

**MULTICULTURALISM:  
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*Kamala Markandaya and Jhumpa Lahiri have both written novels that bring together the cultures of the East and the West. Since both authors have written at least a novel each with multiculturalism in the background, it becomes interesting to see how each of them uses ideas of multiculturalism and how their novels compare on this point of reference. This article shows how Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* and Lahiri's *The Namesake* use multiculturalism differently through their respective narrative techniques, plots and fictional discourses.*

**INTRODUCTION**

When reading two diasporic multicultural works of fiction, successively, written by Indian women novelists, settled in the West, it is natural to read one against the other. This paper examines two such novels, (a) *The Nowhere Man* (1973) by Kamala Markandaya and (b) *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri. Both these novels are masterly works of literary fiction and their similar generative principles invite a critical comparison between the two.

There are certain natural similarities and differences in the novels of Markandaya and Lahiri. When Kamala Markandaya wrote *The Nowhere Man*, thirty years earlier than *The Namesake*, the time of composition, the place in which the novel was to be set, the modes of fictional style – all were different. The three decades saw several changes on the international scene of fiction, not the least of which was the fact that women had become more liberated by then, able to express themselves independently, as women. One other major difference between the two novels results from the fact that Kamala Markandaya shows us multiculturalism as it existed in Britain – the colonizing nation of the Indian novelist; whereas Lahiri takes us into a domain where the social status of the diaspora is different. Indians were not colonized by Americans and therefore did not have the same mental equation with them. Hence in Markandaya's multiculturalism there is a vivid post-colonial discourse. In Lahiri's novel the multicultural experience emanates out of an Indian's diasporic experience in America.

Markandaya shows how British colonialism lives on in the relationships between Britons and Indians even after England has formally given freedom to India and left the colonized country. The mindsets of these two nations have hardly changed. Hence, the multicultural discourse in Markandaya shows the relationship between the erstwhile colonizer and the erstwhile colonized. In the case of Jhumpa Lahiri, multiculturalism takes on an entirely different hue in her novel; in *The Namesake*, there is neither a colonizer nor a colonized and yet the Indian Diaspora seems to consider the American community entirely different and probably superior. Even though America has not colonized India directly, it has colonized our minds with the power of its wealth and technological advancement. Furthermore, it seems that even though Lahiri is born in America, she feels some kind of anxiety due to racial factors, possibly of a genetic nature, passed on by her colonized parents whose “other” (in theoretical terms) were the white skinned Westerners; the problem is psychological and can only be determined through psychoanalysis. The British have already taught the Indian community to develop a mindset in which the West is to be looked upon as superior and more civilized. Jhumpa Lahiri’s narrative therefore does the following two things: (a) it shows how the Indian (Bengali) community, once it has acquired the status of diasporic existence in America, relates with Americans; (b) how the typical Bengali mind is able to transfer its compliance, from the Briton to the American. He may not be absolutely servile towards Americans, but he does look upon them as superior in the ultimate analysis. The Americans are not the same as the British, no doubt, but they share with the British their origins, language, culture, and complexion. Even though the Americans have never ruled over India, the Indian Diaspora in America seems to treat them as people living on a higher plane. Further, The Indian community tends to isolate itself from the Americans at moments when traditionally Indian events are to be taken care of. The Indian Bengalis make it a point to come together on all ceremonious occasions in which Americans are not invited. What Lahiri’s fictional diasporic discourse conveys is that East is East and West is West and they may never become one. This is the message of multicultural fiction from E.M. Forster to Jhumpa Lahiri, with Kamala Markandaya in between.

This paper points to Kamala Markandaya as a multicultural novelist as well as one who uses multiculturalism as a positive force to bring about some kind of balance between the East and the West. Unlike Jhumpa Lahiri who merely paints a picture of a Bengali family living in America while telling a moving tale of how an Indian can return to his roots when faced with a cultural crisis in an alien land, Kamala Markandaya has written a more artistic and intellectually more resonant novel, even if it is not as absorbing as Lahiri’s novel. In *The Nowhere Man*, somewhere in the background, multiculturalism has been employed to reveal an evolutionary stage of the human mind; it shows a step further in human civilization. But it has also been used to show how multiculturalism can degenerate. This phenomenon, of how multiculturalism has the potential to change the world, if it does not degenerate itself in the process, can be found in some novels that have multiculturalism in their background. Markandaya is one who has raised this issue in her novel. On the whole, Kamala Markandaya

has shown faith in the positive side of multiculturalism. In this paper, Markandaya's treatment of multiculturalism is revealed in the novel's plot-structure and in its narrative technique as well as in the characterization. *The Nowhere Man* is not merely a literary novel but a highly significant document on multiculturalism as a way of life. In the history of Indian multicultural fiction this novel needs to occupy a highly significant place. Markandaya's novel has shown a fine balance and maturity, as few novels have done. Even *A Passage to India* is a less sophisticated work when considered from the point of view the niceties of multicultural fiction. *A Passage to India* may be described as a more complete work of art and a novel that keeps the reader more gripped than *The Nowhere Man*. But in matters of multiculturalism Markandaya's novel may rank higher. It is a contention of this paper that Kamala Markandaya has remained somewhat underrated as a novelist and *The Nowhere Man* has remained a grossly neglected novel.

