

Kamala Markandaya's Novel *The Nowhere Man* is a Story of Displacement and Racism

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Abstract

The *Nowhere Man* by Kamala Markandaya a distinguish Indian English novelist is a story of displaced Indian, Srinivas, who goes out of India under pressure and tyranny of British Empire and settles down in England, but the English community does not accept him. Though he tries his best to adapt himself to the 'alien' climate and manners he becomes a rootless restless individual, dispossessed of India and disowned by England.

Kamala Markandaya depicts the picture of post war Britain with all its emigration problems is not safe for people like Srinivas. With the loss of the colonies the British have started looking upon the immigrants in London as intruders who have no business to be there. Housing and unemployment have become the most acute problems so the agitation against the black mounts up. The young men of England like Fred, Mike, Joe and Bill look upon the blacks to be the cause of their miseries and turn hostile towards them. They torment Srinivas in various ways he finds himself an unwanted he faces the existential problems of loneliness, alienation, adjustment and belonging. And finally becomes the victim of racism.

The novel tries to tell us that though differences of colours, religion and language do exist between people but harping on these differences breeds violence and hatred.

Key Words

Displacement, racism, alienation

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The Nowhere Man, as the title itself indicates is a novel about a displaced Indian, Srinivas, who settles down in England, but unfortunately not fully accepted by the English community. Srinivas becomes a rootless restless individual, dispossessed of India and disowned by England. He belongs to a very old well-to-do South Indian Brahmin family: his grandfather has owned a teak forest through which the British Government laid a road on account of which the family has lost the valuable property. Srinivas's father, Narayan, a Lecturer in a Government College is deprived of all promotions because of his being an-Indian. The family gets involved in the Nationalist Movement, again not by its own choice but by its association with its neighbours whose daughter, Vasantha, is betrothed to Srinivas. Vasantha's brother, Vasu is a staunch nationalist involved in anti-British activities. Though Narayan is not actively engaged in the Freedom Movement his few symbolic gestures make him culpable in the eyes of the British authorities. Once, he goes to the College in Khadi dress abandoning his usual Alpaca coat and turban just to register his protest against the authorities. And another time, during the Governor's visit to the College, he shows his protest by singing aloud his own national anthem, at which the Governor lays his restraining hand on this protesting patriot. Immediately, the young Srinivas, sitting among the audience, attacks the British official shouting: "Your Excellency, take your bloody hands off my father" (Markandaya 147). Both father and son are blacklisted as political criminals and are denied a decent life in their motherland. Edward Said depicts "As westerners dominate the Orientals, their internal affairs are rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power" (Edward Said 36). The British, though offended, act judiciously and with discretion lest they antagonize the Indian public. The father is sent to the lunatic asylum and the son is expelled from college.

Mr. Platt, the Deputy Principal of the College thinks it his moral duty to help the family and uses his good offices to get Srinivas sent to London. Before going, he hastily marries Vasantha. The irony is that he chooses London as his refuge where he arrives with 'mean memories' of British imperialism. Vasantha joins Srinivas As Shyam M. Asnani says,

Srinivas and Vasantha settle down on alien soil and their ties with India are more or less severed. They form a micro India around themselves in an alien country. With typical Indian habits, temperament, dress, and opinion, living peacefully but without in any way assimilating in the culture of their adopted land. The handful of Indian soil and the bottle of Ganga water treasured by Vasantha are both realistic and symbolic. (Shyam Asnani 125)

As a human being, Srinivas longs to belong to a 'wider citizenship', but Vasantha, a typical Indian woman, refuses to assimilate to the culture of her adopted land. She grows tired of moving, like the gypsies, from pillar to post, and persuades Srinivas to acquire a house. Though they have given their house a name, Chandra Prasad after their original home in India, to all the neighborhood and the postman it is only 'No. 5' and the family, 'the people at No. 5'.

Their sons Laxman and Seshu, brought up in Christian environment and educated in Christian schools, do not inherit Indian values. They are an example of the second generation of immigrants who are neither here nor there; their alienation is complete in that their roots are completely cut off and their adoption into the new environs is rather fragile. Seshu shows a few Indian characteristics, while Laxman is a hard-headed realist and Indian familial sentiments are nonsense to him. Seshu dies in an accident while performing his official duties.

Laxman marries an English girl and settles down in Plymouth as a business man. Laxman has no trace of Indian sentiments in him, and his outlook is absolutely materialistic or commercial and very matter-of-fact. Vasantha becomes a pathetic figure after the separation from both her sons, one dead, the other living apart from her. Vasantha cannot bear this emotional void, and succumbs to a tubercular attack and dies, leaving Srinivas all alone, desolate and depressed in the big mansion i.e., the world.

