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# A Thematic Analysis of Kamala Markandaya Novel 'The Nowhere Man'

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### ABSTRACT

The East-West confrontation is once again the predominant theme in the novel. 'The Nowhere Man (1972). The experiences of Srinivas, the 'nowhere man', occur against the background of intercultural conflict in the social situation in England. This novel clearly testifies to Markandaya's authentic experience as well as her clear mastery of the technique of fictionalizing the outer reality. This novel holds forth the possibility of an inter-cultural meeting-point in this relationship where the basis of friendship is deep human empathy and compassion. The Nowhere Man is Markandaya artistic adumbration of the need for secular humane concern as the principal integrative ingredient to prevent further fragmentation of our post-colonial schizophrenic world.

Keywords: East-West confrontation, Predominant theme, Authentic, Adumbration, Post-colonial schizophrenic

### Introduction

The East-West confrontation is once again the predominant theme in the novel. 'The Nowhere Man (1972). It shows Markandaya's continued concern with cultural values in the context of racist attitudes in England following the decline and defeat of the British imperialism. In this novel, she probes deeper than in her previous novel into the actual social interaction below the surface of inter-cultural tensions at personal and group levels. The experiences of Srinivas, the 'nowhere man', occur against the background of intercultural conflict in the social situation in England. This novel clearly testifies to Markandaya's authentic experience as well as her clear mastery of the technique of fictionalizing the outer reality. However, Markandaya does not give any formula for a better understanding because there is none except humane concern; and this, Markandaya does indirectly through her literature of concern.

Meanwhile, Srinivas narrates the story of his early life in India and his self-exile to England and friendship with Mrs. Pickering. The narrative incorporates the remote past of Srinivas and helps us trace the line of Srinivas's mental conflicts and dilemmas to his maturity. The narrative then moves again from the symbolic starting-point of the novel through the phase of racial hostility and ostracisation that Srinivas experiences, the monstrous activities of Fred and his associates and the eventual martyrdom of Srinivas.

The point of view that Markandaya employs in this, novel is that of the third-person omniscient author, and here the stance is more or less of the real author herself, though skilfully filtered through the consciousness of Srinivas and succeeding in presenting his point of view also. Mrs. Pickering's world, which struck most strangely of all. To which she, and they, but not he, belonged. Inhabited an area devoid of meaning for him, but dense with experience for them. It isolated him, cast him in the role of intruder. Intruder, after ten, twenty, fifty years. (The Nowhere Man 173) Srinivas is, initially, the young man adhering to the familial bonds and duties at "Chandra prasad". But when the society in which he lives faces an upheaval in the form of British despotism, Srinivas's mind begins to fill with the desires to defy and protest against the injustice meted out to the Indians. But even at this point, he experiences the surging conflict between the desire to get rid of the controls, and the doubt whether it is right. His situation is such that he begins to long for an escape not only from the social structure but also from himself in the grip of a dilemma: The police search carried on at Srinivas's house is the turning-point in his career. Vasudev, the suspect, locks himself up in a camphor-wood box and dies of asphyxiation. The mean insult directed at Vasantha drives Srinivas to fury. His father, Narayan, a staunch loyalist, also rebels against imperialism by singing an Indian hymn at the college function. The "pater-figure" who stays a conformist even when all around him have rebelled, Narayan is also forced to defy the British authority at the end. But the germ of racial hostility begins to creep into England also, and Srinivas feels trapped in an absurd existential situation. The maturation of Srinivas is slow and steady. Ignoring the politics of imperialism, Srinivas attempts to merge into the society of England by migration and acceptance of the new values. He finds that even with his ideas of individual freedom and social consideration he cannot live in harmony because of the whole welter of forces like jingoism and racism which can never be completely eliminated and which surface even without provocation. Thus driven to England with his newly-wedded wife, Srinivas has to carve out a totally different future from the academic one he had once visualized; so he starts a spice business in London. Once in London, it is Vasantha's grit, her refusal to turn into a Londoner that preserves Srinivas from total alienation and decline. But she is also practical and adopts the efficiency of British methods over the messy Indian ways. She retains her identity at the same time. Srinivas's questioning quest becomes an existential search for meaning in the face of an absurd situation. All he wants is peaceful coexistence, but peace evades him. Two other novels replicate

theimmigrant plight. Vasantha persuades Srinivas to buy the house at No:5, which fulfils the psychological need to establish their identity. Man's innermost desire is to be recognized as one of the herd or to acquire the sense of "I" which is nearly always in relation to the outside world unless one becomes truly free." In buying the house, Srinivas buys responsibility also. The "house with basement and attic" turns into the symbol of the security that Vasantha desires in an alien land. Srinivas who thinks that he does not need it is later on attached to it. Ironically, from its secure premises, Srinivas later struggles to escape with life. The house initially means "chains" to him which he wants to escape from—the chains of responsibility. "Chains, said Srinivas, glum amid the teak chests and buckled fiber suitcases. We have chained ourselves to four walls and a roof." It later expands into the responsibility towards his tenants, whom he cannot and should not evict at his own pleasure. His final eviction of them veers back at Srinivas in the hostility he encounters in the neighborhood.