This chapter also maintains that *The Nowhere Man* is both a political and postcolonial novel. It naturally projects a world in which racial deference matters. This novel is richly engrained with much contemporary theoretical discourse. It has the advantage of coming much later than *A Passage to India*. The latter novel contains postcolonial discourse whereas the former deals with colonialism. Multiculturalism grows out of postcolonial theory to a very large extent. Hence it is not surprising that Markandaya's multicultural vision is more developed and refined than Forster's.

This paper seeks to suggest that a great achievement of Markandaya is that in *The Nowhere Man* she has anticipated the theories of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha. During the course of this chapter the ideas, that were to figure in the discourse of these later theorists as anticipated by Markandaya, have been shown. It need not be stated that Markandaya was not a theorist and her ideas were never formulated into theories. This shows that Markandaya is not merely a novelist who can use literary language adeptly but she has a sound mind, capable of theorizing on the issues of her times. For her contribution to theoretical ideas, Markandaya should be given recognition. She has, however, remained unnoticed as an originator of ideas that were to anticipate some of Said and Bhabha's. This paper does not make a case for her as a postcolonial thinker. Since this paper focuses on the comparison of Markandaya and Lahiri, it will not go into details regarding Markandaya's anticipation of Said and Bhabha.

A novel does not always tell a story directly; it can do that through myriad major and minor devices that make up its form. The more simple its narrative, the more commercially viable and reader-friendly it becomes. But a truly literary novel can contain a complex network of factors that contribute to the narrative art that is far from simple. These can emerge as what Roland Barthes called the writerly aspects of its structure. In some novels the plot itself helps in the overall narrative process. Plot can become an aid, or an impediment, to the main narrative line of a novel. The hidden or discursive meaning in a novel can also lie in the

novel's structure or plot if it does not lie in the discourse of a novel's content. This chapter examines Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* as an example of fiction which sacrifices a readerly story and adopts narrative machinery that compels the reader to work hard and construct the novel as s/he proceeds with the reading of this novel.

If *The Nowhere Man* has something that is wanting, in apparent or superficial terms, it is in the plot. Its plot is highly deceptive. The novel is rich and interesting in the opening as well as the whole of the first half and it is similarly well constructed in the end; in the middle it seems to become weak. But this happens barely in a few chapters and for reasons that can be found in Roland Barthes' theory. This aspect is discussed later in this section. Most of *The Nowhere Man* is gripping. If the reason for the plot's weakness is sought, it is easy to locate. The plot serves a cause in the novel; the cause of multicultural experience. Markandaya's own life in England, and her experience of an outsider, has been put into the novel. More than a story, *The Nowhere Man* is, in its entirety, an experience. The story and plot of this novel emerge, as seems quite evident, out of the personal life and experience of Kamala Markandaya even though it is not an autobiographical novel. It is the experience of an Indian woman settled in England, in the hope that England will ultimately accept her as its own, but then coming to a realization that we are we and they are they, and never will there be a collective us.

Through the plot, the novelist is also asking a question indirectly, "Does multiculturalism work out ultimately?" This is a question that E. M. Forster was one of the first to ask through *A Passage to India*. Even though the novel gives the impression that multiculturalism can work out successfully in its initial part, Markandaya seems to reply in the negative towards the novel's ending. She does so through a plot, the art of which does not allow her to make the novel too story-like. Discourse keeps coming in thickly as the narrative moves. The discourse which foreshadows postcolonial thought and deals in the reality of multiculturalism often overtakes the story and we learn of the story only through the discourse in the *The Nowhere Man*. The plot keeps bringing us back to the harsh realities that an Indian in her position, like the novel's protagonist, Srinivas, would face in England because the cultures never coalesce; they clash cantankerously. The protagonist, Srinivas, is somewhat in the same position in England as Markandaya was after she decided to stay there as the wife of an Englishman.