Two deaths, one of his son, Seshu, and the other of Vasanth, and the callousness of Laxman push Srinivas into isolation. One day he comes across Mrs. Pickering, a very poor old divorcee and a former nurse. Several subsequent meetings confirm their need for each other. Srinivas offers to take her into his building, and a sort of intimacy develops between them.

The post war Britain with all its emigration problems is not safe for people like Srinivas. With the loss of the colonies the British have started looking upon the immigrants in London as intruders who have no business to be there. Housing and unemployment have become the most acute problems. Srinivas even turns down the proposal of assistance made by Abdul, his African friend. But he has to support himself and Mrs. Pickering. The latter suggests that the big house be converted into cheap flats and let out to poor tenants. Srinivas occupies the attic, whereas Mrs. Pickering the ground floor. The basement is rented out to an old Negro vagabond.

Unfortunately, the monster of racial hatred and color discrimination of the 1960s raises its ugly head and begins to devour its victims. As the agitation against the black mounts up, there appear posters, 'man-sized messages of hate, BLACKS GO HOME',

in different parts of London and open new hells of 'fear and desolation in those at whom they were aimed' (Markandaya 168).

The practical and worldly-wise Abdul Srinivas's friend discerns signs of antagonism in the behaviour of the British and warns Srinivas against placing faith in them. He has experienced discrimination against blacks in pubs, restaurants and customs. He has seen people looking up and down at him and hardening up with cold deadly looks. Anyone resident in the West since 1950s will have lived through an era of extraordinary turbulence in the relations between East and West. No one will have failed to note how "East" has always signified danger and threat during this period. He remarks with a sneer in his voice,

I'll tell you what they're saying, right now, this very minute. The black ape, they're saying; meaning me, what's he doing over here in his overheated automobile? Living off our white girls, that's what, stands to reason he must be, else how it happens he can run a motorcar two blocks wide which we can't afford to do (Markandaya 75).

He asks Srinivas not to think of England as his country because the British won't allow it and Abdul advises him to go back to his country in India. When Srinivas tells Abdul that England has become just like his own country, Abdul retorts:

But maybe you think my skin's so thick I never felt what they did to me. Took my land from right under my nose, took my old man first so he wouldn't bleat, took my pride so I never walked with my head up, took my freedom finally, ... What's come over you, man, that you can't remember, seeing how you went through what I did? (Markandaya 162).

The Oriental and Occidental conflict as treated in this novel is not only on the political or cultural level but also from the economic pressures faced by England in the wake of the disintegration of the British Empire. The young men of England like Fred, Mike, Joe and Bill, who experience the strain of this pressure, are unable to secure decent jobs. Fred Fletcher, a maniac hates the colour of a face without assigning any reason to it. A frustrated soul, he has suffered failure and defeat everywhere, whether in London or in Australia. It is against this background of failure that he holds a fanatical view and blames the immigrant Indians for the problem of unemployment in his country. He begins to look upon the blacks to be the cause of their miseries and turn hostile towards them. The day Fred learns from a mate of his, who has had it straight from the mouth of his councilor that, the blacks were responsible. They came in hordes, occupied all the

houses, filled up the hospital beds and their offspring's took all the places in schools (Markandaya 163).

He starts behaving as if possessed by a racist demon. He looks upon himself as the *Messiah* of his country. He challenges a coal-black man with thick lips, sweeping the street: "Here, you. He said to the man you got no right to be in this country. You bugger off, see?" (Markandaya 164). The Blackman a graduate of London University, controls his anger a little when he retorts arrogantly, "I got my right when you lot carved up my country" (Markandaya 164). Finding the man stronger than he is, Fred stalks off but soon after seeing a thin, elongated coloured youth standing alone at a bus stop, sends him flying into the gutter.

The irrationality of Fred and his likes is made clear in his first deliberate confrontation with Srinivas. When he attacks the harmless old man during an evening stroll, Srinivas dodges the blow, and the drunken Fred falls to the pavement and rolls into a gutter, Srinivas runs to help him up. Looking up at him, Fred finds Srinivas,

a harmless face, but the colour was wrong. He decided he hated that colour, and the man, and the untold evils he and his kind were letting loose in his country, his beloved England... (Markandaya 165).

