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Possession by Kamala Markandaya: An Assessment

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Abstract:

Kamala Markandaya possesses outstanding skills to convert her day to day experience in her creative expression. As a novelist, she portrays wonderful characters and deals with themes of human relationship, love, marriage and the place of women in the contemporary society. The literary works of Kamala Markandaya have been studied and interpreted differently by various researchers in terms of her feminist concerns, East-West themes, the representation of traditional and modern life and her contribution in the field of Indian fiction. The present paper is an attempt to assess Markandaya's art of writing novel with reference to her novel Possession.



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The fourth novel of Kamala Markandaya *Possession*, unfolds many enigmatic issues. It moves from India to London and back to India again. The novel deeply elaborates human relationship through the various characters. The speaker of the novel Anasuya is not its heroine but a negligible character. In the novel, Lady Caroline Bell and Valmiki (or Val) are the vital figures who covers the major part. Valmiki is an uneducated cowboy who is dexterous at paintings. The Swamy again emerges in the novel and plays a decisive role. Lady Caroline goes to countryside with Anasuya and there she convenes Valmiki. She learns the talent for painting in him and asks him to go to London with her. Before departing, he goes to Swamy who knows his aptitude. With Swamy's consent and blessing Val goes to London with Lady Caroline. The character of Swamy is portrait by Markandaya to highlight the religious consciousness in the story. He is saintly figure with mysterious personality and performs the role of surrogate father of the protagonist. He is source of spiritual ideas whose presence makes Val comfortable in the different critical situation. As the novelist describes Swamy is "The holy man — he was deep in meditation when we came, a thin, muscular figure with not an ounce of spare flesh anywhere, not a stitch of clothing on his body, a man probably of middle years" (45).

Valmiki turns out to be an artist of intercontinental fame. Lady Caroline was infatuated by his art and she wants to 'possess' him. So, the title as A.V. Suresh Kumar says, " In a way, the title depicts this obsession of the protagonist, to 'possess' her hero. Alas!, the more she tries to possess, the far she goes away from her mission. Unwittingly she cuts herself off from the very culture she comes to adore. Her excessive desire to 'possess' is her undoing." (100) However Val loves Ellie, the immigrant working maid of Caroline. She becomes pregnant and Lady Caroline turns her out without the knowledge of Val. The Swamy comes to England to liberate Val from Caroline's pressure but she takes Valmiki on a tour of America. After coming from America, Val encounters a young artist, Annabel and falls in love with her. Val leaves Caroline and starts to live with Annabel. Caroline is over again successful in contravention of their love. She informs Annabel everything about Val's affair with Ellie and Annabel leaves him. Valmiki comes back to India and to the Swamy. Lady Caroline attempts to take him back but in vain. In the estimation of Prof. H.M. Williams, this novel is one of the most powerful artistic explorations of the deformation of India's national character in the British squeeze and of her consequential urge to be free. The narrator describes Lady Caroline's character as:

"Lady Coroline Bell, so that was who it was ? I had heard about her a dozen times in a week I had been in Madras. She was rich, divorced, well-



born, said fashionable Indian society, concentrating upon essentials: really rich, in the English way, with landed estates and money in sterling; really well-born, descended from a long line of men who had ruled India in the days of the British Raj, not loosely linked to a little-known lord by marriage to an umpteenth cousin—which was the more usual cause for awe in India; and very boldly and publicly divorced, with headlines in the papers. She had also been reputed to be beautiful, though no great stress had been laid upon this as far as I could recall, probably because even her astonishing good looks lost impact compared to her other spectacular qualities. (1)

In this novel, Markandaya portrays the cross-cultural worry and clash between the materialistically possessive West and the morally non-possessive East and between the material and heavenly sources of art. With extraordinary infiltration and convincingness the novelist efforts to concretize the invincibility of the religious power of the East tackled with the glamour of the worldly society of the West. The novel also parfaits the plight of the artist, Valmiki who, attracted into the impressive world of alien values, experiences the resulting disagreement between the profligate freedom and accountable liberalism in a baffling innovation of atmosphere. The novel stages the search for true individuality of Valmiki, nature's own gift to the world of art in the customary South India. Valmiki, a born artist, is a permanent outsider. He feels separated as much in his native village as in the sophisticated London. He is a poor, abandoned lad, a simpleton, not able to study even the simple skills their living needed. His art has no significance for his poor family. The members of his relations simply refuse him.

