



Old Tradition Vs Modernity In The Novels Of Kamala Markandaya

1. Dr. Shilendra pal , Assistant Professor, Department of English,

J.S. University Shikohabad Firozabad (U.P.) India

2. Km. Pinki , Research Scholar, Department of English,

J.S. University Shikohabad Firozabad (U.P.) India

ABSTRACT: Kamala Markandaya (1924–2004) stands as a major voice in Indian English fiction, known for her insightful portrayal of the clash between traditional Indian values and the unsettling rise of modern forces. Her novels, mostly situated in post-independence India, address issues such as industrial growth, Western influence, class disparity, and spiritual upheaval. This study examines how this tension unfolds in four of her significant works — *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *The Coffers*, and *Possession*. Through close attention to characterization, cultural environments, and narrative structure, the paper contends that Markandaya avoids simplistic binaries: she neither idealizes the past nor blindly endorses modernization. Instead, she envisions a human-centered mode of progress that must be anchored in cultural continuity. Her fiction highlights both the damaging consequences of development—displacement, exploitation, cultural loss—and the sustaining force of tradition—community, identity, and moral grounding. Ultimately, her novels advocate a thoughtful and compassionate negotiation between heritage and change, a perspective increasingly relevant in the contemporary global world.

Keywords: Tradition; Modernity; Industrialization; Postcolonialism; Cultural Encounter.

Introduction

In the years after India gained independence, the nation underwent dramatic changes. Industrial growth, new educational structures, urban migration, and Western ideas transformed economic patterns and reshaped social and cultural identities. Amid these shifts, Indian writers faced a central dilemma: how to preserve the spiritual, ethical, and communal pillars of tradition while welcoming the possibilities of a modern era. This struggle—between cultural rootedness and modern aspirations—recurs throughout Indian English literature.

Kamala Markandaya captures this conflict with particular sensitivity. Although she eventually settled in England, her fiction remained firmly grounded in Indian realities. Her narratives depict rural communities threatened by industrial projects, anti-colonial resistance entangled with Western modernity, tribal societies

pushed to the margins by technological expansion, and artists negotiating the pull of both Eastern and Western cultures. She does not depict tradition and modernity as opposites; instead, she shows them as intertwined forces that collide, overlap, and sometimes harmonize.

This paper investigates Markandaya's treatment of the tradition-modernity dynamic through four novels: *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *The Coffers Dams* (1965), and *Possession* (1963). Each section analyzes one major thematic dimension of her exploration.

1. Rural Tradition and the Shocks of Industry in *Nectar in a Sieve*

Nectar in a Sieve remains one of Markandaya's most poignant portrayals of traditional life under siege. The story opens in a rural village where Rukmani and her husband, Nathan, live in deep connection with the land. Their everyday existence—and their values of endurance, cooperation, and patience—emerges from their agricultural way of life.

The opening of a tannery disrupts this equilibrium. It symbolizes the arrival of industrial modernity, bringing with it environmental harm, economic inequality, and a breakdown of social unity. Scholars such as Chitra and Rekha Rani observe that the tannery serves as a metaphor for a “disruptive modernity”¹ that gradually erodes traditional structures. Rukmani's reflections capture her confusion and grief as she witnesses rapid, unpredictable social changes.

The generational contrast is telling: Rukmani's children gravitate toward wage labor and urban opportunities, reflecting a shift in values shaped by modern aspirations. Yet the promise of modernity proves double-edged. Though it offers employment and change, it also leads to land loss and the dissolution of ancestral ties. The community, once interconnected through shared customs, splinters under the pressure of change.

Markandaya presents industrialization as a complex force — offering material benefits while simultaneously unsettling cultural identity and community life.

2. Western Influence and Nationalist Identity in *Some Inner Fury*

Some Inner Fury confronts the friction between Indian tradition and Western modernity against the backdrop of the independence movement. The protagonist, Mira, is shaped by Western education, rationality, and personal freedom. Her relationship with Richard, an Englishman, embodies the allure of Western modernity—emotional independence, intellectual exploration, and cross-cultural connection.

However, the growing nationalist movement disrupts her personal world. Her brother Kit and his companions embrace anti-colonial ideals rooted in cultural pride and national loyalty. As critic Bipin R. Parmar notes, this moment of transition creates “a spiritual void ... as traditional values collapse without being replaced by fully grounded modern ones.”² Mira embodies this conflict: torn between affection for Richard and her unwavering bond with her homeland.

As Baral points out, in the novel “tradition becomes resistance,”³ not mere nostalgia. Markandaya shows that defending cultural identity is a necessary counter to colonial dominance. Mira's internal turmoil illustrates the emotional cost of trying to bridge the two worlds of tradition and Western modernity. Thus, Markandaya portrays neither tradition nor modernity as wholly virtuous or flawed. Instead, she reveals their coexistence as deeply challenging and emotionally fraught.

