

Original Article

The Village and the City: Spatial Dichotomies in Kamala Markandaya's Fiction

Dr. Shilpi Kumari

Dept. Of English, Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar

Email: darshildarsh1234@gmail.com

Manuscript ID: **Abstract**

JRD -2025-170605

ISSN: 2230-9578

Volume 17

Issue 6|

Pp. 21-25

June 2025

Submitted: 02 May. 2025

Revised: 20 May. 2025

Accepted: 04 June. 2025

Published: 30 June. 2025

This paper examines the spatial dichotomy between the village and the city in Kamala Markandaya's fiction as a central framework for understanding the socio-cultural, economic, and psychological tensions in postcolonial India. Through close readings of Nectar in a Sieve, A Handful of Rice, and The Coffey Dams, the study investigates how the contrasting geographies of rural and urban life serve as metaphors for broader binaries tradition and modernity, collectivism and individualism, harmony and alienation. Markandaya's village is portrayed not merely as a pastoral ideal but as a space marked by endurance, poverty, and vulnerability to external forces such as industrialization and colonial capitalism. In contrast, the city emerges as a site of aspiration, disillusionment, and fragmentation, where characters grapple with survival, displacement, and loss of identity. The paper argues that Markandaya does not present these spaces as fixed or monolithic; rather, she uses them to reveal the transitional nature of postcolonial subjectivity. Drawing on postcolonial theory and spatial studies, the analysis emphasizes how these spatial tensions reflect the human cost of development and modernization. The liminal or hybrid spaces, particularly evident in The Coffey Dams, challenge binary thinking and offer a nuanced view of cultural negotiation and identity formation. In doing so, Markandaya's spatial imagination critiques linear progress and affirms the complexity of lived experience in a rapidly changing India.

Keywords: Postcolonial fiction, Spatial dichotomy, Village and city, Tradition and modernity, hybridity, Indian English literature, urban alienation, rural displacement.

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya, one of the pioneering voices in Indian English literature, offers a profound engagement with the spatial and cultural transitions of a postcolonial nation. Her fiction frequently negotiates the dichotomy between the village and the city a recurring motif that functions not merely as a backdrop but as a critical axis through which issues of identity, modernity, and displacement are explored. In novels such as *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), and *The Coffey Dams* (1969), Markandaya creates spatial landscapes that are deeply symbolic and politically charged. The rural-urban divide in her work reflects the fragmentation experienced by individuals caught between tradition and change, rootedness and migration, continuity and rupture.

The village, in Markandaya's vision, embodies a way of life that is closely tied to nature, community, and cultural continuity. However, it is not romanticized as an idyllic space; rather, it is shown as vulnerable to the forces of industrialization, economic hardship, and social disruption. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the intrusion of a tannery into the village disturbs the agrarian rhythm and exposes the peasantry to exploitation and dispossession (Markandaya 33). The city, by contrast, appears as a space of opportunity and alienation. Characters like Ravi in *A Handful of Rice* are lured by the promise of urban success, only to confront its harsh inequalities and moral ambiguities (Markandaya 112). Thus, the village and the city emerge as contested spaces that reveal the ambivalence of progress in a postcolonial context. Scholars have noted that Markandaya's spatial configurations correspond with larger postcolonial anxieties.

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) Public License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work noncommercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

Address for correspondence:

Dr. Shilpi Kumari, Dept. Of English, Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar

How to cite this article:

Kumari, S. (2025). *The Village and the City: Spatial Dichotomies in Kamala Markandaya's Fiction*. *Journal of Research & Development*, 17(6), 21–25.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16361947>



Quick Response Code:



Website:

<https://jrdrv.org/>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.16361947](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16361947)



As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, “Markandaya does not allow either the village or the city to stand uncritically as models; rather, she reveals the tensions within each” (Mukherjee 184). This duality allows her to depict the complexities of development in India, where the move toward modernity often entails a simultaneous loss of cultural moorings. Her treatment of space also intersects with questions of gender, class, and environmental degradation, adding further layers to her narratives. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the spatial dichotomy of the village and the city operates in Markandaya’s fiction to dramatize the tensions between tradition and modernity. Drawing on postcolonial theory and spatial criticism, this study argues that Markandaya’s use of space not only frames the external worlds her characters inhabit but also reflects their inner conflicts and desires. The spatial shifts in her novels underscore the dislocation experienced by individuals in a nation undergoing rapid transformation. Through a close reading of her selected novels, the paper investigates how space becomes a powerful metaphor for postcolonial negotiation and identity formation.