With the death of Vasantha, something vital in Srinivas snaps and he feels the void impossible to endure and survive. She has symbolised for him their cultural moorings which he had once forcibly rejected to carve out a new future. Now he feels his individual self-threatened and he proceeds to defend his self within the security of his four walls. His emptiness is evoked through effective images: "That period, for Srinivas, was a dust bowl of being. Empty, without meaning, scooped out, picked clean, no climbing up the slippery sides. A skull, from which all matter had gone. Sea urchin shell, from which the living lights had been brutally plucked, leaving the pearly skeleton to serve as an ornament for the mindless, the surf-riders of life." Though he is free from all responsibilities now, he becomes incapable of performance. The will needs to function through obstacles. Markandaya thus prepares us amply for the plausibility of his meeting and life with Mrs. Pickering. The theme of this relationship transforms the novel into a perceptive work of art, and not just a documentary. Personal relationships here are on the East-West axis. The Srinivas-Pickering relationship is founded on a firm commitment to human values; it is indeed based in true freedom. As J. Filella says, true freedom means "commitment without compulsion."

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### Critical Analysis

This novel holds forth the possibility of an inter-cultural meeting-point in this relationship where the basis of friendship is deep human empathy and compassion. The vital influence of personal relationships even in teaching greater awareness is perceived, as Srinivas begins to realise his responsibilities to Mrs. Pickering in whose care he places himself "in the warmth of human commitment", progresses to an awareness of the responsibility to the country he adopts. Srinivas matures from the initial belief that he can be isolated from imperialism itself by moving away from his motherland. His expanded consciousness underscores social responsibility which, in Markandaya's universe of discourse, is of paramount importance. Srinivas has a duty to the society which has given him a refuge. So though hoodlums like Fred Fletcher would rise now and then to torture the immigrants, the latter cannot negatively react to it since they are indebted, and after all remain responsible 'aliens'. Srinivas does not bargain for such feelings of responsibility when he escapes from British India but now accepts the fact of commitment: "England was becoming his country". One sees the difference, therefore, between the responsibilities that one undertakes and those that are thrust upon one.

In *The Nowhere Man*, Markandaya shows how the more mature friendship of Srinivas and Mrs. Pickering can survive through sympathy, mutual concern and care. It survives various inter-racial storms because it is founded not on external fripperies or sex or money . but on the compassionate commitment between two mature individuals. Meanwhile, the phenomena of social change sweep over the environment. One of the predominant changes is the slow, sneaking and insidious hostility towards Asians.

Laxman is a defiant Indian youth in England—self-righteous, assertive and vehement—who fully integrates into the adopted culture and is no more an alien in England. But Srinivas cannot understand him. The situation is corroborated by the study *Between Two Cultures* (1976) which vividly describes the "traumatic clash" between the immigrants and their children:

The parents cannot understand why their children wish to give up the culture they have held for centuries, and the children cannot understand why their parents are old fashioned, illiterate, embarrassing. (*Between Two Cultures* 7)

In language and style, Markandaya far surpasses the earlier novels. Pithiness of style and the force of reinforced imagery heighten the meaning of the theme. Imagery, in general, is Markandaya's powerful tool, both to convey her complexity of thought and to suggest her thematic patterns. As Dorothy Shimer suggests, Markandaya raises the image of "images irrevocably tied to antithetical life patterns".

The rejection that Srinivas faces at the hands of a radical racist like Fred is the objective counterpart of the rejection of a whole race. Markandaya stresses the utter shamefulness of such total rejection through violent imagery. The cross-cultural impasse which she hinted at in the earlier novels and in *Possession* is now dramatized in the form of open injustice. While in *Possession* she envisages no possible meeting-point as Val goes back to the wilderness and Caroline seeks in vain to bring him back to "possess" him, she projects, in *The Nowhere Man*, a possibility of a meeting in deep human compassion as in the Srinivas-Pickering relationship. What does *The Nowhere Man* achieve? It brings to the fore, artistically, racial issues founded on illogical standpoints that curb the individual through gigantic forces that compel, divide and destroy.

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### Conclusion

Destruction of humanity is like leprosy. It is contagious and repulsive. It is the result of abdication of responsibility. When one is a leper, one has the responsibility to prevent the communicable disease of leprosy from being spread. When one evades it, there is a social problem. Thus, the pattern of responsibility in this novel expands to include the responsibility of races towards each other in terms of communication and concern. As far as the individual's situation is concerned, Markandaya sees that the individual has no "freedom from" the curbing situation of inter-racial hostility and it is left

to him to achieve a degree of maturity as Srinivas does and a sense of positive freedom which helps him to perform his duties within the circle of constraints. Markandaya's sensitive portrayal is of the individual as subject to tensions induced by society because he is helpless in the context of racial relations unless there is a combined effort to achieve a greater degree of inter-racial understanding; and this novel is a call for this kind of concern. More than other novels dealing with the expatriate experience (like Anita Desai's *Bye, Bye Blackbird* (1970), Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), TimeriMurari's *The Marriage* (1973), this novel is a realistic social study and is enlightening for the Indian reader who has not been able to view at first hand the racial riots in London. It is also, in a sense, prophetic. Within the fictional structure of Srinivas's ironical movement from political rebellion against the colonial rule to his migration to the ruler's own country, his deliberate socio-cultural integration into its mainstream culture and his tragic existential ennui as the outsider in the wake of the sudden eruption of racial violence, Markandaya figuratively presents the issues of personal freedom and social responsibility. *The Nowhere Man* is Markandaya's artistic adumbration of the need for secular humane concern as the principal integrative ingredient to prevent further fragmentation of our post-colonial schizophrenic world.

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