

Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire and Possession* (Exploring Psychological Dimensions of Spirituality)

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya belonged to that pioneering group of Indian women writers who made their mark not just through their subject matter, but also through their fluid, polished fictional technique. The works of Kamala Markandaya reflect the modern, traditional and spiritual values of the Indian societies. Her characters represent these values in a very subtle manner. The psychological conflict in Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire* takes its roots in the basic opposition between Sarojini's unreasoned belief in the healing faculty of the Swamy and Dandekar's rational belief to disapprove it whereas in *Possession* Vals journey through negative freedom and an escape from responsibility to the self-realization reveals his psychic problems. The present paper is an attempt to explore the psychological dimensions of spirituality in Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire*. and *Possession*.

Key words: Spirituality, psychology, faith, possession, karman

Undoubtedly, Kamala Markandaya is one of the most distinguished and prolific Indo-
Anglican novelists. She was born in 1924 in a small village in Mysore (India). She was a
graduate in History from University of Madras. From 1940-47, she worked as a
journalist and during the Second World War, she worked for the Indian army and later
on returned to journalism. On May 16, 2004, she died in London due to kidney failure.
She attained fame and world wide recognition for her masterpiece novel *Nectar in a
Sieve* published in 1954. It became a bestseller and named a notable book of 1955 by the
American Library association. She also achieved distinction by winning Asian Prize for
her literary contribution and achievement in 1974. Her novels are very remarkable for
the true representation of Indian life and its vivid experiences. Her first novel *Nectar in a
Sieve* (1955) depicts the tale of the trials and tribulations of a peasant couple. *Some Inner
Fury* (1957) represents straining of human relationship at the backdrop of Quit India
Movement (1942). *A Silence of Desire* (1960) reveals the conflicts between faith and
rationalism. *Possession* (1963) boldly highlights the confrontation between Indian
spiritual values and Western materialistic world. *A Handful of Rice* (1966) and *Two
Virgins* (1973) examine how the modernism brought in by the Western culture and how
it influences and inspires the protagonists to raise their voice against the native
environment. *The Coffey Dames* (1969) unfolds the activities of a British engineering
firm which is invited to construct a dam in India. *The Nowhere Man* (1972) explores the
predicament of Indian immigrants in England. *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) represents
a chronicle of three generations of the princely family of Devpur. *Pleasure City* (1982)
was her last novel. It describes the confrontations and negotiations that get underway

when a multinational organization decides to construct a tourist resort next to a deserted South Indian fishing village.

India is an amalgam of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the sexual; the ideal and the earthly. The concept of spirituality is the most remarkable feature of Indian religion and culture. It considers “spirituality” above other worldly possessions. Spiritual experience is the foundation stone of Indian religion and culture. Spirituality is therefore an essential factor in everyone's life in India.

Kamala Markandaya's novels basically deal with post-colonial themes in modern India. She is known for her writing about cultural clash between Indian urban and rural societies. She learned traditional culture and values by heart. This fact is clearly reflected through her wide range and rich variety of setting, characters and theme.

A Silence of Desire deals with the life journey of a middle class family. But things worsen for this family when head of the family, Dandekar loses respect for his wife, Sarojini after finding a photograph of a strange man, who he takes as Sarojini's paramour.

On the contrary, Sarojini ailing from a tumor seeks faith cure from the strange man “Swamy”, sometimes at the white washed house and sometimes in his village retreat. His wife's strange absences, excuses and lies turned him into a wild and distorted personality. At the end of the story, it is noted that in the face of opposition and disbelief, Swamy leaves everyone and Sarojini undergoes a successful operation, accepts the separation from her spiritual guide and Dandekar is left as a bewildered person with a corroding sense of guilt.

The psychological crisis intrinsic in an opposition between spiritual faith and rational belief affects the relationship between the human beings. The enormity of the war that Dandekar is fighting dawns on him only when he approaches to the Swamy. It is a whole spiritual force that becomes his rival. Dandekar is actually feared with the loss of Sarojini's companionship, and when she begins giving both time and money to the Swamy, he becomes almost insane due to fretfulness.

Dandekar visits the Swamy to win Sarojini back. When he is with the Swamy, his “sense of identity begins to slip”. «He knew who he was –I am Dandekar, he said to himself but the words had no reality» (*A Silence of Desire*: 80). At this stage, Dandekar faces an identity crisis. When his “psychic” needs are not fulfilled, Dandekar transforms into a dispossessed and deformed personality. Dandekar's identity as a rational being deems to dissolve in the face of Sarojini's resistance and superstitious gullibility. «His exposure to western thinking has rendered him particularly unsuitable to uncritically participate in the world of Sarojini» (Rajeshwar, 2002). He realizes that he could never be whole when a part of her is missing. The Swamy and the ugly dwarf by their remarks, lead Dandekar on this ultimate “realization”.

