

Kamala Markandaya's Art of Characterization in *Possession*

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The subject-matter of all fiction is human experience. Characters, therefore, occupy an important place in a novel because it is through them-their personalities, thought processes, emotional complexities and their actions that human experience is expressed. In contrast to drama where primary importance is given to plot and characters are considered secondary, the essentials of a novel are, to quote Duffin, "first, character, second, character and third, character." (Duffin, p.78) Kamla Markandaya, a leading Indo-Anglian novelist, seems to have been fully aware of this act and has provided a rich gallery of portraits in her novels. Her sense of involvement in Indian social life, her keen observation, critical acumen and feminine sensibility have helped her in delineating characters from various shades of life: the western and Indian, the rich and the poor, urban and rural. Beginning with poor peasants, Markandaya has gone on to portray princes and Maharajas. In between she has covered characters from almost every class: sophisticated families of westernized Indians, ultra-modern men and women, orthodox grannies, swamis, beggars, artists, peasants prostitutes, government officers and patriots. The present paper attempts to discuss the characters in Markandaya's *Possession*. My intention here is to discuss the characters in this novel individually, but not quite independently of others. For a novel is one complete whole and, as Richard Curle says, to "discuss them one by one is to miss the point and do injustice to a work of creative arts." (Curle, p.13) So, an effort has been

made to discuss principal aspects of Markandaya's characters in *Possession*, taking into consideration the whole situation of the plot, and the interaction of characters on each other.

No one who has read *A Silence of Desire* and *Possession* can doubt Markandaya's faith in genuine holy men. Both of these novels are based on the spiritual aspect of Indian society and deal with the world of spiritual guides who radiate an aura of ancient mystique and drive followers in large numbers in their search for peace in this restless age. While the Swami in *Possession* fails to win much admiration from the reader, Swami in *A Silence of Desire* is one of the best portrayals (Parmeshwaran, pp 97) Meenakshi Mukherjee calls the Swami of *Possession* "Vague and shadowy" - though compared with his prototype in *A Silence of Desire* he has more to say for himself and possesses a greater solidity. Looked at objectively, Valmiki's guide seems a humanized character, neither idealized nor satirised. He is not as detached as he wants to be, and acknowledges that he has to learn lessons from the world. He is a modern swami who is as much at home in a cave as in a hotel. When Anasuya meets him in a hotel, where he is surrounded by women, and tells about Valmiki's life in London, he says that everyone, including himself, makes mistakes. He says, "---what else should I be doing among you ladies here but sitting at your feet learning my lesson." (p.101). The Swami is a foil to Caroline - who represents the possessive aspect of West, whereas he himself is all spirit. He is the only person in the whole novel whom Caroline cannot boss over.

He is loaded with money which he does not touch and goes back. He is known for his detachment. If he had said that Valmiki would not go with Caroline, he too would have been possessive like Caroline Bell, which he is not.

If the Swami represents the spiritual, Valmiki depicts the soul of art. Through the character of Valmiki, an illiterate peasant boy with a gift of painting, Markandaya makes it clear that it is not the technique but heart and soul of the artist that matters. The novel depicts the development of Valmiki, generally referred to as Val, from a village goatherd to a mature artist.

From his very childhood, Val is different from other children and is understood neither by his parents nor his fellow villagers. This is what his mother thinks of him: "he has brought us nothing but shame and sorrow." (Markandaya P.19) Turned out of the house because of his artistic intentions, he is forced to live among goats under a hill. His art still flourishes and is recognized first by the Swami and then by Caroline a rich British woman, who takes him to London.

It is through Val that Markandaya presents her favourite theme of cultural clash between the east and west. As part of Caroline's glossy world, Val quickly fades into a pleasure-loving idler. Although he is devoted to the Swami, he falls a prey to the material world of England for some time and soon degenerates into a Bohemian. To quote S.C.Horrex, "Possession is a drama of de-humanisation in which the central character, the artist Valmiki, is not only culturally and psychologically conditioned by the West, but also possessed by it." (p.248) Under Caroline's intimate patronage Val achieves success in the Western senses of the word, that is, in terms of money, exhibitions and the resultant public acclaim. But in the process, he not only loses his own humanity but also kills,

under Caroline's over bearing possessiveness, the soul of his art. It is by his own moral and spiritual consciousness as well as by the influence of the Swami, who welcomes him back into the service of God, that Val is ultimately redeemed. The Swami, austere, enigmatic and enlightened as he is, guides the destiny of Val from the beginning to the end, first by recognizing his artistic genius and later by directing it in the service of God. That is why there still remains in Val the vestige of an honest identity even beneath the facade of Caroline's cultural imperialism. Val never loses the need for India's spirituality without which he cannot paint in the way he must. The Indian sun often makes him "think of the terrible power there was up there ...you always ended up thinking of God" (p.155). Val's art languishes in London and only the letters supposedly written by his spiritual guide, the Swami, bring about a rapid discovery. Dillusioned and disappointed in London, Val at last comes back to India where the swami has been waiting for his return in confident expectation. Once he comes back to the Swami, he loses all attraction for the material possessions, a transformation which is symbolized by his action of discarding and putting into the dark cave the ruby ring given to him by Jumbo, the sovereigns left for him by his mother and all the uncashed cheques sent by Caroline., Thus Val, attains, towards the end of the novel, the Swami's philosophy of ascetic detachment.

