

Men and Women in Kamala Markandaya's *Possession*

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Abstract

The story of men and women in Kamala Markandaya's great novel *Possession* (1963) is very instructive and informative. In the novel, the novelist deals with human relationships and related complex problems. She also describes the disposition of some people to use physically and psychologically, the poor and the innocent for their selfish gain. In the novel, the main characters are: Valmiki, Swamy, Caroline, and Anasuya. Valmiki is a poor Indian lad but he is a talented painter. Caroline, an English lady tries to make use of Valmiki and his art for her benefit. She takes him to London. Valmiki becomes a popular painter and enjoys name and fame in London. After some time, Valmiki feels that he is kept at a distance by Britishers. With the help of Swamy, Valmiki's mentor, Valmiki comes back to India. Caroline is shown as a representative of the western society, which exploits the talent of the poor. About Anasuya, she is a friend of Caroline. She tells the story, as a reporter, from the point of view of India. She is a bridge between the Eastern and Western World. As for Swamy, he is a wise advisor to Valmiki. He never tries to possess Valmiki. On the other hand, he guides Valmiki in the right direction. As to Ellie, she is a twenty year old Jewish girl. She works in the house of Caroline. As Valmiki falls in love with Ellie, she is driven out by Caroline. After return from America, Valmiki lives with Annabel an artist. Caroline informs Annabel about Ellie's affair with Valmiki. As a result, the link between Annabel and Valmiki is broken. Valmiki finds himself estranged from his traditional roots. He returns to India and leads his life with satisfaction and without craving for popularity. In the words of Penn, "Avoid popularity; it has many snares, and no real benefit". (Mubarak Sing (ed.), 207)

Keywords: *possession, valmiki, caroline, exploitation, culture*

Introduction

All '*Possession*' is slavery, or a perilous precariousness. What we try to possess is taken away, sooner or later: Val loses Ellie, Annabel, and even Minou, the monkey; and Caroline loses Val. It is giving, not taking, it is losing – not possessing – that paves the way to fulfilment.

- K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (443)

The more a man possess over and above what he uses, the more careworn becomes.

- George Bernard Shaw (Mubarak Singh, ed., 207)

The men and women in Kamala Markandaya's fourth novel *Possession* include among others Valmiki, Swamy, Caroline and Anasuya. Through these characters, the novelist depicts the feelings of alienation and rootlessness. She exposes material comforts and sensuous living. She shows the virtues of both the East and the West. She

emphasises the importance of culture and tradition. All men and women have their own role as participants in the action of the novel. A discussion, in detail, on these men and women follows.

Discussion

Valmiki, a poor boy, aged fourteen years is the protagonist in the novel. He lives with his parents in a South Indian Village. He is a great painter. Lady Caroline Bell is a British lady. Anasuya, the narrator of the story, first meets Caroline at a party in Madras:

I FIRST MET Caroline Bell at a party in Madras given by an old friend of mine, an ex-ruler of one of the smaller states of India who now cheerfully eked out his existence on parties and a pension of seventy-five thousand rupees a year. (*Possession* 1984:1)

Caroline wants the arak in an Indian Village. She expresses this desire to Anasuya. Anasuya observes Caroline and describes Caroline in this way:

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. (3).

Caroline is very much impressed by Valmiki's paintings. She discovers in Valmiki an extraordinary genius. She purchases him for five thousand rupees from his parents and takes him to London. She exploits him to enrich herself and to satisfy her desires. Valmiki feels lonely and an outsider in London. He thinks that he is uprooted from his spiritual and cultural heritage. He is unable to face the furious attack and dominance of Britishers on him. He finds that he is transplanted into the aliens environment. Consequently, his artistic talent starts fading.

While that is so, Valmiki loves a girl named Ellie. She is a refugee. She works in the house of Caroline. Ellie becomes pregnant and she is sent out by Caroline. Valmiki does not know about Ellie's expulsion. In the meantime, Swamy comes to London to take Valmiki to India and thus free him from the influence of Caroline. But Valmiki goes on a tour to America. After his return from America, Valmiki happens to see Annabel, an artist, and lives with her in a garret. Caroline reveals Ellie's affair with Valmiki to Annabel. In this way, Caroline breaks the link between Annabel and Valmiki. However, Swamy helps Valmiki to return to India. Valmiki "is at peace and satisfied" (*Possession* 232)

About Swamy, he is a mentor to Valmiki. He never tries to possess Valmiki. On the other hand, he shows the correct way to Valmiki.

Regarding Anasuya, she knows much about Indian culture and tradition. Further, she is a product of two cultures – the Eastern and the Western. She is eager about search for identity. At the same time, she encounters the motives of Caroline. In her opinion, Caroline is a confident person from the beginning of her life and brought up in that way. In short, Anasuya tries to connect the East and the West.

Opinions of Writers

(i) As regards Caroline, Markandaya, Ellie, Annabel and Valmiki, R. Sathya Priya observes:

In the character of Lady Caroline Bell, Markandaya has transformed the suppressed woman into a domineering and tyrannical possessor and an active victimizer of an adolescent male. She is independent of and even dominating over other men as well. If Caroline possesses Valmiki by money and strength, Anasuya does the same by her kindness and sympathetic understanding and Ellie and Annabel by their youthful charms. (R. Sathya Priya 515)

(ii) About Anasuya, Caroline, Valmiki colonialism and neocolonialism, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar is of the opinion:

Anasuya (or Kamala Markandaya) is trying to make the story of Caroline and Valmiki something of a parable of colonialism, the passing of an empire, and the current insidious movement of 'neo-colonialism'. (*Indian Writing in English* 444 – 445)

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya in her novel *Possession* tries to present the image of cultural domination over Indians. The theme of exploitation of the poor and the talented artists is made known. Caroline is the symbol of western culture. Valmiki represents the poor and the talented artists in India. It is made clear that India gives more importance to customs and traditions than money and luxury. **What is needed today is:** (1) to remember Indian culture and tradition, (2) to follow Indian Way of life and (3) to give due importance to the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn about the desire to have more things and still a better life:

The constant desire to have more things and a still better life, and the struggle to this end imprints many Western faces with worry and even depression, though it is customary to carefully conceal such feelings. (Speech in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 8 June 1978)

References

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