

A COMPARATIVE READING OF R.K. NARAYAN AND KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S SELECT NOVELS

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Abstract

This paper attempts a comparative study of the characters portrayed by R. K. Narayan in "The Vendor of Sweets" and Kamala Markandaya's "Some Inner Fury". It tries to examine how the writers delineate harsh realities of dualities and conflicts an individual goes through in one's personal and social life and what is the impact of East - West Encounter on an individual's cultural, social and intellectual life. It aims to study the role this encounter plays in building, creating or destroying the image of an individual and the nation of which one is an inseparable part. And at the same time it proposes to investigate why despite of love, understanding and rapport the relationship between Mali and Jagan, Mali (Indian) and Grace (American-Korean), Richard and Mira and other minor characters fail in the novel. Emphasis is also laid on tracing similarities and differences in the reaction and approach of the characters in different situations, social and political upheavals, personal crises and individual failures.

Key Words: *Conflicts, duality, encounter, individual identity, and human relationship.*

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This paper attempts to examine the impact of conflicts aroused due to influence of western system on Indians, Indian culture and society in general and human relationship in particular. The two novels *The Vendor of Sweets* and *Some Inner Fury* are suggestive of the dogmatic world in and around us. Both R. K. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya have delineated the world of individuals caught in the chaos. As Prof. M. K. Naik in his *Dimensions of Indian English Literature* rightly points out that one of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was probably a fountain head of story-telling.

The theme of East-west encounter captivated the attention of post independence Indian English novelists more vigorously than any other theme. The presentation of reactions of an Indian on returning home from abroad is focus of the most of these novels. E.M. Foster too has very finely depicted the impact of colonizers on the colonized, the relationship, causes and barriers for tangible relationship between Indians and the British in *A Passage to India*. It is evident that the British have left long back but the impact of their rule has not just left a permanent imprint on history of the nation but deeply rooted into Indians minds too. The conflicts and dilemmas faced by them might have changed but they are not extinct. Modern generation has inherited the culture which is already diluted and thickened in different concentrations at different junctions.

The conflict faced by older generation comes to new generation in a different form with complexities and the generation gap and limited perception are visible in the approaches of people towards life. And R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of sweets* proves this impact viz. differences in attitudes, lack of communication and understanding. Vincent Buckley opined that Indianness is something hard to define and that cross -cultures may augment the search of identity. It is true to certain extent that in search of individual identity, a nation's identity is also established since individual identity is not devoid of society.

Similarly, to speak of R. K. Narayan, he oscillates but strikes a balance through his series of Malgudi novels, with *Swami and Friends* (1933), he added a new dimension to the novel of social reforms and revived Hardy's convention of regionalism. As M.K. Naik puts it:

A single minded practitioner of the novel of local colour, he, however, produced his best work after independence when the little small town ironies of his microcosm developed into an awareness of the layer of existential irony of human nature and life.¹

R. K. Narayan was one of the trios who played the trumpet of creativity in the field of Indian English novels. His stories and characters are waved in to a web of relationships encircling in and around the fictional world of Malgudi. His characters are not just the inhabitants of Malgudi rather represent human sensitivity. He does not involve much into the external world, rather he dwells into the world of humans and kaleidoscopic relationship man lives in. However, when it comes to encounters between East and West, he generally tend to think of political ideologies impressed in the writings but primarily aiming at tracing the influence of such conflicts on individuals and the native culture.

Indians in general and Indian writers in particulars were then in dilemma. The Indians were facing cultural colonization which split writers and individuals in to different customs or dual code of behaviours which lead to differences and made them feel outcasts between the worlds. Kamala Markandaya, the earliest of the top ranking women novelists, shot to fame with her very first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. She was familiar with the interaction of the two cultures - Eastern and Western. Her novels reflect the East-West encounter in different contexts and project the resultant identity crisis. It is observed that personal relationships are R. K. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya's forte and step by step they buildup relationships, analyse and dramatically make them represent something larger. A fine sensibility pervades their fictional world.

India can boast of a glorious civilization, ancient culture and history which stood test of time. However, the Language itself, British administration, and western culture did influence the Indian way of life over the two centuries. The writers of India have depicted cross cultural encounters and westerner's writings on Indian's show prejudiced views; British of considering themselves as enlightened, superior and civilized race and Indians may consider the British superior and write under their influence or blame them for the current situations. However, R. K. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya's works reveal prejudices of both Indians as well as the British.