What follows below will examine Jhumpa Lahiri's handling of multiculturalism as it is revealed through characterization, the portrayal of a diasporic existence in America and the juxtaposition of values that may be described as Eastern and Western. In addition, this chapter will examine the various discourses that exist in *The Namesake* particularly the feminist discourse that creeps into the novel at various points in its narrative. Apart from this there is an East-West discourse that provides one of the bases of the novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri may not indulge in rhetoric and highly visible literary devices, as Markandaya does; Lahiri's narrative art lies in a conspicuous absence of literary machinery which is generally employed in contemporary fiction. In *The Namesake* there is little trace of fictional art, of the kind that one experiences in Salman Rushdie, Arundathi Roy or even Kamala Markandaya. The art in this novel arises out of a seeming artlessness; Lahiri manages to show everything to the reader in the simplest possible way. In examining this simplified art form it may be useful to take recourse to Roland Barthes's landmark essay on narrative, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1967). In this essay, Barthes points out that there are hundreds of things that may be included in the narrative technique of a fictional work. Objects like pictures and other visible things tell us much about the story, characters, etc., indirectly.

Jhumpa Lahiri seems to have imbibed some of what Barthes has pointed out about narrative. In *The Namesake* Lahiri makes a number of objects in Ashima's apartment tell stories. For instance:

*In the kitchen there are matching yellow appliances, a lazy Susan, linoleum made to look like tiles. A watercolor by Ashima's father, of a caravan of a camel in desert in Rajasthan, is framed at the local print shop and hung on the living room wall. (52)*

The above passage has been put into the narrative of *The Namesake* to fulfill a certain purpose. We are shown a picture of Ashima's kitchen – in which there is a co-mingling of America and India. This co-mingling results from a selection of some objects from both the countries. Each of these objects, as Barthes has pointed out, tells a story and is part of the novel's narrative technique. We are first told that there are matching "yellow appliances". Such a matching is generally absent from the kitchen of the middle class Bengali (Indian) home. But in an American setup care is taken to ensure that even the kitchen is aesthetically arranged and laid out. There is a "lazy Susan" and linoleum is made to look like tiles. All these are found in American kitchens and are therefore part of Ashima's kitchen as well but then there is a water color painting made by Ashima's father, in which a caravan of camels seen in a desert of Rajasthan. This painting tells us a story and so is a part Lahiri's narrative technique. The kitchen is a great way to show multiculturalism. The story it tells is about Ashima and her longing to carry her India with her, even into her kitchen. It also tells us about Ashima's great attachment with her father. The kitchen is her domain and in it she has chosen to preserve the memory of her father and her country.

This is only a single example of how a novelist can tell the reader a great deal about a character by choosing certain objects and certain setting. A great many scenes in this novel put together the Indian and American cultures which are symbolically conveyed through the choice of some objects and the absence of others. As T.S. Eliot has pointed out in his theory of "objective correlative", objects become the symbols of mind sets and moods and convey

emotions of characters (“Hamlet and His Problems” 49). Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel is a classic example of how objects, settings, books, etc., tell stories of how the main characters, who are Indian, feel in an alien land.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s art is remarkable for its simplicity. When her novel is read after Markandaya’s, the latter novelist seems to be rhetorical in comparison. In Lahiri we are impressed by a simple situation described with spontaneity rather than as Markandaya does when she uses a complex situation, described in difficult language, in a manner that is intellectual and bordering on the philosophical. Lahiri’s mind gropes for unusual kind of experiences encountered by a particular diasporic community, that of the Bengalis living in America. In doing his she dwells on uncommon though real experiences like the problem of common to terms with an uncommon name, in this case Gogol, which is neither Bengali nor American.

Unlike Markandaya whose stage on basic colonial and post-colonial issues that point toward multiculturalism, Jhumpa Lahiri indulged in a display of nostalgia for India from the very first paragraph of the novel:

*On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Crispies and Planters peanuts and choked red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slice of green chilly pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. (1)*

Right from the first line of the novel, Lahiri keeps taking the reader back to India through the Ashima’s memories that never allow her to experience America in its purity. She keeps bringing her experience of Bengal into the assimilation of her understanding of America. The following lines from the novel will make clear how she puts together the Bengali along with what could seem odd in America:

*He [Ashoke, Ashima’s husband] leans over a card table; the edge of their bed, two twin mattresses pushed together under batik spread, serves as his chair. When she calls out to Ashoke, doesn’t say his name. Asthma never thinks of her husband’s name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety’s sake, to utter his first. It’s not the thing Bengali wives do. (2)*

Lahiri's technique in this is to see that aspect of Indian experience in America which is absent there. In the process she reveals how the mind of an Indian can be left behind in India even when her body is in America. She does this intensively in the first part of her novel.

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