When Srinivas replies he is English 'by adoption,' Fred tries to assault him. Though the old man seems harmless to him, the fire of hatred was smoldering within him. His mother, gifted with Christian consciousness, however, apologizes on her son's behalf:

He does not know what he's talking about. You have got as much right to live here as what he has. Even if you weren't born in this country, Mr. Srinivas, you belong here (Markandaya 167).

Srinivas realizes the truth of Abdul's words when he suffers torments at the hands of Fred and his friends. They torment him in various ways-placing faces and later a dead mouse on his doorstep, abusing and slandering him, slugging him, He finds himself an unwanted man and tells Mrs. Pickering,

It is time when one is made to feel unwanted, and liable, as a leper, to be ostracized further, perhaps beyond the limit one can reasonably accept of oneself (Markandaya 193).

He gets a stunning blow when he realizes that if he leaves he has 'nowhere' to go. For a time he feels reassured by the sympathetic words of the well-meaning lady, Mrs. Fletcher,

the mother of Fred, and when she asks him not to leave England but to treat it as his own country, he tells her with confidence, "I won't. I do belong here now. It was good of you to remind me" (Markandaya 167).

Soon after, however, he senses the hollowness of his claim as he faces the existential problems of loneliness, alienation, adjustment and belonging. He says out of utter frustration, 'I am a stranger.' He muses over his situation as "An alien, whose manners, accents, voice, syntax, bones, build, a way of life—all of him--shrieked alien!" (Markandaya 230). A little later, he accepts that he is really outsider in England.

One day, Srinivas, catches cold and contracts a serious disease. Dr. Radcliff diagnoses it as leprosy that dreaded disease which turns one's body white-spotted and foul-smelling. This disease spreads, in due course with the disease growing, Srinivas thinks that he would be a health hazard to the flat mates, and so without disclosing the reason, he gives them notice to vacate. The dead line for the flat tenants to move out approaches. They are sore that they are being unjustly thrown out. Srinivas finds the atmosphere in the building very hostile. Now he is compelled to reveal to them the reason for evicting the tenants. Though they are shocked, they still think their eviction is inhuman and unethical. This brave but miscalculated action only makes matters worse for him. Assuming he is to be the saviour of his country, Fred could not speak for feeling. He felt for his wife and children, and his kith and kin whose health, life and living were in jeopardy. His heart enlarged and took in more, the whole of civilization, the whole of Western civilization which in his judgment—such it was and he would not claim infallibility for it—which in his judgment No. 5, was imperiling (Markandaya 235).

He decides to burn the house at No. 5 and sets its basement ablaze. But evil brings its own punishment and Fred is hooked to the boiler by his own belt and dies in the flames he himself has kindled. The black tenant of the basement, who has throughout been observing Fred, leaves him to his fate and escapes. Srinivas is saved from the fire by his son, Luxman, but he dies of the shock. Dr. Radcliffe is terribly shocked by the evil consequences of racial hatred which lead to the brutal killing of an innocent old man. He says, "He is dead and we have all had a hand in it" (Markandaya 298).

Englishmen and women are shown to be divided on the issue--those who condemn Indians and those who champion their cause. There are racists like Fred who says, "He's a devil. They're all devils" (p. 184) or like Mike who shouts, "Bloody swine. Deport the whole bloody lot" (p. 205) or like Mrs. Glass who remarks,

It's these people. These immigrants. They keep coming here, who asked them? One day they're poor, living off the rates, the next they could buy us all up. (p.197)

And Mrs. Pickering looks after Srinivas with gentle care when leprosy strikes him 'I would care for you, I am trained.' The relationship between Srinivas and Mrs. Pickering has appropriately been interpreted as one 'between the best of India and the best of Britain'.

To conclude we can say that Srinivas, the central character in the novel, ultimately belongs to no place, neither to the land of his birth nor to England. The title itself points out this fact. He is the displaced person along with his family. He goes out of India under pressure and tyranny, but the English community does not accept him. Though he tries his best to adapt himself to the 'alien' climate and manners. Shyam M. Asnani rightly says,

The fact that Fred Fletcher and Srinivas—the British hater and the Indian hated—are burnt alive underlines the moral that conflict and violence spares none. It kills both the hater and the hatred (Shyam Asnani, 136).

It will be apt to conclude by saying that the novel tries to tell us that though differences of colours, religion and language do exist between people but harping on these differences breeds violence and hatred. It is obvious that intolerance and egoistic feelings are at the root of the conflict between the two races and cultures but overlooking these differences and becoming aware of the owners of all human beings will bring down the barriers of race, religion and language.

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