3. Technology, Human Costs, and Ethical Progress in The Coffey Dams

In *The Coffey Dams*, Markandaya shifts her attention to large-scale technological development. The narrative revolves around the construction of a dam—a hallmark of engineering progress—led by Western experts who evaluate success solely in terms of efficiency and modernization.

In contrast, the indigenous tribal laborers maintain a spiritual and ecological connection to their land. Their customs and values are disregarded by engineers who consider them “primitive.” Markandaya uses this conflict to critique a form of modernity that prioritizes technical achievement over human welfare.

Helen, the engineer’s wife, becomes the moral center of the novel. She sympathizes with the tribal workers and condemns a model of development that sacrifices people for progress. Her belief that “progress must not crush the people who support it”⁴ reflects Markandaya’s call for modernization grounded in empathy and ethics.

For Markandaya, modernity is not inherently destructive, but without moral restraint it becomes dangerous. The dam stands not only for development but for the ethical dilemmas embedded within it.

4. Art, Cultural Ownership, and East–West Tensions in Possession

Possession examines the tradition-modernity conflict through the lens of art. Valmiki, a young Indian sculptor, draws creative strength from his cultural and spiritual environment. Lady Caroline Bell, a British patron, “discovers” him and attempts to shape his artistic identity according to her own Western ideals.

Her patronage is intrusive: she claims she will “form him into the artist he was meant to be.”⁵ Critics like Rajesh Yadav and Pratima Chaitanya regard this as cultural appropriation—Western modernity attempting to possess and redefine Indian artistic tradition. Under Caroline’s supervision, Valmiki grows alienated from his roots, struggling to reconcile the two cultural worlds.

His eventual return to India symbolizes a reclaiming of his authentic creative identity. Markandaya suggests that modernity can offer exposure and opportunity, but severing artists from their cultural lineage leaves their creativity unanchored.

Here, modernity appears not just as technological or economic change but as a cultural power that can redefine identity.

5. Women, Patriarchal Structures, and the Struggle for Selfhood

Across Markandaya’s novels, women become central figures through which tradition and modernity intersect. Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* embodies traditional virtues—resilience, devotion, and sacrifice. Yet modern pressures such as industrial intrusion and poverty force younger women in the story into difficult, morally fraught choices.

Female characters in *Some Inner Fury* and *Possession* more actively encounter modernity through education, emotional agency, and cross-cultural relationships. Yet this does not guarantee liberation. As Archana Brahmabhatt notes, Markandaya’s women must carefully navigate the pull between duty and self-expression. Tradition demands loyalty and restraint; modernity encourages independence. The psychological conflict is profound.

Psychoanalytic critics, including Agrawal and Agrawal, emphasize that these women internalize competing forces — attachment versus autonomy, obligation versus individuality. Their struggles mirror the broader cultural transition India faces.

For Markandaya, women stand at the frontline of social transformation, making them both symbols and agents of change.

6. Toward Reconciliation: A Human-Centered Vision of Progress

A key feature of Markandaya's fiction is her refusal to side wholly with either tradition or modernity. Instead, she advocates a synthesis that honors cultural memory while embracing constructive change. Many of her characters long for a form of development that does not uproot them from their cultural foundations.

Scholars frequently describe her worldview as humanistic: modernization devoid of compassion becomes empty, while tradition resistant to change becomes rigid. As one study in the *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* notes, Markandaya's novels depict "a gradual shift in values ... between faith and reason, mysticism and science, tradition and modernity."⁶ This suggests a vision of development that incorporates spirituality, social responsibility, and human dignity.

Similarly, Abirami and colleagues argue that Markandaya encourages a spiritually informed approach to modernization that transforms—but does not discard—tradition. Modernity, in her fiction, is not an adversary but a partner in shaping an ethical future.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's fiction provides a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the conflict between traditional values and the demands of modern life in twentieth-century India. Through the experiences of peasants, displaced laborers, activists, artists, and women, she examines the human struggle to find belonging in a changing world.

Her contribution lies not in prescribing easy solutions but in presenting a compassionate vision: progress and heritage must coexist, but only when development respects culture, identity, and ethical responsibility. She warns that unchecked modernity can lead to alienation and exploitation, while unbending tradition may stifle hope and growth.

In today's global world—marked by cultural blending, technological speed, and constant migration—Markandaya's insights remain strikingly relevant. She reminds us that the dialogue between tradition and modernity is ongoing, and that creating a humane future requires honoring our roots while embracing thoughtful change.

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