When Lady Caroline Bell, a wealthy patrician English woman, comes into contact with Val the latter is young and no shell has shaped to defend him as yet. She determined in this uninformed goatherd an extraordinary artistic mastermind. She comprehended that he needs freedom to broaden his artistic talent and to give vent to his artistic expressions in an atmosphere favorable to growth. As a confident English woman she adopts him compulsorily and tries to possess him in order to develop his artistic mastermind for marketable principle. No hesitation, Caroline gives him freedom at the commencement and put aside him with her money from want, from utter scarcity and from the need to back scrape. However she intentionally restrains his impulsive activity. In addition Caroline's physical and psychological command, Valmiki's artistic growth is shortened by other factors also. After captivating him to England Caroline, arrogant and impertinent by nature, tries to possess him bodily, psychologically, culturally and religiously too. Since he has been deracinated from his spiritual and cultural heritage to face the onslaught of an alien, prevailing



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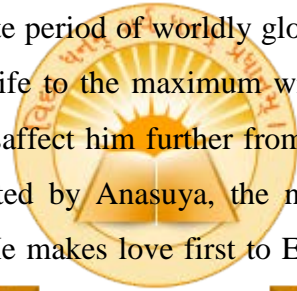
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white race he obviously suffers from a sense of rootlessness.

He feels appallingly homesick and finds that he is removed into the alien milieu where he got commendation as a painter. The conceited and impertinent approach of Caroline is not helpful to reanimate him. He senses that for her, he is not a full-fledged human being to be loved and cared for but “the clay” in her hands to be “moulded and caressed to an image she could love”. Valmiki grievances to Anasuya, “She does not care for me... when I do nothing I am nothing to her, no more than a small insect in a small crack...”.

This consciousness is much worse than being an abandoned goatherd. Though Valmiki was living in a filthy condition in his village before his leaving to England, he found sufficient recompense in the spiritual company of the Swamy and in the dormant and the throbbing affection of his mother. However in London, being pulled up from his native soil, feeling rootless, this sensitive artist experiences emotional segregation and is over-powered by disaffection. The epoch which Valmiki spends in Europe is measured a glorious period acquisitively. It is almost passionate period of worldly glory-money, power, repute, sex and journey. Leading a bohemian life, Valmiki likes life to the maximum with recklessness and adopts the mercenary values of the gilt-edged society which disaffect him further from his roots. That he is often alienated from his conventional roots is often commented by Anasuya, the narrator. Under the influential pressure of Western culture he becomes licentious. He makes love first to Ellie, then to Caroline and later to Caroline and Annabel by turns.



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But his love connection with Ellie is dissimilar from his dealings with Caroline and Annabel: Val and Ellie are waifs looking for comfort and companionship in each other. However with the other two, he is a mere enjoyment seeker. These years can be measured a period of separated activity in which he loses touch with the core of himself. His approach towards life now becomes out and out unsettled. H. M. Williams comments Valmiki turns into an artist Lady Bell intends but at the expenditure of nearly destroying his soul. He finds only squander and death in personal relationship and to recuperate his true self has to fracture with Lady Bell and return to India. Although critics tend to believe the novel an allegory of Great Britain’s challenge to restrain India, it is definitely an individual’s struggle to find his spiritual identity in an alien environment. In the novel, Valmiki becomes so much wretched by the discovery of the deaths of Ellie and his still born child. He becomes just unconscious about whatever happening around him. Anasuya tries to convince him and tells him to paint once again in order to earn some money to go back to India. But Val is not in the mental condition to paint anything. Markandaya very artistically describes that,



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“Nothing”, he repeated. “That is the truth,,” saya. If you could look inside me you would find nothing but deadwood.”

A memory stirred. Someone else had said those words – similar ones – long ago. Deadwood, ashes. The memory came alive. Ellie’s words said, clearly: “Inside I am burnt out... it is not easy for me to feel because I am burnt out.”

Their lives which had run parallel now touched, although she was in her grave. (214)

The magnificent money-oriented life led by Valmiki in London can be explained as the having mode of existence, to use the terminology used by Eric Fromm to define a life which exclusively relaxes on money, power and status in dissimilarity to the being mode which is noticeable by aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world need one to surrender one’s narcissistic attitude and selfishness. “His English was good, the accent cultivated – Caroline had clearly made him work at it. The most uncouthness was gone, and some of the honesty. Did it make him more acceptable? In this polished Western world, obviously yes.” (110) In spite of the hectic period of extraordinary success, Valmiki happens to be forlorn and an outsider. Because his life lacks discernment and a pattern, his art, even at the height of his aesthetic glory, discloses a lack of discipline which his art critics censure.