R.K. Narayan was essentially a middle class writer and did not load his novel with high sounding philosophy. His works have philosophy of humanity, humbleness, humility and simple life. In the *The Vendor of sweets*, R.K. Narayan pictures a humble life of Jagan- a sweet vendor, a die-hard Gandhi and his only son Mali- an imitator and admirer of western ideology. Jaganas a father faces crises of identifying himself with the foreign returned son and he loses his cultural significance also. Due to Mali's newly acquired traits, he is looked

down by the orthodox members of his family and community. This shows that Jagan develops a fear of losing his identity in the society due to the impact of western culture. R.K.Narayan does not fail to focus on human weaknesses, Jagan's reading of Bhagavat Geeta and simultaneously keeping account of profit earned shows his worldliness and spiritual life. Jagan stands for Indian (culture) values and Mali for problematic dichotomy of West-East dilemma. In chapter 4 of *The Vendor of Sweets* Jagan says God be thanked that there was no direct exit from his room to the street as his father foolishly planned otherwise he would have lost the memory of his son's identity long ago. Here the difference between Jagan and Mali and Jagan and Jagan's father's attitudes are marked.

When cousin tells him that Mali is going to America to learn the art of novel writing Jagan remarks that he should go to village granny to learn story telling. Pungently he asks 'Did Walmiky go to America or Germany in order to write his Ramayana, strange notions these boys get nowadays.' This dialogue shows that Mali was independent and adventurous whereas Jagan was emotionally dependent on his son and a patriot, he stands out as a typical Indian patriarchal father deeply rooted into his native culture whereas, Mali's roots had lost ground. It also shows R.K.Narayan's firm faith in richness of Indian folklore, oral and written literature.

Cousin remarks on western food habit that only beef and pork is consumed in that country and that they take a lot of intoxicating drink, never water or milk, and the women are free, they mix freely with men and snap off marriages without ado, and bask in the sun without clothes, shows prejudiced nature of Indians towards west. Though biased view of Indians against British/American or western in general is clearly emphasized here, the writer hints at the possibility of perfect understanding between people of two different nations. Jagan reflects 'It may not all be true.' The letter from Mali after three years of stay in America states that he had fallen in love with western life and he writes to his father that he eats beef, and was ashamed when India asks for American aid. He suggests that instead, Indians should slaughter cows which wonder in the street and block the traffic. It shows change in attitude of Mali and degradation of ethics. According to him Shastras defined the 5 deadly sins and the killing of a cow headed the list. Mali announces his arrival and comes to India with Grace and introduces her to Jagan as 'This is Grace, we are married'. Jagan's marriage to Mali's mother was an arranged one and Jagan was an obedient son but only Mali was an exception in the family. Jagan still manages to control himself. Jagan had not made much change in his ancestral house but for foreign returned Mali, he had spent fortune in building modern toilet and bath room adjoining Mali's bed room and had put up chairs. It can be observed that father attempts to adjust to son's requirements but son fails to understand. This is the result of lack of communication and

understanding between the two. Mali's exposure to western air had made him to feel disgusted of Indian life, culture and people. Interestingly Grace a foreigner enjoys the place and finds it 'charming' and Mali remarks "Honey" "live in it and see what it is like." Here when west meets east i.e. Grace meets Jagan both of them try to be normal but they are not. The house gets divided into two and kitchen is set apart. Mali a young foreign returned individual now carries himself like a celebrity.

Grace's sincere attempt to become an Indian housewife / daughter-in-law is appreciated. Though a foreigner she gives her best for the relationship. She tells him that she would not mind to work as she was an Indian daughter-in-law. West can be in harmony with east if bond of understanding is developed. Jagan was happy to see Grace in his musty and old sari. On one hand, relationship between Jagan and Grace was improving on the other Jagan -Mali's relationship was getting weakened. He had learnt great deal about American from his letter but knew not whether Mali had finished his studies and acquired a degree. Jagan understands that Mali never wrote letters to him, it was Grace who wrote letters to him about their well being.

Literature occurs in a social contest as a part of culture in a milieu. R.K. Narayan very aptly displays local colour and culture of Malgudi through reaction of native people. It presents how the structure of the society in which they live and the sentences they draw from it conditions their attitude. A strand of dilemma as to acceptance and rejection of traditional roles and western models can also be traced effectively. These texts indicate possibilities of transcending patterns of relationships. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya's characters may seem to be simple and limited in dimension but they are not isolated beings. Both of them explore another facet of East -West encounter and the problems and challenges faced by the Indians in making adjustments with the alien culture. Though an element of nativism is found in R. K. Narayan it is inclusive in nature, which makes his novel speak of universalism.

Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* (1955) is a semi-autobiographical story, and depicts the time of 40s, when India was fighting for independence. The intricacies of life are made clear in different parts of the novel through recording the inner workings of the minds of the characters, their personal confusions and social confrontations. The characters emerge as individuals growing into themselves, unfolding the delicate processes of their being and becoming. In their encounter with an alien political power, the anti-colonial or anti-imperialist attitudes are powerfully expressed. Through her novels, Markandaya brings to light the complication of post-colonial and traditional Indian social hierarchy as well as the implications prevalent within both systems.

In *Some Inner Fury*, Kamala Markandaya probes the east-west conflict through the dilemma of Mira, who was in love with an Englishman. Indian woman and an Englishman's love for each other come to a tragic end because of political inequality. On his arrival in British India to take up the appointment of an ADC to one of the governors, Richard spends a couple of weeks in the house of his friend, Kitsamy, where he meets Mira, Kitsamy's younger sister. A bit shy at first, Mira develops a liking for Richard, to which Richard responds favorably. They meet again after three years, and they find that their hearts have grown fonder. With the second meeting, love and understanding quickly develop between the two. In the course of the year, Richard becomes a victim of the political turmoil, and Mira is left to mourn the loss of her beloved for the rest of her life.

Despite wide differences in race and culture, Mira and Richard become great lovers. The basis of their quick mutual attraction is not physical. In fact, there is very little description of their physical beauty and charm. In both these novels characters are Mira(Indian)- Richard(Foreigner) and Mali(Indian)- Grace(Foreigner) and their relationship fails for strong political, social or economic and cultural differences. Mira and Richard were dedicated, sincere and deeply in love with each other. In the case of Mira in their physical union, there is always poetry, love, and a rare tenderness. Mira recalls her experience 'the abundant flow of his love for me and there was no passion, only this outpouring of an overwhelming tenderness.'⁶ They believed, in their youthful inexperience, that nothing can separate them and nothing can bring an end to their love. Mira says that in those days they believed as if:

love were a talisman that would somehow keep us together,
protecting us against war, the world, everything; as if a
million others, believing this, had not already been undeceived.⁷

The political situation prevalent in the country crops up in the conversation between Mira and Richard now and then, though they zealously argue in the beginning that the situation does not make any difference to their relation: 'your people' and 'my people'? 'I thought, and I said No. I thought I spoke the truth. I thought there was no region of my mind I could not enter, if I tried. I did not know-- I had yet to learn-- that no man knows himself.'⁸

These illustrations explore the possibilities of good relationship between people of two different nations only when political motives and hypocrisy is surpassed. It becomes increasingly difficult for Mira and Richard to ignore the situation, particularly after Gopal, Mira's adopted brother, and great patriot, is falsely accused by an English priest of the

murder of Kitsamy, and consequently the government's attempt to exploit the priest's words to send Gopal to the gallows. Feelings of hatred spread among the people on both sides 'It is a terrible thing,' says Richard 'to feel unwanted. To be hated.'⁹ Mira tries to console him by saying that the feeling is not directed against him, but Richard asks:

Do you really think people can be singled out like that?
One by one, each as an individual? At a time like this?
After today?¹⁰

Grace was born to a Korean mother and American father and she was living with an Indian in India. Though a foreigner she manages to be an Indian daughter-in-law. Mali's argument with Jagan on financial matter shows a drastic change he had undergone. Jagan states 'Why do you blame the country for everything? It has been good enough for four hundred millions.' Mali says he did not know what Jagan was talking about. His westernized thoughts clashed with Jagan's Indian ideologies and the relationship between the two gets hampered.

Economic aspects are also visible in the novel, Mali's rejection of Grace proves his materialistic attitudes. Jagan believed that Indian wife had distinct place. He says 'If you read our Puranas you will find that the wife's place is beside her husband whatever may happen.' Though Grace manages to be a loving and good partner, Mali asks her to return to her country when he fails to get his business done. Jagan gets shock of his life when he learns of Mali-Grace staying together without marriage at his ancestral house. His ancestral culture and tradition of the family were dumped by Mali.

