



THE UNIVERSALITY OF FEMININE VULNERABILITY: AN EAST-WEST COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANNIE ERNAUX AND KAMALA MARKANDAYA

Bansari K. Gorakhiya¹, Dr. Audrey Barlow²

ABSTRACT

This study analyses the depiction of women as vulnerable and solitary in the writings of Annie Ernaux and Kamala Markandaya through an East-West literary perspective. Even though they happen in very different places and times, twentieth-century France and postcolonial India, the way they show women dealing with being banished, being alone, and having their identities shift in different social contexts is remarkably similar. The study investigates the effects of substantial social and historical factors, including modernisation, industrial advancement, and shifting gender standards, on women's self-perception, by comparing Ernaux's *The Years* with Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*. This study analyses the unique narrative techniques utilised by both authors to depict women's vulnerability. It achieves this through qualitative and comparative textual analysis, drawing upon feminist literary criticism and cross-cultural literary studies. Ernaux illustrates alienation through disjointed memories and the dissolution of individual identity within shared history. Markandaya illustrates this through the harsh reality of rural poverty and social dislocation. Although the two great works of literature differ significantly in style and culture, they both illustrate the marginalisation of women in rapidly evolving societies. The study asserts that analysing these East-West literary contexts enriches our understanding of feminine vulnerability as a shared human experience shaped by various historical narratives. The book adds to the field of comparative literature by showing how works from different cultures can express the same emotional truths and by explaining the historical factors that shape them.

KEYWORDS: Female Alienation, Feminine Vulnerability, Annie Ernaux, Kamala Markandaya, Comparative Literature, East-West Literary Context, Gender Studies

How to Cite:

Bansari K. Gorakhiya
& Dr. Audrey
Barlow (2026),
The Universality
of Feminine
Vulnerability:
an East-West
Comparative Study
of Annie Ernaux and
Kamala Markandaya,
International
Educational Journal of
Science & Engineering
(IEJSE), Vol: 9, Issue: 4,
41-47

1. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, feminist and comparative literature studies have been interested in how women feel when they are by themselves. Writing has helped women all over the world talk about how they felt when they were sad, alone, or left out. These things may happen anywhere, but they happen more often in some places than others. We can learn about how women's voices deal with identity, belonging, and being sensitive in a world where things are always changing by reading books from different countries.

The idea of "feminine fragility" is looked at

by comparing the works of Annie Ernaux and Kamala Markandaya. Ernaux is a well-known French author who won the Nobel Prize. She is best known for her diaries and sociohistorical works that look at how memory and shared history are linked. She writes about memories in a unique way in *The Years* compared to her other books. France went through a lot after WWII, so it's hard to tell the difference between memories of one person and memories of the whole country. But Kamala Markandaya is a famous Indian author who writes in English. Her writing shows how hard life is for women in rural India and how they deal with it. The book

Nectar in a Sieve by Rukmani has a lot of issues. That she is poor, that companies have taken over farms, and that safe farms have been lost have all made things worse for her.

Their stories both have women whose lives change because of things they can't change. The stories are told in very different ways and take place in very different places. To find out why women are getting weaker over time, the study looks at it as both a cultural trait and a universal human state that has been shaped by different social histories. This study's goal is to help us learn more about how writing from the East and West shows how gender, society, and political change are all linked.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of female alienation has received a lot of attention in literature and feminist debate, notably in studies that look at how societal, cultural, and economic shifts affect the identities of women. Extensive research has been conducted on alienation as a syndrome caused by patriarchal institutions, societal and economic injustice, and changing female expectations in modern society. Literary studies have investigated this theme in a variety of cultural contexts, revealing that narratives of women experiencing seclusion and being forced to leave their homes frequently reflect key historical developments.

Annie Ernaux's work is highly regarded by European literary experts because it combines autobiography, group memory, and social history in a way that no other writing does. Some individuals say that Ernaux's way of recounting stories makes it hard to identify the distinction between what happened to her and what happened to culture as a whole. Some critics think that the way she uses an impersonal narrative voice and a fractured memory in *The Years* is a literary trick that demonstrates how identity is becoming less stable in today's consumer culture. Many experts say that Ernaux's study reveals how hard it can be for women to feel alone when their recollections are intermingled with changes in society's past.

