. The children of Ruku and Nathan:
   a. Irawaddy (Ira), the only daughter, is married at age fourteen but separated from her husband because she cannot bear him a child. She returns to live with her parents. Poverty forces her into prostitution. She eventually has an illegitimate albino son, Sacrabani.
   b. Arjun and Thambi do not want to work the land with their father. Briefly, they are employed at the tannery and are able to make a financial contribution to the home. After they lose their jobs, they emigrate to Ceylon to work and have no communication with the family.
   c. Murugan leaves the village to become a servant in the city. He marries and fathers a son but deserts his family to seek employment elsewhere. He fails to keep in touch with his wife or parents.
   d. Raja becomes frail because of malnutrition and is beaten to death by the watchmen when he is found rummaging for food in the vicinity of the tannery. His parents have no recourse and are persuaded by the watchmen to admit that they were not responsible for his death.
   e. Selvam builds on what his mother taught him and thus becomes the most educated person in the family. He is apprenticed to Kenny and looks forward to the completion of the hospital.
   f. Kutti becomes closely attached to Ira but in spite of her efforts to buy him food with money she earns from prostitution, he suffers and dies from malnutrition.

Family Structure

An extended family structure was common among Indian families. Often, as any as three generations lived in the same house. This resulted in problems such as lack of privacy, inadequate resources, family disputes, and dependence on diminishing food supplies produced on ever less fertile land.
Although there were not enough resources available to the family, its members lived with some contentment and peace. Rukmani (Ruku) and Nathan were devoted to each other until Nathan’s death. They encouraged and supported each other. Nathan was a compassionate and loving husband. Ruku adjust quickly to the role of a homemaker. The belief among Indians was that a woman’s place was in the home, bringing up children, preparing meals, keeping house, and maintaining religious and cultural traditions. In addition, Ruku planted a vegetable garden and on occasions helped Nathan in the rice field.

Ruku and Nathan worked hard to achieve their goals. They attempted to put aside food and money to purchase their land and provide for their family. When that failed and they were forced off the land, they worked at backbreaking labor to earn money to return home from the city. A characteristic of Indians is their frugality, as evidenced in Ruku’s astute handling of the family’s meager finances. To some extent, the couple was broad minded, but also incredibly naive and unworldly. They trusted Puli, shared their food with him, and in the end, Ruku took him home, aware that there was not enough food for her own family.

In an extended family, strong family ties often discourage members from leaving the family unit. Nathan and Ruku, for example, tried to dissuade their sons Arjun and Thambi from going to Ceylon, even though their land and meager resources could not support them. As with most Indian peasant fathers, Nathan wanted his sons to stay and work the land, but they were reluctant to do so because they recognized that the family’s situation would not improve and their opportunities were better elsewhere. This provides an example of how changing, industrialized economies alter extended family structures that tend to exist in agricultural, peasant economies. Selvam had similar thoughts about the land, but when he decided to work for Kenny his parents did not stop him because he was not going to leave the family’s home as his elder brothers had done. In many ways, villagers were also an extension of the family helping one another during births, deaths, marriages, and drought or monsoon.

Ruku and Nathan were hopeful that their situation would improve. Nathan aspired to buy a house like that of his father-in-law and abandoned certain traditional Hindu practices such as revering the cobra. Ruku was proud. Despite the sufferings they experienced in the city, for example, she refused to beg. Her resilience and great reluctance to deal with change sometimes irked Kenny who saw her acceptance of fate as a weakness. Ruku, like many peasants, was worried that the construction of the tannery would destroy their traditional way of life; she failed to see its potential economic benefits.

To a large extent, she was right. However, she, too, unlike many peasants, accepted some modern ways exhibited in her faith in medicine to cure hers and Ira’s infertility. However, this acceptance of modern medicine was her attempt to preserve the tradition and culture of Indian peasant life. Without the help provided by Kenny, she knew that neither she nor Ira would bear sons, and without sons their traditional way of life would be destroyed.

**Cultural Polarity**

The dictum of the author Kamala Markandaya in the Possession is a failure of a harmonious meeting of the east and west is inevitable. This incompatibility arises due to the egoistic and self-centered personality like Caroline. Likeliness of East-West meeting is achieved, through the tolerance and temperance of the characters, even though society poses the greatest threat to their union. However, in possession society plays an insignificant part and there is adequate room for the meeting and merging of the east and the west, but yet remains an illusion due to characters like Caroline.

