

# From East–West Dialectics to Gendered Precarity: Rewriting the Critical Legacy of Kamala Markandaya in Indo-Anglian Literary Studies

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## **Abstract**

Early criticism of Kamala Markandaya's fiction, particularly between 1968 and 1985, positioned her novels within frameworks of East–West cultural dialectics, identity formation, symbolic patterning, and tragic inevitability. While these foundational readings established her as a major Indo-Anglian novelist, they frequently privileged civilizational conflict and aesthetic structure over gendered material realities. This article revisits major early critics, including Chandrasekharan, Harrex, Chauhan, Gulati, Inamdar, Jain, and Jha—to examine how Markandaya's critical reception was shaped by nationalist humanism and formalist paradigms that under-theorized women's embodied precarity. Through the method of historiographical analysis and feminist re-reading, this paper contends that Markandaya's fiction precedes postcolonial feminist realist trends in the areas of hunger, labour, economic dispossession, and agency. Rather than being situated in the East/West divide, this paper seeks to reposition Markandaya as a novelist of gendered vulnerability in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. Moreover, this paper also argues that the early Indo-Anglian criticism itself needs to be re-read, as its own canon-forming project precluded feminist analysis. Through a re-reading of Markandaya's fiction and early criticism, this paper seeks to reinsert Markandaya into contemporary debates and to open up new methodological possibilities for feminist literary studies in India. Markandaya appears not only as a mediator of cultural conflict but also as a precursor to structural feminist critique based on precarity, endurance, and ethical survival.

**Keywords:** Kamala Markandaya, Indo-Anglian criticism, East–West dialectics, feminist realism, gendered precarity, postcolonial feminism, canon formation.

## **1. Introduction: Canon Formation and Critical Framing**

Kamala Markandaya appeared on the scene during a very important phase in the formation of Indian Writing in English as a legitimate literary domain. During the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, literary critics were engaged in the process of articulating a coherent Indo-Anglian literary canon, positioning novelists in terms of national identity, cultural mediations, and literary craftsmanship. It was in this context that Markandaya was constantly reinterpreted as a novelist of East-West encounter, moral insight, structural unity, and tragic resilience.

These early critics—Chandrasekharan (1968), Harrex (1971), Chauhan (1976), Gulati (1984), Inamdar (1984), Jain (1985), Jha (1985), and so on—were not just commentators; they were actually architects of literary historiography. These interpretations have continued to define the way in which Markandaya has been read for the last several decades. However, while these interpretations were foundational, they often tended to prioritize civilizational abstractions at the expense of gendered materialisms.

This paper does not dismiss early scholarship but rather re-situates it. It contends that early Indo-Anglian criticism was engaged with cultural dialectics and aesthetic formalism at a time when Indian literary studies were attempting to gain legitimacy by adopting universalist models. However, in the process, it tended to under-theorize the gendered aspects of economic precarity, labor, hunger, and dispossession that are central to Markandaya's writing.

By way of a historiographical and feminist re-reading, this research re-situates Markandaya as an early voice of gendered precarity in colonial modernity. Markandaya's novels are more than cultural bridges; they are also complexly nuanced narratives of women living with inequality.

## **2. Chandrasekharan and the East–West Dialectic**

The influential essay “East and West in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya” by K.R. Chandrasekharan (1968) placed her fiction in the context of the conflict between the Indian spirit and Western materialism. This reading holds that Markandaya stages the encounter between two cultural worlds.

This framework was historically significant. In the post-Independence period, Indian literary criticism sought to articulate national distinctiveness while engaging Western literary forms. East–West dialectics provided a convenient interpretive scaffold.

However, while such readings emphasize cultural encounter, they risk abstraction. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the tannery's arrival is not merely Western intrusion; it is industrial capitalism producing economic displacement. Rukmani's suffering is grounded in hunger, infertility, land loss, and precarious labour. These are not metaphysical contradictions but material crises.

Thus, while Chandrasekharan is able to clarify contradictions in ideology, his paradigm fails to capture the colonial modernity of gender vulnerability effectively. The East/West binary opposition is a simplification of the far more complex intersection of patriarchy, land rights, and economic subordination.

## **3. Identity and Psychological Humanism: Harrex and Chauhan**

S.C. Harrex (1971) shifts focus from civilizational dialectics to identity formation. He interprets Markandaya's protagonists as subjects struggling to construct coherent selves amid cultural transition. Identity becomes central analytical category.