There has been postcolonial and feminist literary critique of Kamala Markandaya's work, among other things. Most of the time, her painting illustrates poor women in rural India grappling with the

repercussions of colonialism and changes in the economy. People have said that *Nectar in a Sieve* is an excellent example of how industry has harmed people and ruined life in the country. Scholars have noted that Rukmani, the main character, is both weak and strong as she fights to protect her dignity in a society that is changing swiftly.

Al-Rawahi, M. W. (2024). *Unveiling the Cultural Dynamics of Women's Leadership Aspirations: A Comparative Study Between Western and Eastern Societies* (Master's thesis, ISCTE-Instituto Universitario de Lisboa (Portugal)). Globally, there is an issue with women and men not being treated equally in the workplace, particularly among leaders. Many believe that our culture has been coping with this issue for a long time. The girls should keep an eye on the children, while the boys should take leadership. Standards for women's behaviour in society still exist, however they differ from country to country. Women face challenges in becoming leaders owing to a variety of reasons. Do Easterners and Westerners agree that women should be treated differently? In what ways does this limit women's leadership opportunities? A poll was conducted among women working in both the East and the West to enquire about the situation. The findings were the key information source for the study. The secondary data came from numerous studies and book reviews on the same issue. Because there was debate over the facts, a comparison was used to help everyone grasp the situation. Several of the poll's findings differed from previous studies. As a result, we can conclude that historical and biological roles have a significant impact on global cultural standards, making it more difficult for women to take leadership positions. However, it demonstrated that when it comes to legislation and enabling women to lead, the West is ahead of the East. Increasing the proportion of women in the workforce would be a more equitable first step. Women who can work from home and set their own hours will find it simpler to advance to positions of leadership.

Yilmazçoban, M. (2020). Mindset and culture difference in Eastern And Western societies in gender and feminism. *International Journal of Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity*, 11(2), 189-202. The research investigates the notions and ideologies of gender and feminism, focusing on

the disparities in mindset and culture inherent in the foundational structures of Eastern and Western cultures. Eastern and Western societies have quite diverse ways of thinking and cultural systems. Consequently, gender and feminism possess distinct conceptual interpretations and divergent applications of these interpretations within two disparate social frameworks. The study performed a comprehensive sociological and socio-psychological analysis, considering the “individualist” traits of Western society and the “integrative” traits of Eastern Islamic society. This genuine analysis demonstrates that gender equality and feminist ideology adversely impact, albeit in varying degrees and forms, the various mindsets and cultural realms of two distinct societal institutions.

The resolution that ought to hold significant relevance in the domain of sex and gender must not be derived from feminist and sexist ideologies. Additionally, the examination of these theories conducted with a discriminatory, competitive, and egalitarian approach should be eschewed. The most important thing is to make sure that the East and the West meet in “common human values,” which are the things that both societies have in common. This can be done by remembering old ideals and making new arrangements. To eliminate detrimental impacts from Feminist, Modernist, Capitalist, and Liberal philosophies that discriminate and create antagonism between sexes, families, and societies. Consequently, men and women, as distinct sexes, will not participate mentally in emotional conflict and warfare, nor will they be exploited by coexisting inside the capital market. Turkish society and Turkey will better show how Eastern Islamic societies work, while continental European countries will be used to look at how Western societies work..

Kašić, B. (2004). Feminist cross-mainstreaming within ‘East–West’ mapping: A postsocialist perspective. *European journal of women’s studies*, 11(4), 473-485. The piece discusses the intriguing enquiries that arise when feminists intersect with popular culture. It achieves this while remembering that “over-genderization,” globalised marketing, changes in borders and people moving around, and other issues are huge concerns for the feminist movement and feminist critical studies. The author

examines feminist cross-mainstreaming as both a concept and a “normative act” at the commencement of the 21st century, as well as a contentious method for asserting authority across various realms and boundaries. To accomplish this, she examines the issue of the globality of feminism in its various settings and complexities, the position of feminism from a postsocialist perspective, and the implications and potential challenges of gender mainstreaming.