The Village as a Site of Tradition and Suffering in *Nectar in a Sieve*

In *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Kamala Markandaya presents the village as a deeply symbolic space that embodies both the endurance of tradition and the painful realities of rural suffering. The novel’s protagonist, Rukmani, lives a life intimately bound to the land, embodying the rhythms and values of agrarian existence. The village is portrayed as a site of continuity, community, and spiritual resilience, where people find meaning in shared hardships and familial bonds. At the same time, it is also a site of economic vulnerability, environmental unpredictability, and systemic neglect. Markandaya thus constructs a village that is neither an idealized rural idyll nor a place of total despair, but a space suspended between cultural richness and material deprivation. The traditional fabric of village life is evident in Rukmani’s deep connection to the land and her family. She speaks with reverence of the earth that yields sustenance: “There is a sense of fulfillment in reaping what has been sown” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 21). Her values patience, self-sacrifice, and faith are shaped by the agrarian lifestyle, which is governed by the cycles of nature and the codes of the community. However, this way of life is persistently under threat. Natural disasters such as floods and droughts repeatedly decimate the crops, rendering the family helpless. “The land is our life,” Rukmani says, “and when it fails, we too must fail” (Markandaya 33). The vulnerability of the peasantry is laid bare as their survival is at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

The arrival of the tannery marks a pivotal moment of disruption in the novel, bringing the forces of industrial capitalism into the heart of the village. While it promises employment and economic development, the tannery also introduces social fragmentation, environmental degradation, and moral conflict. Rukmani observes how the tannery “grew and flourished and worked its changes in our village” (Markandaya 37). The intrusion of the tannery into rural space is not only physical but symbolic it represents the encroachment of modernity into a traditional world. This change brings noise, pollution, and a shift in social values, especially among the younger generation who are drawn to the tannery’s wages but lose touch with the agricultural ethos. The village, once a place of cohesion and shared values, begins to unravel. Ira’s turn to prostitution to feed her starving brother and the death of Rukmani’s children from malnutrition underscore the brutal realities of rural life. As literary scholar Priya Joshi notes, “Markandaya’s village is not a locus of nostalgic return, but a crucible of endurance where the struggle for dignity becomes paramount” (Joshi 148). The persistence of suffering does not extinguish the characters’ humanity; rather, it illuminates their moral and emotional strength. Rukmani’s voice, meditative and composed, becomes a testament to the resilience of women who silently bear the burden of poverty and displacement.

Moreover, gender and spatiality intersect in the novel through Rukmani’s experience as a rural woman. Her identity is shaped by her physical and emotional attachment to the home and the land, yet she is the one who ultimately navigates both village and city in her later life. Her endurance is emblematic of the feminine spirit tied to traditional rural India, yet capable of adapting and resisting in the face of change. As Anuradha Dingwaney Needham argues, “Rukmani’s narrative embodies a quiet resistance to the erosion of traditional life, not through confrontation but through survival” (Needham 202).

Urban Alienation in *A Handful of Rice*

In *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Kamala Markandaya offers a stark and unflinching portrayal of urban alienation in post-independence India. Unlike *Nectar in a Sieve*, which situates suffering within the agrarian village, this novel shifts the focus to the chaotic, impersonal world of the city. Through the character of Ravi, a young man who flees the restrictions of village life in search of opportunity in the city, Markandaya explores the psychological and social dislocation that defines urban existence. The city, far from being a space of liberation and progress, becomes a hostile environment where individuals are dehumanized by poverty, class inequality, and moral compromise. Ravi’s journey encapsulates the disillusionment that often accompanies migration to urban centers. Initially lured by the dream of prosperity and self-determination, he soon encounters the harsh realities of urban life: unemployment, hunger, and the breakdown of traditional support systems. His survival depends on his ability to conform to the exploitative and morally ambiguous demands of city life. As Markandaya writes, “There was always hunger... It came uninvited, it

stayed too long, it weakened the body and wore down the spirit” (*A Handful of Rice* 45). This constant hunger both literal and metaphorical becomes a symbol of Ravi’s existential alienation and the failure of the city to offer fulfillment.

