



## Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

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### Kamala Markandaya's *Possession* – A Thematic Study

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#### Abstract

Novel is considered to be the most powerful form of literary expression when compared to other literary genres. This literary genre has been implanted from foreign shores in Indian soil as a consequence of western contact. It has fixed its firm roots in this alien but fertile soil and has stood the test of time and criticisms. Women novelists in India have been producing fiction as early as the 1980s. To mention a few woman writers of fiction Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Nayantara Sahgal. Of these Kamala Markandaya occupies a prominent place among Indian English Novelists.

#### Full Paper

Kamala Markandaya's fourth novel *Possession* is a straight forward narrative tale told by a first person narrator Anasuya who is mainly an observer and reports events with a minimum of personal involvement and commentary. She takes her characters from a very wide spectrum: Indian peasants, students, and Indian émigrés in England etc. She has particular interest in analysing woman characters. Markandaya's Indian characters like the genial ex-Maharaja "Jumbo," the talented Brahmin rustic Valmiki and the accomplished novelist Anasuya on the one hand are contrasted with the shallow westerners like Caroline, Leon and Annabel on the other. The novels portray how the western culture has the tendency to exploit the innocent and the poor for their selfish gains. *Possession* is the story of the attempt made by a rich aristocratic woman, named Lady Caroline Bell, to possess physically, morally and spiritually the peasant lad Valmiki from South India, in whom she finds artistic talent and turning him into a "Western" artistic genius, and about the problem of the East and the West. The major theme in *Possession* is the influence of art on life. The scene of the novel shifts from India to England and America and again back to India. In Markandaya's novels six themes are prominent. They are Hunger and Degradation, East-West Encounter, Fatalism, Rootlessness, Politics and Human Relationships. Though these themes have been dealt with by a number of Indian English Novelists, Kamala Markandaya provided variety and vividness to these themes. In her novels, these themes are in the life in villages, cities, husband-wife relations, social conflicts and lure for modernism. H. M. Williams considers that "This novel is one of the most forceful artistic explorations of the distortion of India's national character in the British embrace and of her consequent urge to be free."<sup>1</sup> In *Possession*, the theme of **Hunger and Degradation**, deal with the tale of a father who sells his son to Caroline for five thousand rupees. Caroline did not pay for the boy but she means to compensate Valmiki's father for the loss of his services. She says: "Tell him I'll compensate him for his son," said Caroline. "Say a couple of thousand rupees. Five thousand." (18). The man has got seven children. So extreme poverty leads him, to take this shameful step. Anasuya explains Caroline's dissession to Valmiki's parents. Valmiki's mother does not want to send his son with Caroline. But she rightly remarks about her husband thus: "He has already decided," She said bitterly. "Did you not hear him? It was the money-it was too much for him. But it is always so, men are even free and easy with that for which they have neither suffered nor laboured." (20). Caroline has won in taking possession of Valmiki full view of his family. Markandaya adapts a novel method of showing the tension between the **East and the West**. Markandaya is born and brought up in India, though she settles finally in England after her marriage. Hence in her novels she presents the East-West conflict, tension and culture as a first – hand experience. She brings English men to India who are looked with curiosity and contempt by the Indians. Caroline is her tool. Kamala Markandaya wants to emphasize the fact the British rulers exploited the innocence of the Indians and tried to possess them both physically and mentally, but ultimately they failed and had to quit India. Caroline took Valmiki to England and tries to exploit his talent of painting for selfish gains. But she cannot exploit him fully. Though Valmiki's life is totally changed in the West he could not forget the cave and the Swamy. In order to possess Valmiki completely, Caroline adopts the mean way of forging letters in the name of the Swamy to urge Valmiki to start painting again and to expose his paintings to the outside world. But she wants to expose herself to the outside world along with Valmiki and Valmiki is unable to accept this. His sensitivity to the word "Crevice" uttered by Caroline to Anasuya makes his ego more. When Anasuya explains the meaning of the word to him, he reacts sharply.

"No. I not crawl out like lice. ... She not find me in crevice she beg me. I come. She not like. I go back to Swamy. To Swamy not hole in stone like belly-lizard. You go tell her that." (54)

Caroline possesses Valmiki like the British subjugated India. Caroline tells Anasuya about Valmiki.

"Teething troubles and homesickness he's over them both now. I think that i can recognise the symptoms if they occur again." "And deal with them." (69)