There is extensive research on each author individually; but, comparative studies between Ernaux and Markandaya are scarce. Most important talks are either about stories by Western feminists or about pictures of women from postcolonial times who are not connected to one other. This hole illustrates that we need to look at how female solitude is shown in different kinds of writing from different civilisations. The objective of this study is to contribute to comparative literature by demonstrating how narratives from many cultural contexts might illuminate shared patterns of female vulnerability influenced by varying social histories.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on a synthesis of alienation, feminist literary criticism, and a comparison of various writing styles. These concepts clarify how two artists from different nations, Annie Ernaux and Kamala Markandaya, use their art to depict the loneliness and helplessness of women.

The feminist view of literature serves as the foundation for this study. Books, according to feminist authors, demonstrate how unfair society is to women, particularly the norms and expectations that come with being a woman in a nation where men rule. Because they don’t belong to social groups, have less power than men, and must struggle to maintain their identities in a world where men rule, women frequently feel alone. From a feminist perspective, it is evident that the protagonists of “The Years” and “Nectar in a Sieve” are weak and out of place in their respective societies.

The study also looks at the philosophical and social conundrums that people face when they are alone. Alienation occurs when a person feels that they don’t belong in their identity, group, or social context.

Artists frequently depict people who are alone, don't fit in, and feel like they don't belong in order to convey alienation. The study looks at how the main female characters in the chosen works deal with societal shifts that make them feel insecure and put their identities in danger.

You can look at works from other literary traditions from a cultural point of view using comparative literature, which is a broad study method. The study shows how cultural distinctions and universal traits of female fragility can be recognised by comparing Ernaux and Markandaya in an East-West context. This method can help us understand how diverse historical events might make us feel the same way. It also helps us comprehend how literature talks about how gender, society, and social change are all linked.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative and interpretive research methodologies utilised in this study both look at how different pieces of writing are similar and different. The study employs a textual and analytical approach to examine how Annie Ernaux and Kamala Markandaya depict the vulnerability and isolation of women. We examine at how different cultural and political issues affect women's life by doing in-depth studies of individual works of literature, such as Ernaux's "The Years" and Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve."

The main methodology used in this study was comparative textual analysis. It made it easier for the researcher to identify commonalities between two works of literature from disparate social and cultural backgrounds. The study looks at themes, narrative structures, and character development to see how both authors depict women's weaknesses. Many people are curious about how cultural transformations such as modernism, industrialisation, and shifting gender roles affect the major female characters' thoughts and emotions.

We will use feminist literary theory to investigate how relationships between men and women affect the representation of women in both works. The challenges that place women on the periphery of society such as the fact that society is centred on males, the unstable economy, and cultural ideals

about what it means to be a woman are the primary emphasis of feminist philosophy. According to this paradigm, the main characters' struggles are viewed as societal and individual issues.

To further understand how the work fits into the larger academic debate, we reference supplementary sources such as scholarly papers, journal articles, and critical essays. These websites explore the literary, cultural, and theoretical aspects of the works. This allows the study's findings to be included in larger discussions about gender, identity, and reading literature from multiple cultures. The study's concept is to explain how narratives from diverse civilisations might show how weak women are in all societies and in a variety of ways.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FEMININE VULNERABILITY IN ANNIE ERNAUX AND KAMALA MARKANDAYA

The differences in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Annie Ernaux's *The Years* show how different historical, social, and cultural circumstances influence women's vulnerability while simultaneously emphasising universal themes. The two writers originate from two distinct literary traditions: Indian postcolonial fiction and European autobiographical narrative. Both, however, write about women whose lives are strongly influenced by events beyond their control. Ernaux and Markandaya's experiences show how women manage their identities, resilience, and emotional survival in rapidly changing civilisations.

The Years by Annie Ernaux is a novella that combines everyone's shared history with individual memories. The female subject is portrayed as part of a larger society understanding that has been influenced by the political and cultural transformations that happened in France following World War II, rather than as an individual. As the novel unfolds through decades of social instability, the protagonist progressively loses touch with her history and the rapidly changing modern society around her. Ernaux's use of the communal voice and restricted storytelling style exemplify how current commercial culture shreds individual identity. In this setting, feminine fragility expresses itself as a conflict between one's own recollections and shared historical experiences, as well as a little emotional distance.