As he feels itinerant and separated himself from religious and cultural roots and heritage his painting lack divine and religious glow. After his crack with Caroline which goes down his self-esteem Valmiki undergoes a wonderful psychological catastrophe. Like deport in an alien culture Valmiki feels nomadic and develops into a twisted personality. K. R. Rao’s opinion of Ramaswamy is pertinent, in a way to an exile like Valmiki in *Possession*.

The amiable memories of the past as well as the tender comprehension of his own segregation, both in time and space weigh on his soul cruelly. He cries out in a mood of outwardly total situation and unhappiness. There is nobody to go to now no home, no shrine, no climate, and no age. His unbearable sense of disaffection and non-belonging decreases him to the quandary of a mere nonentity in the wide phenomenal world. He becomes a quarry to indecision and nervousness, and the traumatic memories of the past hang heavily over his mind. Valmiki is nervous not by the wicked nature of Caroline, nor by Annabel’s malevolent attitude, but by his own self-castigation.



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Throughout this depressed stage his selfless love for pet animals are shaped in their right and man should not develop them. Even though self-reproof could have led him to self-reprobation and self-hate which would have mechanically resulted in self-destructive proceedings, his self-awareness and love of honesty and incorporation help him overcome the bitter crisis. Valmiki's mother concurs to leave her son for a few rupees and for a better life of her son; whereas Caroline is not equipped to leave Valmiki in the hands of either Ellie or Annabel since she wants to him. The way she takes Valmiki away from his parents, no one even forecast that Caroline would use him as her man.

Caroline's special donation to Valmiki's life lies in the fact that she attached his rudimentary talent, changes his rustic manners and makes him gentleman satisfactory to the fashionable humanity of London. It seems that Caroline wanted to change the entire being of Valmiki and make him more stylish to mix with the advanced culture. Initially, Valmiki also surprised by the dignified and gorgeous lifestyle of Caroline. At the time of his entry in the public as a western emerging painter, Anasuya too got astonished by his new transformation. As she speaks,

Caroline came first, all in her shining whiteness, leading by the hand Valmiki also in dazzling white, and he leading by its chain a tiny monkey wearing a scarlet hip-length jacket and a gilt leather collar. The trinity was surprising enough, but it was Valmiki, who held me – a new and astonishing Valmiki, clearly very conscious of his sudden and heady accession to self-confidence, a little too obviously careless of the striking looks guaranteed by brown skin against white clothes, light eyes against brown skin; and his uncompromising peasant attitudes exchanged, with at least questionable gain, for a glossy uniform urbanity. (108)

It seems that Caroline only assists him to change his outside life and manners, his dress and behavior, his deportment but not his inner life and his touching needs. She tames Valmiki as he has disciplined Minou, a monkey. He dances like a monkey to Caroline's tune. Caroline always desires to control over a young man absolutely-culturally, actually, morally and inexpensively. The personality of Caroline, at a large degree, is domineering. Margaret P. Joseph accurately points out: While Caroline thrived in the first three-making Valmiki a well-known artist, flattering his mistress, education him her worldly values- she fails in the last, for in every disaster he turns to his mentor the Swamy. Caroline has redefined his etiquettes and made methodical his artistic knowledge and talent, however she fails to overpower or tame



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his strange Indian sentiments.

Valmiki requirements to remain a true artist with a free and frank heart, which cannot be subdued by a foreign agent. Valmiki's Indian personality makes him a misfit in Caroline's family as her sexual partner and both get estranged from each other. Valmiki's circumstance is akin to that of the chimpanzee, Minou, which he taking with him-cut off from its kind, underprivileged of its natural environment and freedom. In spite of his westernization, Valmiki is not entirely cut off from his roots and sense of identity. Caroline has her personal intention to make Valmiki famous. He realizes Caroline's intention and says to Anasuya, "She does not care for me. She cares only for what I can do, and if I do it well it is like one more diamond she can put in her necklace round her friends to admire; but when I do nothing, I am nothing to her, no more than a small insect in a small crack in the ground. It was not a slip oftongue, a manner of speaking. It is what she thinks of me when I am as I am now" (p. 55)

Symbolically, the death of the monkey foretells the end of his ostentation when he used to carry her about with a silver chain around her neck first as Caroline used to flaunt him with a gold chain. Valmiki comes back to India to re-establish his religious roots. In London he was a touching wreck. There his visage difficulties, knowledgeable life at dissimilar levels, gained worldly knowledge. Lastly, he comes back to his native village as a man of self-realization. And once a man has attained self-knowledge and self-awareness he no longer swings between becoming and being. Back in the religious world of the Swamy he recovers his self. He discovers the wilderness of the caves loving since here his spring of inspiration is perpetually resuscitating.