While talking to Anasuya she describes her own relations with Valmiki as the 'Classic ailment'. "That England and India never did understand one another." (77). Kamala Markandaya conveys that the relations between England and India are strained because of the spiritual and the political reasons. Caroline tells Anasuya that 'India is full of cruelty'. "Caroline could say atrocious things, and things that sounded atrocious." (69) In a cocktail party in London Anasuya is impressed to see the

changed conditions in Valmiki. His English was good, the accent cultivated. Caroline had clearly made him work at it. ...Uldilute East had always been too much for the West. And soulful East always came lop – dog fashion to the West mutely asking to be not too little and not too much, but just right.(109-110). Through these observations of Anasuya, Kamala Markandaya expresses the view that the East should adapt the good qualities of the West, but should not allow the West to overpower his soul. Valmiki is totally immersed in the Western culture, but with the arrival of the Swamy in London, he is reminded of the Indian spiritual values. Valmiki's attraction towards Western culture ends suddenly when he comes to know that Caroline writes forged letters in the name of the Swamy and she is also responsible for removing Ellie from his life. Ellie is a girl of twenty working as a housekeeper in Caroline's house. Valmiki has an eye foe Ellie. When Valmiki decides to leave Caroline, she feels hurt and injured feelings are reflected in her letter to Anasuya: Do you want me to terribly British and congratulate the winner? I can't, because it wasn't all you're doing. Whatever you may think, i handed you quite as much as you took. But the game was worth playing. (220-221). Recognizing the talent of Kamala Markandaya in depicting the East – West theme, R.M. Varma rightly points out: It would be seen that Kamala Markandaya in portraying the conflict between the East and the West is all comprehensive and all-embracing and ranks atop amongst Indian novelists writing in English.<sup>2</sup> The theme of **Fatalism** has been aptly treated by Kamala Markandaya. In possession she points out the tendency of the Indians to believe in the fate and accept everything as the gift of the almighty. This gives them mental strength. Possession depicts, the Indians, who consider the Swamies as the representatives of God. Here in this novel, When Caroline decides to take Valmiki with her, he, seekd the permission of the Swamy and the gods in the cave before leaving. The Swamy is the main link in the chain of sequences in the novel. He is a wise old man. Valmiki is related to the Swamy until he is discovered by Caroline. Valmiki has a blind faith in the Swamy and so even after reaching London, Valmiki is not able to forget the Swamy because he is the source of inspiration for him. He tells Caroline: "He was like father and mother and friend."(51) many poor Indians seeks happiness and faith through these Swamies. When Anasuya goes to Valmiki's village once, she meets a cripple who informs her about the Swamy thus: When he was here, there was peace and order...he used to keep them in order...he even tended us as good as any doctor. When he went, we would have gone too.(179). But to Anasuya the Swamy is not a parish priest, a missionary, a revivalist concerned with keeping tabs on human being to plot his spiritual progress. When Caroline comes to India in the hope of 'possessing' Valmiki once again, she meets the Swamy, but she fails. The Swamy's calm tone, his absolute assurance, must have lacerated Caroline. She accuses the Swamy of exploiting Valmiki. Caroline comes from a breed that never admitted defeat. So she does not accept her defeat and tells the Swamy about Valmiki: He has tasted other satisfactions – satisfactions that i have given and ehich he knows i can give. One day he will crave them again and then...(232). Valmiki's decision to stay with Swamy is the victory of the Swamy and is a failure to Caroline and also for the Western feminism. "Caroline was not even his mother, to achieve a kind of patience."(56) She simply engages him with love affairs "what she called her nymphean needs."(57) It is the victory of the spirituality over materialistic comforts. K.R. Chandrasekaran rightly remarks: The struggle between the Swamy and Caroline for the controland custody of Valmiki truly becomes symbolic of the struggle between the Indian spiritual values and Western materialism for the art or even the soul of India.<sup>3</sup> Beacuse of this faith in the swamy, Valmiki is able to defeat the evil doings of Caroline to "possess" him. The theme of **politics** reveals Markandaya's firsthand knowledge of India's freedom struggle. Caroline's 'possession' of Valmiki shows the Britishers' attempt to 'possess' India. The spiritual values take the shape of political conflict in the struggle of freedom. Only because of this spiritual faith that Valmiki has on the Swamy, he is prevented from Caroline, and because of this spiritual faith that the Britishers' are removed from India. The theme of **Rootlessness** is presented in a different way. **Possession** shows rootlessness resulting from the selfish motives of caroline to exploit an innocent child. Valmiki, a young boy is taken to England by Caroline. Thus he is uprooted from his soil. One who is uprooted from his own soil may not be happy in the new circumstances. Likewise Valmiki is not free in England like he was in his own land. The theme of **Human Relationship** is in the form of exploitation of the poor by the rich, and the west exploit the talent of the East selfish gains. As Valmiki is the protagonist in this novel, his relationship with all the other characters in the novel is presented in a quite different manner. Valmiki's relationship with the Swamy is very important. He is related to the Swamy until he is discovered by Caroline. Possession creaes a very powerful impact due to the bold themes presented in a bold manner. It is because of this Kamala NMarkandaya occupies a prominent plae in the Indian English Fiction with writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. NArayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Raja Rao. Stephen Hemingway rightly observes: Markandaya is definitely one of the most productive, popular, and skilled Indo – Anglian Novelists and a superb representative of the growing number of Indian Women writing serious literature in English.<sup>4</sup> It is obvious that all the six themes of Kamala Markandaya get strength through forceful characters and catchy incidents. All the incidents are real. Markandaya has successfully presented almost all the important aspects and the varied colours of human life. I Possession she has succeeded in exploring the complexities of human relationships in all its depth.

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