In contrast, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays vulnerability in a more direct and honest way. The main character, Rukmani, portrays the problems that Indian women experience in rural areas, such as poverty, social instability, and the intrusion of industrial forces into traditional farming life. Although she has faced bereavement, migration, and financial hardships, her narrative displays her resilience and emotional toughness. The opening of the tannery in the village exemplifies how industrialisation may change the town's social and economic composition, increasing the protagonist's feelings of insecurity. Women's vulnerability in this book arises from real-world causes such as a lack of cash, social marginalisation, and the dissolution of traditional lives.

Both books highlight how women commonly have to fight for their rights in shifting civilisations, despite the fact that the stories are told differently and the civilisations are separate. In both stories, the characters must deal with situations that limit their liberty and give them a sense of estrangement. Ernaux and Markandaya show how literature can convey both cultural and universal aspects of women's vulnerability by situating these experiences in various social contexts. The two authors argue that understanding women's lives in varied historical and cultural contexts necessitates a knowledge of their experiences of displacement, strength, and identity negotiation.

5.1 Memory, Identity, and Gender

To understand how Annie Ernaux and Kamala Markandaya show how fragile women are, you need to comprehend how memory, identity, and gender are all connected. Both authors write about strong women whose lives and the times and locations they live in define who they are. Memory is a story device that helps the characters make sense of their lives, think about their problems, and figure out how they fit into their own cultures.

In Annie Ernaux's *The Years*, remembering is a key element of how people learn about themselves. The book combines personal memories with cultural events that everyone in France has gone through at different eras in the country's social history. Ernaux intentionally shifts from an individual's perspective

to a collective voice, suggesting that a person's identity is profoundly connected to the broader historical context in which they exist. Women might use memory to connect with other people and feel alone at the same time. The main character's memories reveal how the distance between his old and new identities gets bigger as cultural standards and values change. This new way of thinking about memory reveals how hard it is to figure out who you are these days.

What do you think of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*? It highlights how memory may help people stay who they are when things are harsh and they have to move. Rukmani stays emotionally stable even though poverty and industrialisation have made things chaotic. She does this by recalling her life, her family, and how people used to do things in the country. She really cares about the rhythms of country life and the lessons of loyalty and community. Markandaya's comments highlight how memories can help people go through hard situations without losing their honour.

Both pieces deal with how memory and identity are affected by gender. The main female characters have to struggle with cultural and social norms that change how they see themselves and their future. In both scenarios, women are generally given occupations because that's what their families, towns, and society think they should do. So, their personalities are continually trying to find a balance between what they want and what society expects of them. Ernaux and Markandaya's study examines memory, personality, and gender concurrently. It reveals that the social and cultural things that affect women's life are closely tied to how unsafe they feel.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

"The Years" by Annie Ernaux and "Nectar in a Sieve" by Kamala Markandaya are two noteworthy texts that highlight how women have been seen as weak in different ages and places. The study's key thesis is that the women in both novels feel alone due of changes in society and the economy, not merely because of their individual circumstances. The main characters in both books encounter issues because of changes in history, societal rules, and the way things are made. These issues influence their self-perception and sense

of belonging.

The study suggests that the psychological impacts of modernity and how weak women are in Ernaux's novel are closely related. France's culture evolved so swiftly after World War II that people's memories and sense of who they are are getting worse and worse. Ernaux's manner of narrating stories shows this since she regards the female subject as an important part of a group's understanding of history instead of just a single voice. Alienation turns into a complicated but common emotional condition in which the main character feels cut off from her past and the changing social world around her.

Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, on the other hand, demonstrates how weak things are because of how they are in the real world. Rukmani, the main heroine, has a hard time with money, death, and moving as life in her little village becomes less stable because of industry. Her experiences highlight how women's lives can be greatly affected by changes in race, class, and income, especially for women who are already on the fringes of their communities. The narrative shows that being weak isn't just a state of mind; it may also be tied to issues like being impoverished, losing land, and not being able to move forward in society.