The alienation Ravi experiences is compounded by his growing detachment from ethical values. Unlike Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, who remains morally centered despite hardship, Ravi becomes increasingly complicit in corruption and violence. He associates with smugglers and criminals, indicating a moral erosion driven by economic necessity. Markandaya does not condemn Ravi outright; instead, she presents his choices as symptomatic of a system that rewards selfishness and penalizes integrity. As Ravi reflects, “Goodness was for those who could afford it” (Markandaya 97). This cynical realization underscores the ethical void of the urban landscape, where survival often requires the abandonment of idealism.

Furthermore, the city in *A Handful of Rice* is characterized by social fragmentation. Relationships are transactional, and community ties are replaced by individualism and suspicion. Ravi’s marriage into a wealthier family offers a temporary reprieve from poverty, but it also deepens his sense of isolation, as he remains socially inferior and emotionally disconnected. His father-in-law, a tailor, represents a class that is economically better off but still subject to systemic pressures. The domestic space, instead of providing comfort, becomes another site of alienation. As Ravi sits alone reflecting on his failures, “He was surrounded by things people, voices, houses but none of them touched him” (Markandaya 122). This moment illustrates the emotional desolation that urban life inflicts upon the marginalized. Critics have observed that Markandaya’s urban narratives are marked by a deliberate absence of redemptive spaces. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, “The city in *A Handful of Rice* is an anti-community, a space where traditional bonds disintegrate and alienation becomes the dominant mode of existence” (Mukherjee 192). Unlike the village, which, despite hardship, offered a sense of belonging, the city offers only anonymity and rootlessness. Markandaya does not merely critique urban poverty; she critiques the ideological structures that perpetuate inequality and dehumanization in urban spaces.

Gender dynamics further complicate the theme of urban alienation. Ravi’s wife, Nalini, is confined within patriarchal structures that mirror those of the village, but without the moral solidarity of rural life. Her silence and resignation reflect not agency but entrapment. Markandaya subtly exposes how urban spaces, despite their progressive veneer, continue to marginalize women within the domestic sphere, often reducing them to instruments of male social mobility. In *A Handful of Rice*, the city is not merely a setting but a character in its own right unyielding, indifferent, and deeply stratified. It represents the darker side of modernization and serves as a counterpoint to the rural suffering portrayed in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Ravi’s alienation is emblematic of a generation caught between the failure of traditional systems and the betrayal of modern promises. Through this complex portrayal of urban space, Markandaya questions the very foundations of postcolonial development and exposes the emotional and ethical costs of rapid urbanization.

Hybridity and Transition in *The Coffee Dams*

In *The Coffee Dams* (1969), Kamala Markandaya moves beyond the stark village-city binary of her earlier works and explores a liminal space marked by cultural hybridity, environmental transformation, and ideological confrontation. Set in an unnamed, mountainous tribal region of India undergoing rapid industrial development, the novel dramatizes the encounter between Western technology and indigenous traditions. The construction of a hydroelectric dam becomes a metaphor for the nation’s postcolonial transition fraught, uneven, and deeply ambivalent. Unlike *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*, where space is depicted as rigidly divided, *The Coffee Dams* constructs a “third space” (to use Homi Bhabha’s term) that is fluid and unstable, reflecting the complex dynamics of cultural negotiation and identity formation in a rapidly modernizing India. The tribal region in the novel resists easy classification as either rural or urban. It is a transitional zone where the modern and the traditional coexist in tension. The British engineers, led by Clinton, bring with them the rationalist ethos of Western industrial capitalism. Their presence represents not just technical expertise but also a neocolonial attitude toward land and people. In contrast, the tribal communities deeply embedded in local ecosystems and spiritual traditions symbolize a holistic and organic way of life. The conflict between these two worldviews plays out in both physical and psychological terrain. As Markandaya writes, “the earth was not inert to the tribals... it was alive, it breathed, it responded” (*The Coffee Dams* 82). This spiritual connection to the land sharply contrasts with the engineers’ mechanistic approach, revealing a fundamental clash of epistemologies.