Grace accepts Indianness of Jagan but Jagan's sister and distant relatives ostracize him for taking Grace -a beef eating Christian girl as a daughter-in-law. Mali keeps comparing and contrasting Indian and American way of life 'People must respect other people's privacy that's all. We don't find it in this country. In America no one stares at others.' In India, bonding, neighborhood and sharing each other's sorrow is part of Indian culture but for Mali it was interference, nonsense and indiscipline. A radical change in attitude is highlighted here. At the end he comes to know of Mali being locked up in jail. He hands over the keys to him and believes that Mali may take care of shop once he comes out of the jail. He still respects Grace and tells cousin that if she needs to return to her country he shall buy the tickets because he considered it to be his duty.

Contrasting attitudes and life style of Jagan- Mali give an insight into the conflicts and intricate changes brought in due to east - west dualism. R.K.Narayan emerges as a keen observer and a neutral writer depicting what was part of his surroundings. The life he described is of the middle class, semi-urban people who tried to imitate western life style. Jagan wins admiration for his understanding of Grace. Jagan undergoes an agony of being

an outcast, he thinks he may be asked to get away and blamed as pollutant of family reputations. In *Some Inner Fury* When Mira finds herself in a situation in which she has to make a choice between joining the procession of Indian patriots and staying away from it with Richard, she realizes they cannot stay together. The procession may not mean anything to her, but she is compelled to join them. 'Go? Leave the man I loved to go with these people? What did they mean to me, what could they mean, more than the man I loved? They were my people- -those others were his.' 'Did it mean something then-all this 'your people' and 'my people? Or did it have its being and gain its strength from ceaseless repetition?' 'I knew I would go, even as I knew Richard must stay. For us there was no other way, the forces that pulled us apart were too strong.'¹¹

When Richard is killed their love supposedly remains immortal. Mira reflects:

What had been given us had been gifted freely, abundantly, lit with a splendour which had coloured and enriched our whole living; it could Neverbe taken from us. We had known love together, whatever happened the sweetness of that knowledge would always remain. We had drunk deeply of the chalice of happiness, which is not given to many even to hold. ¹²

The minds of Mira and Richard, despite the wide racial and cultural differences, work in perfect unison. They achieve such a perfect Platonic relationship that it is somewhat hard to believe. But in Mali's case he was bourgeois, he was untouched by love, and he wanted Grace to return to her country. He was selfish and love-relationship meant a business. Though the novel fails to make the presentation of the romantic story of love and the final estrangement of the lovers natural and compelling, its message is clear. As long as political domination of Britain/western over India lasts, lovers like Mira and Richard cannot further strengthen their relationship through marriage. This reminds us of failure of Aziz and Fielding's friendship in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. However, the message which one may derive here is that as long as individuals fail to realize importance of human bonding and learn to respect diversity, people like Mali won't be an exception.

To sum up Jagan is not an exception, Jagan confronted by new world and its ways, degradation of values and morals, duties towards each other, notions of marriage, patriotism and bonding at last manages to escape. Both the novels seek to demonstrate how colonialism left the native culture, identity, tradition and even individual selves in tatters, destroyed through in doctrinarian, education or outright negation. This crises of cultural identity results in a kind of schizophrenic madness, the accumulated insults by the white matter, the endless negation of native culture, and prolonged indoctrination in

western culture all result in an unstable condition for individuals, where their native culture was rejected but a new one was not readily available.

What is frightening is that as a culture, they have begun to lose their identity. Native culture has lost its bearing and roots in its encounter with colonialism. Pramod Nayar says that the mimicry of other culture becomes a way of negotiating with this unstable state of non-identity. The individual identity, he discovers, was always an attributes something given to him by the westerner. He sees himself as civilized in sharp contrast to his people. He collaborates with his colonial ruler. Markandaya studies the theme of race and culture contact from different points of view. From whatever angle she looks at it, she finds that people belonging to different cultures generally face insurmountable difficulties in mutual understanding and love. Political inequality is not the only hurdle here.

The people who enjoy this short-lived happiness from understanding and love are romantics like Mira and Richard, rustics like Jagan and Ambika. Both of them unmask their hypocrisy and arrogance and related faults in a bold and forthright manner but without over looking their limitations and weaknesses. Both the novels are not simple documentaries but recreate life and manners so that the characters and situations not only stand by themselves in their own right, they illuminate the culture and way of life of Indians and western people.

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