Similarly, Chauhan (1976) emphasizes “sense and sensibility,” foregrounding emotional maturity and moral insight in Markandaya's characters. Such readings contribute to understanding her ethical nuance.

Yet these frameworks risk psychological universalism. Identity, in Markandaya's novels, cannot be separated from material survival. Rukmani's identity is inseparable from land and subsistence. Women's selfhood is shaped by reproductive labour, marital dependency, and food scarcity.

To treat identity primarily as a psychological struggle overlooks structural determinants. Feminist reinterpretation suggests that identity in Markandaya is a precarious social position rather than abstract self-realisation.

## **4. Formalism and Structure: Gulati and Inamdar**

V.B. Gulati's (1984) structural study of Kamala Markandaya's novels highlights the importance of compositional balance, thematic unity, and narrative development, placing her work within a structured formal framework. F.A. Inamdar's (1984) study of Kamala Markandaya's novels, on the other hand, focuses on the use of images and symbolic patterns, such as land, drought, fertility, and barrenness, to create aesthetic unity and thematic complexity. These studies together form an important part of the understanding of Kamala Markandaya's craftsmanship and narrative skill.

However, a formalist and symbolic method of textual analysis may end up estranging aesthetic structure from socio-economic contexts. When drought is considered a symbolic expression of hopelessness or spiritual despair, the reality of hunger may be aestheticised. Similarly, the use of land as a symbol of continuity or belonging may conceal its use as an economic resource and a means of survival. In *\*Nectar in a Sieve\**, drought is more than an atmospheric symbol; it is a direct threat to survival. Land is more than a symbolic space; it is a means of survival affected by tenancy agreements, colonial policies, and industrial encroachment.

A feminist materialist rereading challenges the separation of form and political economy. Symbolic density does not cancel out materiality but rather increases it. Structuralism needs to be supplemented by a consideration of embodied

precarity, recognising that aesthetic patterning in Markandaya's fiction is the product of, and remains imbricated with, gender and economic vulnerability.

### **5. *Tragedy and Inevitability: Jain and IJES (1983)***

N.K. Jain (1985) and the anonymous article published in the Indian Journal of English Studies (1983) view *Nectar in a Sieve* from the classical perspective of tragedy, where the need for Rukmani's suffering and the ensuing breakdown of agrarian society are emphasized. Here, the novel is situated in the tradition of tragedy, where suffering takes place on a predetermined course, leading to a structurally necessary loss. The tragic mode emphasizes pathos, endurance, and moral insight, thus universalizing Rukmani's experience as human suffering.

However, feminist realism problematizes this interpretive gesture. In reducing Rukmani's suffering to the status of tragedy, there is a danger of abstracting her experience from its material conditions. Rukmani's experiences of loss—alienation of land, hunger, displacement by industrial capitalism, and reproductive vulnerability—are not structurally necessary but result from historically specific systems: colonial economic reorganisation, the rise of industrial modernity, and patriarchal property relations that deny women economic agency. Suffering that is conceptualised as fate can naturalise systemic injustices.

The feminist re-reading does not negate the tragic component but reinterprets it. Tragedy is no longer destiny but structural violence, no longer inevitability but the predictable outcome of unequal structures. In this re-reading, Rukmani's strength is no longer a sign of acceptance of fate but a sign of survival in historically generated conditions of precarity.

### **6. *Overview and Canon Consolidation: Jha***

Rama Jha's "Kamala Markandaya: An Overview" (1985) occupies a consolidatory moment in the evolution of Indo-Anglian literary criticism. Instead, Jha's overview represents a consolidation of earlier critical currents and a reaffirmation of Markandaya's place within an already established canon. By the mid-1980s, the major approaches—cultural negotiation between East and West, moral endurance, tragic necessity, and narrative skill—had already solidified as the prevailing modes through which her fiction was to be interpreted. Jha's overview confirms these approaches, situating Markandaya as a novelist who mediates between tradition and modernity and who personifies moral endurance in the face of socio-economic transformation.

This consolidation was essential to the process of canonization. Markandaya was established as a representative figure for rural suffering, cultural dualism, and moral endurance. This move ensured that she would be included within curricula and literary histories, but it also circumscribed the parameters of interpretation. By confirming existing categories, Jha's overview is part of the process of solidifying a critical consensus that prioritizes cultural symbolism over structural analysis.

What has been particularly underdeveloped within this process of consolidation is a feminist analysis of material precarity. The issues of gendered labor, economic precariousness, and patriarchal land relations are, for the most part, overlooked. The canon that was thus consolidated around the themes of civilizational and ethical interpretation has left the structural aspects of women's embodied life undertheorized.

