



The Impact of Societal Expectations on Women in the Works of Toni Morrison and Kamala Markandaya

Gita R. Varu¹, Twinkle B. Manavar²

¹Department of English & CLS, Saurashtra University, Rajkot

²Smt. B. V. Dhanak College, Bagasara, Amreli

Abstract:

Women's roles and aspirations have historically been shaped and restricted by cultural and societal expectations. This paper explores how such pressures influence female characters in the writings of Toni Morrison and Kamala Markandaya. Through a cross-cultural lens, the analysis reveals how these two authors address the impact of patriarchy, racial dynamics, and traditional norms on women's identities and agency. Despite their distinct backgrounds—Morrison from African American society and Markandaya from postcolonial India—both writers emphasize the struggles and resilience of women in oppressive systems. Their narratives offer insight into how women resist, adapt, and assert themselves within rigid societal frameworks. By drawing cross-cultural parallels, this paper highlights the universality of female oppression while showcasing how women navigate these pressures in their respective cultural contexts. Morrison and Markandaya's narratives challenge restrictive gender norms, offering a voice to marginalized women through literature. The findings suggest that while Morrison and Markandaya depict distinct cultural landscapes, their works converge in illustrating the oppression, resilience, and defiance of women against societal norms. The findings highlight the struggle for autonomy and self-definition amidst restrictive norms, ultimately advocating for a nuanced understanding of women's experiences across diverse cultural landscapes.

Keywords: *Societal Expectations, patriarchy, identity, agency, cultural norms, African American Literature, Indian Literature, self-determination.*

Introduction:

Across different cultures and historical contexts, women have often faced societal pressures that define their identities, roles, and values. Literature provides a space to examine and critique these social norms, particularly those rooted in patriarchal traditions. Writers like Toni Morrison and Kamala Markandaya use fiction to highlight the limitations placed on women, as well as their emotional, psychological, and social



struggles. By doing so, they challenge conventional gender roles and offer nuanced portrayals of female experiences in diverse cultural landscapes. Literature has long been a medium through which authors critique and challenge these gender norms. The paper examines the literary contributions of Toni Morrison and Kamala Markandaya, authors with distinct cultural backgrounds, who explore women's experiences within their respective societal settings.

Toni Morrison, originally named Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison, was a renowned American writer born on February 18, 1931, and passed away on August 5, 2019. She earned both the Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes for her work. Known primarily as a novelist, essayist, and poet, Morrison gained recognition for works like *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987), which challenge the racial and gender norms faced by African American women. Kamala Markandaya, a British Indian writer and journalist, was born on June 23, 1924, and died on May 16, 2004. She gained prominence for novels such as *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and *Some Inner Fury* (1955), which delve into the conflicts between tradition and modernity affecting Indian women's roles. Despite their varied backgrounds, both authors are united in their aim to reveal how societal norms shape identity, autonomy, and the position of women in society.

Toni Morrison's work critically explores how racial and gender-based expectations affect African American individuals, particularly women. In *The Bluest Eye*, she examines the damaging effects of Eurocentric beauty ideals on young Black girls. The character Pecola Breedlove becomes a powerful symbol of this internalized oppression. Her obsession with having blue eyes illustrates the deep psychological wounds caused by a society that equates whiteness with beauty and worth. Morrison uses Pecola's descent into madness to highlight how societal standards can erode one's identity and self-worth, particularly for marginalized women. Society's imposition of these standards denies Pecola her self-worth, leading to her tragic fate. Pecola Breedlove, the novel's tragic protagonist, internalizes the racist notion that blue eyes symbolize beauty and worth. This internalized self-hatred is evident in her desperate wish: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes...were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 43). This quote encapsulates the destructive power of societal beauty norms that render Blackness invisible or undesirable. Pecola's eventual psychological breakdown signifies the extent to which racialized ideals can erode an individual's identity.

Carmen Gillespie emphasizes that *The Bluest Eye* delves into the societal influences that define standards like beauty, normality, family roles, and sexuality. These ideals pose significant challenges for African American communities, often leading to their marginalization in terms of representation (Grewal). Morrison critiques these ideas by moving beyond surface-level beauty, exploring the deep psychological trauma inflicted on Black women by a society that fails to value them. Pecola Breedlove, a central character, longs for blue eyes,



associating them with acceptance and value, revealing how destructive internalized societal expectations can be. Morrison's storytelling not only reveals the hardships women face but also underlines the importance of reclaiming identity and voice. As Morrison notes, Pecola "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (The Bluest Eye 43), reflecting her internalized belief in Eurocentric beauty.