At one level the novel is the endless conflict between possession and detachment, materialism and spiritualism, represented by Caroline and the swami respectively. Caroline could never understand the spiritual urge behind Val's art. She could see them only as commodities that could fetch money and fame. At another level, Caroline's self-will, dominance, and possessiveness suggest a picture of colonialism, and of India struggling to free itself. The postcolonial love-hate relationship with the British is seen in Anasuya's attitude towards them. (Sodhganga 46)

Valmiki has no animosity and malevolence against anyone; he is at peace and contented. In the world of contradictory standards and ideas and ideals, a child has a hard time mounting up. Growing up is not first a sequential affair, it is a substance that engages the development of the mind and the sentiments of



a child into teens and then into adulthood. Habitually a novel of growing up traces the resist of the child to develop into a being on his own. Logically such a novel gives a lot of deliberation to the pressures on the growing soul. Thus the novel can be interpreted as a novel of growing up. The second part of the novel from the time of Val's penetrating adulthood in England portrays the eloquent expression of his final growing up. Commenting on the character of Valmiki, Ramesh Shrivastva observes

Possession shows the plight of the artistic Val who enticed into the glittering world of alien values experiences the resulting conflict between licentious freedom and responsible liberalism in a buffing novelty of atmosphere. The novel dramatises the search for true identity of Val nature's own gift to the world of art in the traditional south India. (31)

In the novel *Possession*, Markandaya depicts four women characters with the different temperament. The first woman character is Anasuya who is the narrator of the story but remain minor participant in the activities. She is friend of Caroline who narrates the story as an objective reporter. Importantly, Anasuya is in India as well as in England to narrate the finest parts of the story. "Perhaps Anasuya (or Kamala Markandaya) is trying to make the story of Caroline and Valmiki something of a parable of colonialism, the passing of one empire, and the current insidious Movement of new colonialism. (Iyengar, p. 444-445). Anasuya is very well aware about the Indian tradition and culture and knows the instinct of Caroline who wishes to achieve Val at any price. She analyses the worry and psychological complexities of Caroline for Val and her attachment with Swamy. It seems as if she can read well the heart and the mind of Caroline. She speaks "I think she saw him as in the end the real adversary the one who could, more formidably than anyone else who had crossed her path, show up for shadows and a legitimates entitlements to the boys, and resists her taking and keeping possession of what she wanted."(189)

The character of Caroline is representative of typical capitalism who believes in exploiting the poor physically as well as mentally. She is the English missionary, "rich, divorced and well born". By supremacy and authority, she comes to India to choose Valmiki and buys, the spirited Tamil rustic and takes him to England. In the name of exhibiting him to the world as a great painter, she wants to be his paramour, a darksome connection of sex with the boy. She stands for the authoritative feminist of patriarchy. Both of them are quite different from each other. She is self centered and regards herself as the manager and patron of Valmiki. Their unmatched relationship is describes in the following lines:



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“Were they one flash? were the rimous I had heard in India more solidly based than? Lulled by her series of love affairs, imagined? The thought hammered at me again as I saw her white arm encircle him, holding him as it he were her; and then memory stirred. And I remembered this was just how she had held him long ago when he was a boy and she was establishing her clawing to him, as plainly as it flag in hand she were registering properly rights. (39)

The novel also portraits beautiful character of Ellie, a young twenty year old Jewish girl who has suffered the cruelty of Nazis in the camp. At the camp, the soldiers at night times come to have sex and so she has lost her femaleness. After this incident, she yearned to die and asked them to kill; but they laughed at her and had sex with her. “Ellie is a silently suffering representation of womanhood. An orphaned Jew is thrown to the Nazis as a sensual food. During the war times, atrocities on women are many. This terrible, cruel and violent life of Ellie is a painful portrayal of feminity. Here the novelist is voicing the voices of the voiceless.” (Sodhganga 52) The emotional aspects shake the inner consciousness of human psyche and reveal the emotional fervor in language. She tells Anasuya about her mental condition and her love for Val:

I lie with a man- so I do not talk about love, because I do not know if that is what I feel because I am burnt out, inside. I am burnt out . But Valmiki loves me. He does not know it but he does. At times like tonight he forgets , he cannot understand himself how it is possible to love someone so dull as I am you can see in his face he is asking this question. Then when the others are gone and it is day time again he comes back to me, we are of one kind. (116)



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