### **7. *Toward Gendered Precarity: A Contemporary Repositioning***

Markandaya's fiction anticipates contemporary discussions of precarity—conditions of vulnerability produced by economic and political structures.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, hunger is gendered. Women manage scarcity through self-sacrifice. Landlessness produces marital instability. Industrial intrusion destabilizes subsistence economies.

In *Some Inner Fury* and *Possession*, cross-cultural relationships reveal asymmetrical power. Women's bodies become sites of negotiation between colonial and nationalist discourses.

Such narratives anticipate postcolonial feminist realism. They reveal that colonial modernity does not liberate women; nor does tradition protect them unconditionally. Women inhabit unstable terrain shaped by layered domination.

### **8. Canon Formation and Feminist Historiography**

Early Indo-Anglian literary criticism emerged at a time when Indian literary studies were attempting to gain academic recognition in the global academic community. During this intellectual period, gender was a thematic concern rather than a structural issue that impacted material and social relations. Questions of hunger, work, land, and economic dependency were frequently subsumed within broader debates about identity, tradition, and modernity.

In order to understand the critical reception of Markandaya's oeuvre, therefore, it is necessary to historicize it. The concern with East/West encounter and moral stamina was not simply a momentary preoccupation but rather indicative of an intellectual moment during which nation-building and cultural representation were at the very center of intellectual discourse.

Modern feminist literary theory, however, demands a far more rigorous engagement with systemic inequality. A re-reading of Markandaya's work through the lens of feminist historiography shows her acute awareness of economic vulnerability, limited agency, and survival in conditions of uneven modernity. What was previously seen as cultural mediation can now be recognised as an exploration of gendered precarity situated within the colonial and postcolonial political economy.

### **9. Markandaya as Precursor to Postcolonial Feminist Realism**

The fiction of Kamala Markandaya resists the rhetoric of successful liberation, which is so often the sign of liberal feminist narrative. The heroines of her fiction do not overthrow oppressive systems, nor do they achieve unconditional liberation. Instead, they manage to survive, adapt, and cope with a situation that slips beyond their control. Their agency is circumscribed, relational, and sometimes achieved through compromise rather than subversion. These representations predict what might be termed postcolonial feminist realism—a kind of writing that is alert to questions of structural inequality but also resists the idealized discourse of liberation.

In *\*Nectar in a Sieve\** and other texts, women are confronted with the problems of hunger, land alienation, industrialization, and patriarchal dependency. Their survival is neither resignation nor defiance but, rather, a complexly ethical response to oppression. Feminist realism recognises that agency within structures of inequality may manifest itself as piecemeal, conditional, and emotionally expensive. The heroines of Markandaya's fiction are just such a manifestation.

Repositioning Markandaya in this paradigm allows for a move away from interpreting her work as essentially the conduit for East/West cultural conflicts. While the encounter between civilizations is significant, it is not her most enduring contribution. Rather, her preoccupation with economic vulnerability, reproductive labor, and gendered dispossession anticipates more recent conversations in feminist political economy and precarity research. On this score, Markandaya might be thought of as an early and forgotten theorist of structural gendered survival in uneven modernity.

### **10. Conclusion**

The early Indo-Anglian critical tradition was instrumental in consolidating Kamala Markandaya's status as a major writer of East/West encounter, moral resilience, and literary complexity. However, in the process of using cultural dialectics and structural analysis to consolidate her status as a writer, the critical tradition tended to under-theorize the gendered material conditions that inform her writing. Hunger, land alienation, reproductive labor, and economic marginalization were recognized but not explored as structural conditions that shape women's lives.

By way of a historiographical re-appraisal, this article has sought to demonstrate that Kamala Markandaya's novels prefigure the concerns of postcolonial feminist realism in the contemporary period. Her heroines embody not the abstract

contradictions of civilizational conflict but the specific conditions of inequality that frame the possibilities of agency and render survival a morally fraught proposition. The resilience that is figured in her novels is not romanticized or metaphysical; it is instead situated within socio-economic conditions that are precarious.

In rewriting the critical legacy of Markandaya, therefore, it is necessary to move from the abstraction of culture to the analysis of structure. Markandaya can and should be reclaimed not only as a mediator of tradition and modernity but as a complex historian of gender precarity in the differential transformations of colonialism and postcolonialism. This repositioning of Markandaya, therefore, reanimates her contemporary salience.

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