From the barbarously materialistic civilization of London to the "wilderness" of his own, Val has a promising development both in thought and art. Out of confrontation between Caroline's material and Swami's spiritual world, the new world born is the "new Valmiki, strong and independent, a world where freedom is in harmony with belonging." (Jain p.248) In his journey towards adulthood Val gains mental and

artistic balance. He no longer loses temper and replies calmly and serenely even to Caroline. When he resumes his painting back at home, religion once again becomes his theme. There is an important difference between his new art and earlier art. After the fever of sensual escapades in the apparently civilized world, Val is now able to offer his own self and his art of God. Though his pictures are half-buried in an inaccessible cave, they give rich satisfaction to the beholder. Anasuya, the narrator of the novel also finds "a quality of compassion and profundity in his divine images, that had never been apparent before" (p.231).

The main flaw in the delineation of Val's character has been that "he is not seen adequately from the inside." (Horrex p.259-260) There is hardly any psychological conflict in Val's mind when he is caught between the material and spiritual values. Edwin Thumboo feels that characters in 'Possession' "are either not developed fully or lack inner consistency, or both." (Thumboo p129) This is largely true of Markandaya's portrayal of Val, for no depth is given to his character and the novelist does not probe deep into the inner recesses of his heart. But no doubt, Markandaya is successful in presenting through Val the real nature of art and the spiritual superiority of India over the materialistic west.

If Val represents the art of India, Western materialism is represented by Caroline. Beautiful, wilful, rich, divorced, extremely confident, and born and brought up to be so – she is the heroine of the novel. Through her character, Markandaya portrays England as trying to possess the soul of India and to patronize her art even after the granting of independence and it becomes abundantly clear when Caroline virtually snatches Val, the artist, from his parents. No doubt, she has genuine respect for Val's art yet she also desires to wear

him like a necklace of diamond round her neck for show. Through her character Markandaya reveals the folly and futility of average human desire for possession. Through her character Markandaya shows that whatever we try to possess is taken away and that it is giving and not taking, losing not possessing – that paves the way to real sense of fulfillment. Caroline makes Val lose Ellie and Annabel only in order to possess him and in the process herself loses him. It is only for her possessive nature that Val hates her and tells her frankly that he has left her not for her greed, meanness, avarice and cruelty but for her desire to "own me."

Caroline also stands for the Western materialism which does not care for the essential basic human values. Even an illiterate and innocent boy like Val realizes that Caroline cannot go beyond the material achievements and values and that she assesses human relationships in terms of money. She tries to evaluate even the tie between the Swami and Val in terms of money, inquiring how the Swami had helped him: "Buying you things? In that way?".

Western ruthlessness and wilfulness have also been displayed through her character. She does exactly what she wants without caring for other's feelings and wishes, and makes others do what she wants from them. Unlike the Swami, who makes no claims at all on human beings, she does not allow any freedom of choice to the people under her care. Within minutes of seeking Val's crude paints and fine paintings, she decides to make him a successful artist. Nothing can stop her and she buys him from his parents without caring for the feelings of Val. Later on, when Val grows into a handsome young man, she seduces him into an incestuous carnal alignment, over stepping the bonds of matri-archal patronage. Hence from the beginning till end, she has been acting according

to the dictates of self-willedness, without caring for the desires and happiness of others.

Caroline's role, thus, is quite obvious in her selfish intrusion into, and sensual exploitation of the artistic Val. With her "arty eccentricities of irrepressible sensuality", (Rao, P. 61) she comes as a hindrance to the progress of Val and kills the artist in him. Val's dying potentialities get rekindled only from his own people, poor but humane, and also from the Swami's world which leads him to maturity showing the right path. Hence through Caroline's failure of keeping Val with herself, Markandaya reveals the hollowness of western civilization which is bound to be defeated by Eastern spirituality.

Characterisation of Caroline, however, is not without its faults. The intimate knowledge of character provided by the third person is absent here and one finds lack of depth and complexity after the skilful portrayals in *A Silence of desire*. Nevertheless, the novelist is largely successful in her aim of presenting through Caroline's character Western Culture, Western attitude towards East, Indo-British relationship and above all the spiritual superiority of East over west.

As regards the minor characters, Jumbo and Mrs. Peabody are perhaps the least cardboard-like and the most satisfactorily portrayed. Jumbo with his snobbish complaints about the **nouveau riche** in the clubs, and about riff-raff foreigners who do not conform to his British-oriented dress regulations, is a comic portrait of a deposed prince existing comfortably on a much slimmer purse than he used to have: a prince who will hobnob with Val in London, but finds him an embarrassment in India. The connection of Jumbo with the story is very limited. He visits England only once where he meets Val like an ordinary man. But the barriers come back again when Val goes to meet him in India.