The character of Helen Clinton, the British engineer’s wife, embodies the theme of hybridity and transition. Unlike her husband, Helen is receptive to the tribal worldview and begins to question the assumptions of modernity. Her growing relationship with Bashiam, a tribal worker, signifies not only a cross-cultural connection but also a personal transformation. Helen’s emotional and intellectual journey reflects a breakdown of rigid cultural boundaries and the emergence of hybrid subjectivities. As she notes, “I had come thinking we brought light, but I found shadows of our own making” (Markandaya 134). Helen’s increasing empathy for the tribal people and her disillusionment with colonial arrogance highlight the potential for intercultural dialogue and mutual transformation. However, this hybrid space is not free of violence or exploitation. The dam construction disrupts tribal life, displaces communities, and provokes ecological imbalance. The tribal people are co-opted into the developmentalist project but remain largely

voiceless and invisible within it. The violence of modernization is thus embedded in the very structure of the dam intended to serve the nation's progress but built upon the erasure of local lifeworlds. As literary critic Uma Parameswaran observes, "Markandaya's novel dramatizes how the cost of modernity is often borne by those outside its promises" (Parameswaran 201). The transition from tribal space to industrial space is not seamless; it is marked by resistance, loss, and moral complexity.

The Coffer Dams also challenges the binary view of East versus West. The British engineers are not monolithically imperialistic; Clinton's internal conflict and Helen's transformation complicate the narrative. Similarly, the tribal characters are not passive victims; they are portrayed with agency, resilience, and dignity. Bashiam, in particular, is an emotionally complex figure whose dignity challenges the paternalism of the engineers. Through these characters, Markandaya constructs a pluralistic vision that resists simple moral oppositions. The novel's spatial politics thus move toward what Bhabha describes as the "interstitial space" a zone of contestation and creativity where new meanings and identities emerge (Bhabha 2). The hybrid space of *The Coffer Dams* offers a more mature and nuanced engagement with postcolonial themes. It acknowledges the necessity of development while critiquing its ethical and ecological consequences. The transitional landscape is a metaphor for India itself a nation balancing the demands of modernity with the burden of its cultural and ecological inheritance. Markandaya's spatial imagination in this novel transcends dichotomies and gestures toward complexity, uncertainty, and transformation.

Postcolonial Space and Subjectivity

Kamala Markandaya's exploration of spatial dichotomies across her fiction particularly in *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice*, and *The Coffer Dams* ultimately gestures toward a larger thematic concern: the construction of postcolonial subjectivity in relation to space. In Markandaya's narratives, space is never neutral; it is imbued with ideological, emotional, and historical weight. The village and the city, as well as transitional spaces like the dam site, function not only as physical settings but also as epistemological terrains that shape identity, social relations, and political consciousness. This complex spatiality reflects the broader postcolonial condition, wherein subjects must constantly negotiate between inherited traditions and imposed modernities, belonging and displacement, rootedness and mobility. Postcolonial space, as theorized by scholars like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, is inherently political and contested. Said asserts that "geography is not an inert thing. It is refracted through the prism of historical and cultural processes" (Culture and Imperialism 93). In Markandaya's fiction, geography is closely tied to power relations. The village is not simply a pastoral retreat but a site of marginalization, constantly at risk from capitalist expansion and environmental catastrophe. Rukmani's identity in *Nectar in a Sieve* is intimately bound to her village, and the gradual loss of that space leads to a corresponding loss of self. Her journey to the city, where she becomes a beggar, underscores how spatial dislocation precipitates psychological and existential fragmentation.

Similarly, Ravi in *A Handful of Rice* experiences a collapse of moral and personal coherence within the alienating structures of the city. The urban environment, with its emphasis on competition, commodification, and survival, erodes his sense of ethical stability. His disintegration is symptomatic of a postcolonial subject trapped between traditional values and the economic imperatives of modernization. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, "Markandaya's protagonists are not simply victims of fate, but victims of spatial transitions that force them into ethical and existential dilemmas" (Realism and Reality 193). Urban space in her work is thus both a literal location and a metaphor for postcolonial displacement. However Markandaya complicates the rural-urban binary by introducing liminal spaces in *The Coffer Dams*, where the subject must engage with hybrid cultural and spatial identities. Helen Clinton, for instance, navigates a transitional zone neither fully British nor fully tribal. Her internal transformation through engagement with the tribal community illustrates the possibility of reshaping identity through intercultural empathy. Bhabha's concept of the "third space," a site of negotiation where new cultural meanings emerge, is particularly relevant here. As Bhabha writes, "It is in the emergence of the interstices the overlap and displacement of domains of difference that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (The Location of Culture 2). Helen's subjectivity evolves precisely within this interstitial space, moving beyond colonial binaries.