This tragic desire symbolizes the damaging impact of Eurocentric beauty standards on Black women. Morrison reveals how beauty ideals that favor whiteness perpetuate systemic violence, reducing Black women's self-worth. *The Bluest Eye* further investigates how female bodies are often vulnerable to abuse, emphasizing the need to recognize gender inequality and confront sexual violence. Through Cholly Breedlove's character, Morrison illustrates how societal power imbalances, especially in racially and gender-oppressive systems, can lead to violent behaviors. Cholly abuses his wife and daughter, and when Pecola becomes pregnant, it represents how patriarchal silence enables such abuse. Pecola, who suffers emotional and physical harm from her parents, especially her father, illustrates the theme that suffering for Black women occurs both within society and at home. The heartbreaking moment when her father rapes her, and she pleads, "Please, God... Please make me disappear," underscores her desperate wish to escape trauma (The Bluest Eye 42). Through Pecola's tragic descent into madness, Morrison critiques the deeply embedded racial hierarchies that govern identity formation. The novel suggests that societal expectations, particularly those surrounding beauty, are not merely individual burdens but systemic mechanisms of oppression.

Kamala Markandaya's novels, though set in varying historical periods, consistently address the societal pressures imposed on women. Her female characters often confront restrictive patriarchal systems that curtail their freedom, yet they continue to demonstrate various forms of resilience. Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) provides a poignant examination of how societal expectations impact rural Indian women. The protagonist, Rukmani, navigates extreme poverty, famine, and patriarchal oppression while maintaining resilience. Rukmani's life is shaped by poverty and patriarchal norms. Despite her suffering, she finds strength in endurance rather than open rebellion. She reflects it is not for us to write our fortunes; we must be content with what is given. Her experiences reflect a life deeply affected by hardship and restrictive traditions, but rather than rebelling openly, she finds power in endurance and quiet perseverance. Rukmani's voice expresses acceptance, suggesting that fate must be met with inner fortitude.

Markandaya emphasizes the subtle resistance within her characters. She presents Rukmani not just as a traditional female figure, but as someone who upholds self-respect and internal resilience despite societal limitations. The novel further investigates the complex experiences of rural Indian women who live under systems of gender and economic inequality. Rukmani's journey unfolds within a framework



where social expectations determine a woman's value through marriage, fertility, and compliance. Despite extreme adversity, she displays a quiet strength emblematic of what is culturally expected from women in her environment. Markandaya critically examines these fixed gender norms, showing how traditional values often suppress women's autonomy. Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* Beauty is less about physical appearance and more about a woman's **fertility and domestic role**. The novel presents how women are expected to endure suffering and sacrifice for their families, reinforcing the patriarchal control over their lives. Despite these constraints, Rukmani exhibits strength and adaptability, showcasing the resilience of women against societal norms. Markandaya portrays the life of Rukmani, the protagonist, an Indian woman who confronts the traditional expectations of marriage, motherhood, and social status. Rukmani is judged by her ability to bear sons rather than by any personal qualities. Markandaya's emphasis on Rukmani's internal struggles highlights the tension between cultural norms and personal desires. Unlike Pecola, who suffers from **internalized racism**, Rukmani faces oppression through conventional gender expectations that link a woman's worth with her reproductive abilities. Rukmani's struggles within an agrarian Indian society, where women's worth is tied to marriage, childbirth, and submission to their husbands. These works critique the deep-seated cultural beliefs that dictate women's roles and reinforce gendered oppression.

Rukmani, a woman burdened by the expectations of a patriarchal society that values her only in relation to her roles as a wife and mother. As she endures poverty and hardship, Rukmani is expected to remain obedient and resilient without questioning the structures that confine her. Her suffering is emblematic of countless women in traditional Indian societies, where personal desires are secondary to duty. Despite her suffering, Rukmani exhibits resilience, showing how women navigate societal pressures through endurance rather than direct resistance. Markandaya critiques how patriarchal expectations force women to give up their individual needs for the sake of familial survival.

In *Beloved*, Morrison portrays Sethe as a woman haunted by the traumas of slavery, particularly the loss of control over her body and identity. Through Sethe's experiences, the novel addresses the lingering impact of slavery on Black motherhood and female autonomy. Her controversial decision to end her daughter's life rather than see her enslaved reflects the extreme conditions faced by enslaved women. Morrison conveys the depth of Sethe's suffering and trauma with the haunting phrase, "It was not a story to pass on," (*Beloved* 324) emphasizing the generational and psychological scars that slavery leaves behind. This line signifying the inexpressible pain and lingering psychological damage inflicted by slavery. Sethe, the protagonist, faces the struggles of slavery, motherhood, and societal judgment.



Morrison critiques the commonly held idea of motherhood by portraying Sethe as both victim and agent. Society judges her actions, yet Morrison urges readers to comprehend the historical conditions that led to them. Morrison interrogates the societal pressures imposed on Black mothers under slavery and its aftermath. Sethe, the protagonist, makes the harrowing decision to choose death for her daughter over allowing her to be enslaved. Sethe's reasoning reveals the inhuman pressures imposed on enslaved mothers: "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison, *Beloved* 193). Sethe's act is not merely one of desperation but of rebellion against a framework that sees her child as property. Morrison's narrative forces readers to confront the painful choices Black women had to make within oppressive social structures. Through Sethe's suffering, Morrison critiques how motherhood, often idealized in patriarchal societies, becomes a site of unbearable trauma for women subjected to systemic violence. Morrison critiques how society reduces Black women to their reproductive roles.

Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* provides a poignant exploration of societal expectations and their impact on individual identity. Through her female characters, Markandaya critiques the oppressive structures that limit women's choices, while also illustrating their resilience in navigating societal constraints. Through Mira, Markandaya critiques how women are often used as symbols of cultural purity, with their autonomy sacrificed for the sake of societal ideals. The novel presents the tension between personal desires and societal duties through the lens of an interracial romance. The female protagonist, Mira, struggles with the conflict between tradition and modernity, as well as her love for an Englishman in colonial India. Markandaya portrays how women who defy societal norms often face alienation and punishment. Novel is set against the environment of the Indian nationalist struggle and explores themes of love, loyalty, and identity through the lives of its characters, particularly Mira and her relationship with Richard, an Englishman.

The societal pressures in the novel reflect the broader tensions of colonialism and patriarchy. She laments: Love is not enough when the world is crumbling around you. Through Mira's tragic fate, Markandaya exposes how nationalist discourse often reinforces patriarchal control over women's control over their own bodies and decisions. Mira, the protagonist, is torn between cultural traditions and modern values, which becomes her difficulty in balancing emotional needs with expected roles, clearly revealing this tension. The society expects her to adhere to the traditional norms of obedience, chastity, and submission, especially regarding emotional bonds of love and marriage. Mira's brother, Kit, embodies the nationalist fervor and believes that personal desires must be subordinated to the superior good of the country. Her love becomes politically charged, as national expectations render her feelings incompatible with her perceived duties to the country. The societal demand for political loyalty intensifies the personal and emotional conflicts that Mira experiences.



Markandaya describes Mira's internal conflict, noting how she is torn between her love for Richard and her loyalty to her family and nation. Mira reflects, I had been taught from the cradle that family loyalty was the greatest virtue; I had never questioned it. This statement highlights how societal expectations are ingrained in women from an early age, shaping their identities and limiting their choices. The expectation that women become guardians of tradition and nationhood often comes at the cost of their emotional autonomy. Markandaya's portrayal of Mira highlights resistance to the conventional roles that undermine women's individual rights. Markandaya critically examines how social conventions limit women's autonomy and reinforce gender-based oppression.

Morrison and Markandaya both works emphasize that these expectations are not merely cultural constructs but are reinforced by larger historical and systemic forces. Morrison's novels deconstruct the racialized and gendered hierarchies of American society, while Markandaya critiques the patriarchal and colonial legacies of India. Morrison's critique of racialized gender norms in America parallels Markandaya's exploration of patriarchal and colonial hierarchies in India. Their works emphasize that women, irrespective of their geographic and cultural backgrounds, face oppression in multiple forms whether through racism, caste discrimination, or patriarchal traditions. Furthermore, their female characters, despite their different cultural backgrounds, experience similar struggles against systemic oppression. This suggests a universal dimension to the theme of societal expectations, reinforcing the need for global feminist solidarity.

Conclusion:

Toni Morrison and Kamala Markandaya use literature as a vehicle narrative to confront and question the restrictive roles imposed on women by society. Through their characters' experiences, they illustrate how entrenched cultural, racial, and patriarchal systems hinder female autonomy. Yet, their stories also celebrate the inner strength and resilience women display in confronting these challenges. By presenting characters who endure, adapt, and resist, Morrison and Markandaya contribute to a broader understanding of women's struggles and their efforts to reclaim identity and agency. Despite differences in setting and context, their works underscore a shared feminist perspective that demands recognition of women's voices and experiences across cultures.



References

Grewai, Gurleen. *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Louisiana State University Presses, 1998.

Markandaya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Penguin Books, 2007.

—. *Some Inner Fury*. Penguin Books, 2009.

Mbalia, Doreatha. *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness*. Associated University Presses, 1991.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books, 2004.

—. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Classics, 2022.

Varu, Gita R., and Manavar, Twinkle B. "The Representation of Cultural Identity in the Works of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Some Inner Fury*." *Hemchandracharya International E-Journal of Research*, vol. 9, no. 17, Jan. 2025, pp. 179-184. hemchandracharyaejournal.com.



**MULTIDISCIPLINARY COSMOPOLITAN JOURNAL OF RESEARCH
(MUCOJOR)-2583-9829 (On-line)**

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal

Certification of Publication

The Board of Multidisciplinary Cosmopolitan Journal of Research (MUCOJOR) is hereby awarding
this certificate to

Gita R. Varu

In recognition of the publication of the paper entitled

**The Impact of Societal Expectations on Women in the Works of Toni Morrison and Kamala
Markandaya**

Published in Volume 03, Issue 05, June 2025.

EDITOR IN CHIEF



**MULTIDISCIPLINARY COSMOPOLITAN JOURNAL OF RESEARCH
(MUCOJOR)-2583-9829 (On-line)**

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal

Certification of Publication

The Board of Multidisciplinary Cosmopolitan Journal of Research (MUCOJOR) is hereby awarding
this certificate to

Twinkle B. Manavar

In recognition of the publication of the paper entitled

**The Impact of Societal Expectations on Women in the Works of Toni Morrison and Kamala
Markandaya**

Published in Volume 03, Issue 05, June 2025.

EDITOR IN CHIEF