Ellie's character is twisted by the malicious results of possessiveness. In her are fused several shades of tragedy. She has no parents, no passport, no state- she belongs nowhere. She is one of the army of refugees England absorbed after war.

She sums up the endless questing tragedy of the Diaspora. There seems to be no suffering physical and mental that Ellie has not known. Her hand has been "deliberately ground into uselessness under a Nazi Jack boot" (p.73). She is filled with the terrible knowledge of the wanton evil of a concentration camp. Even the pet monkey's wail, the clink of its chain, reduces her by the association of sound to a quivering cowering wreck. Ellie cannot imagine a world where the crippled and the sick are accepted, so she tries to hide her disability. She is the symbol of all "the tight and terrible locked-in tragedy" of the Jews; and in the larger context of innocent suffering humanity under the heel of the possessor. That possession by the Nazis gives way to possession by Caroline is at first her salvation, for Caroline rehabilitates her. She has a brief interval of happiness when Val begins to draw her pictures. Pictures of Ellie representing female pathos are done in nude - and soon Val is established as an artist. But one thing which Caroline has not taken into consideration is that the artist who draws these pictures in nude is a man with his own emotions. Understandably both of them fall in love and Ellie conceives a child also. But when Ellie becomes a rival she has to be removed by Caroline. Her destitution means little to Caroline. For, Val was possessed and wanted; but Ellie was possessed and unwanted. The Nazis did not drive her to suicide; Caroline and Val together do. Her suffering is called "that other Cavalry, the lonely crucifixion, the stifled cries, neatly packed into one printed paragraph ..." (p.213)

Still another woman who comes in Val's life is Annabel who "was distantly related to Caroline in the way that old families in most parts of the world are inter-related" (p.188). She shared great many ancestors with Caroline, a good many great aunts and uncles and remote cousins. When Caroline realized that Val had not been seeing young people of his own age, she organized a party to boost Anasuya's book and invited Annabel also who shared an elegant flat with two other girls in the next square to Caroline. Annabel was a painter also both Annabel and Val came close together because they were of the same age. Actually both of them are attracted to each other so much that they begin to live separately from Caroline and this is which Lady Caroline Bell cannot tolerate. Caroline again tries to possess him in a Machiavellian way by telling Annabel at another party that Ellie had been Val's obsession before Annabel. Ellie killed herself because she had conceived Val's child in her womb. And as expected by Caroline, Annabel left there and then because she had not been told anything about Ellie earlier. The Character of Annabel is superficially drawn. However, this time Val asserts himself and does not go back to Caroline. His feeling of guilt turns him to East where people are not mean.

Mrs. Peabody's cockney rhymes and straight-laced relations to the goings on around are satisfactorily managed. She is a very humorous character. When Anasuya wants to re-appropriate the portrait of herself from Caroline's house, it is this domestic who helps her, indulging on the side in a sweeping generalization that effectively disposes of Val and his art. She brings the wrong painting down and when Anasuya asks her, "Does that look like in any way like me?," she answers, "How should I know? If you ask as none of these here paintings look like what they are supposed to be" (p-216).

A discussion of characterisation in *Possession* will be incomplete without a reference to the film-scribe, Anasuya, the narrator of the novel. In fact we are made to look at all the characters through her spectacles, which of course are coloured at times. Anasuya is biased in the sense that her remarks about Caroline are negative whereas she is all praise for the Indian Swami. From the beginning the narrator tells us what to think, so that we are influenced to consider the characters as representatives of nations and national characteristics, rather than as complex individuals. That is, from an understanding of the theme, which is constantly stressed, we have to move on to intimacy with character and this intimacy never materializes; all we are offered is acquaintance.

Anasuya is a link connecting Val, Caroline and the Swamy. She belongs to Caroline's class, but to Val and the Swamy's country and feels the pull of both England and India when she is away from either. She speaks of "poor old India, staggering along behind everyone else..." at another time she criticizes the English social race. No doubt, her commuting between continents provides her with opportunities for comparison and contrast, but is rooted in restlessness, an inability to settle down, which is an outcome of a strong Western Orientation. Like Kamala Markandaya she is fully aware of the Chasm that separates the continents; and like Valmiki she is "between two worlds."

From this discussion we may conclude that Markandaya's art of characterisation is fairly traditional and she is not always successful in portraying the psychology of her characters. Nevertheless, she deals with her characters as individual human beings or as Indians, and is not interested in their caste or regional characteristics. Unlike R.K.Narayan's, her characters hail from different places & classes, and represent Indian life in general. In the words

of K.R.Chandrasekharan, “ it may be said confidently that the India of Kamla Markandaya is a united India with a culture and soul of her own.”(p.320)

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