Importantly, gender mediates the relationship between space and subjectivity in Markandaya's fiction. Women characters like Rukmani, Nalini, and Helen experience spatial transitions in profoundly gendered ways. Rukmani's identification with the land, for example, reflects the feminization of the rural in nationalist and literary discourse. Yet Markandaya gives her female characters narrative agency; they do not simply endure space they reflect on, resist, and reshape it. As Anuradha Dingwaney Needham observes, "Markandaya's women forge identities through their spatial marginality, making their suffering a source of insight and moral strength" (Using the Master's Tools 206). Thus, female subjectivity in her work is not static but forged through spatial trials and transitions. Ultimately Markandaya's treatment of postcolonial space and subjectivity challenges the simplistic association of progress with urbanization and tradition with the village. Her spatial imagination is dynamic, critical, and deeply humanistic. Space in her fiction is a crucible of transformation where identities are formed, ruptured, and sometimes reassembled. By foregrounding the emotional and ethical dimensions of spatial experience, Markandaya offers a rich, layered perspective on the postcolonial condition, where the personal is inseparable from the spatial and the political.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's fiction offers a powerful and nuanced exploration of spatial dichotomies, particularly through the contrast between the village and the city. By situating her narratives within these distinct yet overlapping geographies, she dramatizes the complex negotiations of identity, tradition, and modernity in postcolonial India. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the village serves as both a sanctuary of cultural rootedness and a site of economic fragility, illustrating the moral resilience of rural life even amid intense suffering and displacement. Rukmani's story, shaped by her intimate relationship with the land, underscores how modern incursions symbolized by the tannery erode not just the environment but the very social fabric of village life (Markandaya 29; Joshi 148).

In contrast, *A Handful of Rice* presents the city as a realm of alienation, where the promise of progress is undercut by systemic inequality, hunger, and moral decay. Ravi's descent into violence and despair reveals the ethical costs of urban survival and highlights the failure of the city to function as a truly liberating or transformative space (Markandaya 97; Mukherjee 192). Markandaya does not romanticize either space but reveals the contradictions inherent in both. Her protagonists do not merely inhabit these spaces they are shaped, fractured, and sometimes redefined by them.

With *The Coffer Dams*, Markandaya introduces a more hybrid and transitional spatial setting, where neither the rural nor the urban dominates entirely. The dam site becomes a metaphorical "third space" where tribal tradition collides with technological ambition. In this liminal zone, characters such as Helen Clinton undergo transformative experiences that disrupt colonial binaries and suggest the possibility of intercultural understanding (Markandaya 134; Bhabha 2). However, Markandaya remains critical of the unequal power structures that govern such encounters. The displacement of tribal communities and the ecological cost of development underscore the human sacrifices demanded by modernization (Parameswaran 201).

Throughout her oeuvre, Markandaya employs spatial dichotomies not simply to contrast settings but to interrogate the ideologies they represent. Space becomes a dynamic force that shapes the emotional, ethical, and political contours of her characters' lives. Her fiction critiques the blind pursuit of development and progress, emphasizing instead the need for empathy, sustainability, and cultural continuity. In this regard, her work aligns with the concerns of postcolonial spatial theory, which views geography as inseparable from the operations of power, identity, and resistance (Said 93; Bhabha 55). Markandaya's engagement with spatial dichotomies ultimately contributes to a broader understanding of postcolonial subjectivity. Whether her characters reside in villages, cities, or transitional landscapes, they are compelled to navigate the ruptures and reconfigurations of a society in flux. Their stories illuminate the emotional toll of spatial displacement and the potential for resilience and adaptation. By rendering space as both material and metaphorical, Kamala Markandaya's fiction provides a compelling critique of India's postcolonial modernity and a humanistic vision of its challenges and contradictions.

Works Cited

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994
2. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton UP, 1993.
3. Joshi, Priya. "Narratives of Nation and the Village: Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*." *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, pp. 143–152.
Markandaya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Signet, 1954. ---. *A Handful of Rice*. Putnam, 1966.
4. ---. *The Coffer Dams*. Harper & Row, 1969 Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*. Oxford UP, 1985.
5. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Pearson, 2010.
6. Needham, Anuradha Dingwaney. *Using the Master's Tools: Resistance and the Literature of the Third World Women*. Garland Publishing, 2000.
7. Parameswaran, Uma. "Kamala Markandaya: The Writer as Social Commentator." *Indian Women Novelists*, edited by R. K. Dhawan, vol. 1, Prestige Books, 1991, pp. 197–205.
8. Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. Routledge, 1993.
9. Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1993
10. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 66–111.