It's also very significant that both writers use women's experiences to talk about bigger social and economic institutions. Ernaux talks on how our consumer society makes people feel hollow and tears up their identities. Markandaya talks about how problems in the economy and industry in rural India effect people's lives. Both authors highlight how women have to deal with the social and mental impacts of historical change, even though they relate their stories in different ways.

The talk makes it sound like women's weakness isn't limited to one place, but is instead a trait that all people have, developed by their own social experiences. When you put these two authors next to each other, you can see how comparative literary analysis can help us understand how literature demonstrates how women deal with issues of identity, belonging, and strength in cultures that are changing.

7. CONCLUSION

Literature from different times and places can help us understand the hard lives of weak women. For example, Annie Ernaux's "The Years" and Kamala Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve." The two writers work in very different genres. One is an Indian postcolonialist and the other is a European writer who writes about her own life. But they are very similar in how they show women trying to figure out who they are, where they fit in, and how to stay strong emotionally in societies that are going through big changes.

The analysis indicates that the alienation of women in both works is predominantly attributable to historical and societal transformations rather than psychological or mental disorders. Ernaux's story shows how weak people get when their memories fade and their sense of self starts to fade. This happens a lot in modern French society. "The story's reflective style shows how the fast pace of life and the demands of modern business can make people feel alone in small ways. Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, on the other hand, shows how unstable life can be for poor, socially isolated, and scared of losing their jobs rural Indians. Rukmani's story shows how people's lives have changed because of industrialisation and the decline of traditional rural life. It shows how big changes in the economy and society can have a big effect on women's lives.

Both writers write about women who fight for their honour and power against things they can't control, but their stories and plots are different. Their stories show how changes in history, gender roles, and social norms can hurt women more than men. By reading these stories from both the East and the West, we can see how women's lives are both the same and different in different cultures.

Lastly, this study shows how important it is to look at different pieces of writing to see how women's roles in writing change depending on their social and economic situations. Ernaux and Markandaya's works show that moving, staying strong, and figuring out who you are are all very important themes in literature from all over the world." But the reasons for ending a relationship aren't always the same.

REFERENCES

1. Al-Rawahi, M. W. (2024). Unveiling the Cultural Dynamics of Women's Leadership Aspirations: A Comparative Study Between Western and Eastern Societies (Master's thesis, ISCTE-Instituto Universitario de Lisboa (Portugal)).
2. Chen, C. H. (2015). Advertising representations of older people in the United Kingdom and Taiwan: A comparative analysis. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 80(2), 140-183.
3. Feher, K. (2021). Digital identity and the online self: Footprint strategies—An exploratory and comparative research study. *Journal of information science*, 47(2), 192-205.
4. Geiger, S. N. (1986). Women's life histories: Method and content. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 11(2), 334-351.
5. Htun, M., & Weldon, S. L. (2010). When do governments promote women's rights? A framework for the comparative analysis of sex equality policy. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(1), 207-216.
6. Jenkins, J. H., Kleinman, A., & Good, B. J. (2013). Cross-cultural studies of depression. In *Psychosocial aspects of depression* (pp. 67-100). Routledge.
7. Longxi, Z. (2017). East-West Comparative Studies: A Challenge and an Opportunity. *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge*, 1(1), 45-65.
8. Mou, F. R. (2025). Power, Gaze, and Gender: A Comparative Analysis of the Male and Female Gaze in 1Q84, Out, and Convenience Store Woman (Doctoral dissertation, East West University).
9. Rao, N., Mishra, A., Prakash, A., Singh, C., Qaisrani, A., Poonacha, P., ... & Bedelian, C. (2019). A qualitative comparative analysis of women's agency and adaptive capacity in climate change hotspots in Asia and Africa. *Nature Climate Change*, 9(12), 964-971.
10. Temkina, A., & Zdravomyslova, E. (2003). Gender studies in post-Soviet society: Western frames and cultural differences. *Studies in East European Thought*, 55(1), 51-61.
11. Watson, P. (1995). Explaining rising mortality among men in Eastern Europe. *Social science & medicine*, 41(7), 923-934.
12. Zhang, L. (2011). Risky Business: The Challenges of East-West Comparative Studies. *Journal of East-West Thought*, 1, 115-122.