As in Possession, in Some Inner Fury and in Now here man the East and West do not meet, but the author does not indicate that they cannot come together at all. Even in these three novels, there are instances of cordial relationship between the East and the West. In Some Inner Fury for example, the lovers Mira and Richard are united by their transcending love for each other. Though they belong to different cultures and different classes- the ruler and the ruled, their love stands unaffected.

This is possible due to mutual sacrifice and tolerance. The forces responsible for their final separation were not within themselves but created by the society. The political fanatics forcibly separate the lovers, but the lovers continue to remain united in their mind and soul. This is evident from Mira’s recollection of her past, holding in her hand, as a relic, the torn shirt sleeve of Richard. Similarly in Now here man the West is extremely harsh towards the East.
The racial fanatics led by Fred fletches make the life of Srinivas miserable. The extreme tolerance shown by Srinivas even when he is insulted and injured shocks us. Here again society is solely or partly responsible for preventing the meeting of the East and the West. Indian authors attempting this theme have emphasized the antagonism existing between them, the gulf which separates individuals belonging of different societies. As Kamala Markandaya shows us, it is not only the cultural differences which bring about alienation but also society itself, its economic and concomitant social structure to which culture values are related dialectically and not independently, are equally responsible.

But in possession it is not society that is responsible for the strained relationship. Polarity is in-built in the character of both Caroline and Valmiki, one arises for the life of the spirit; whereas the other completely ignores it. Nonetheless Valmiki is patient and ready to make sacrifice in the beginning. He leaves behind his home, his family members and the Swamiji. He is very patient adjustable and takes every step to adapt him and make him acceptable to the Western society.

He even begins to learn English and imitate English manners. He is happy with other Westerners like Mrs. Peaboy, Ellie and Annabel. But Caroline’s impolite behavior and fraudulent tactics test Val. The series of quarrels between Valmiki and Caroline are due to the self-righteousness of the pompous Caroline; nonetheless they serve as eye-openers of Val’s spiritual rejuvenation.

So only some individuals like Caroline with eccentric qualities spoil the harmonious existence of East-West completely. On the other hand, Kamala Markandaya does not rule out the possibility of the east and the West existing together. She proves beyond doubt that such a relationship is possible if the Easterners and the Westerners understand each other and show a spirit of tolerance. As Joad observes while talking of modern civilization, co-existence of nations is possible only when tolerance is practiced. Possession ends with Valmiki’s return to the village. But Caroline is optimistic and hopeful of winning Val back. Caroline’s optimistic echoes, “One day he will want to be mine again I shall take care to make him want me again and that day I hall come Back to claim him... of course it will come” reveal the author’s hope that the East and the West can come together though they do not directly do so in this novel.

Besides this, in almost all the novels of Kamala Markandaya, there is always a character, either British or Indian who strikes a common note and proves to be a successful combination of East and West like Kenny in Nectar in a Sieve, Roshan in Some Inner Fury, Mrs. Pickering in Now here man and Anasuya in Possession. They show the spirit of tolerance.

Dr. Kenny, a missionary is all love for peasants in the village. The villagers go to him seeking help. Roshan is loved and respected both by the English and the Indians. Mrs. Pickering loves Srinivas and lives under his roof. And Anasuya serves as a bridge between the East and the West. These amiable Indian and English characters prove that a cordial relationship is always possible between the East and the West.

Through Possession, Kamala Markandaya proves that the eccentric qualities of an individual add to the already existing differences in Culture and religion and thus mark the relationship beyond redemption.

Kipling’s proverbial statement declares:

“Oh East is East, and West is West, and never The twin shall meet. Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s Great judgment seat; But there is neither East nor West, Border, Nor Breed, nor Birth, When two men stand face to face, though

**Conclusion**

They come from the ends of the earth” But Kamala Markandaya has proved with the help of these characters who stroke a common note that a blend of the twin cultures and co-existence of the east and the West is always possible, when the individuals concerned are prepared to sacrifice their idiosyncrasies for mutual benefit, unlike Caroline and Valmiki with fundamentally different qualities and vastly differing aims.

**References**