Dandekar experiences that one can not force another even if it were one's wife. «He realizes that the Swamy ‘functions not as an individual who lives his own life, but as a public figure-a fulfillment of certain needs in society» (Sanyal, 1984). He swiftly attains a high level maturity. He is highly affected by the world of the Swamy which is contrary to his, “world of reality”. With the Swamy, he begins to experience his smallness and shallowness. «When you were with the Swamy, actually there nothing material or physical, mattered. You saw them for the worthless trumperies that they were, rose above your body, knew for a while the meaning of peace» (*A Silence of Desire*: 89)

Dandekar surrenders all the petty pleasures that he has indulged in, returns home directly from office and gives ample time to his children. He realizes his responsibilities and household duties as he values the sense of security that he has once taken for

granted. Though, Dandekar involves in irresponsible behaviour for some span of time but finally returns to the family when he attains understanding. It strikes him most when he sees the miserable plight of his daughter, Ramabai in the biggest need of her mother, Sarojini. The “new mental understanding” that creeps in Dandekar after his severe illness is an indication to develop a better relationship with Sarojini. He experiences the value of others and can now accept the different side of life including the orthodox and the modern.

The Swamy can read the thoughts of others are left open for discussion. But in any case the effect of the Swamy on Dandekar's psyche is unmistakable. His misgivings return; he would gladly lose himself in the assembly. On the other hand the Swamy's tranquility infects him. «He had no time to waste, that the ferry stopped working at mid-day» (*A Silence of Desire*: 123)

Healing by faith is most common in countries like India where people are superstitious and have unflinching faith in the capabilities of the Swamy. Sarojini seeks faith cure from the “Swamy”. Her husband belongs to that class of society, which does not know that there are some inexplicable things which lie beyond man's logical realm. «Sarojini may have been cured in the hospital but continuous to remain her faith in the Swamy's healing power. Dandekar may have laughed at the Swamy but could not help being influenced by him. Thus, the novelist presents a world where science has its own place but only coexistent with human faith» (Mahajan, 1983). Sarojini's cousin sister, Rajan who belongs to uneducated and superstitious class of society also expresses her complete faith in the Swamy's power to cure diseases. The transformation of the person living an intense inner life, especially the radical change in personality and will, leads spontaneously to the development of a sensitivity to the needs of others. This pattern of behaviour is found in every valid expression of the spiritual life and is one of the infallible signs of its genuineness. These enduring fruits of enlightened awareness unfold in the spiritual journey of any spiritual figure like the Swamy in the story.

However, Dandekar is not ready to put Sarojini in the hands of a faith healer. Both Sarojini and Rajan belong to that class of society which has so much faith in Swamy for curing all kinds of diseases. The spiritual thoughts of the Swamy affect the society as well as Sarojini's duties at home. The Swamy teaches the society the lessons of freedom, freedom from all bonds and philosophy of acceptance and non-attachment with worldly objects. However, Sarojini unconsciously desires a freedom from her domestic responsibilities and forgets all her duties to the children and the husband. She even surrenders her will to the Swamy and becomes indifferent to the society. At the end, she returns to her duties at home. She exhibits the ultimate attitude to tradition and social beliefs. Hindu culture allows the woman the necessary freedom to be truly herself in a religious, heroic or aesthetic realm as it gives her necessary protection. Thus, Swamy's lessons have wider significance for seekers of the faith. «Markandaya is keenly and astutely aware of the moral, psychological and human problems which tend to arise out of the dialectical relationship between man and society in India. She also depicts in her fiction the dilemmas inherent in the interaction between Western quest for scientific rationalism and Indian traditional spiritualism» (Joseph, 2004).

The Swamy also exhibits his compassion for the lower class of society. He believes in charity. Donations taken by the Swamy should not lead one to infer that he is a swindler; instead he uses them for the welfare of the poor and the destitute. The Swamy receives so as to dispense both material and spiritual welfare, catering especially to those rejected by the society. It is due to the presence of spiritual elements in his character which force him to do such noble deeds. This point is also strengthened by the dwarf; he found

refuge with the Swamy. Dandekar had not realized this generally beneficial side of the Swamy's presence in the society. It is a social benefit that is practical and indisputable: «I did not realize and surrenders 95-rupee note» (*A Silence of Desire*: 158). The Swamy is carrying an age old Indian culture of true spirituality which says that to serve poor, is just as praying God.

Therefore, had Dandekar to fight against a man, it would have been easier and better for him to overcome the enemy. But he has to wean away his wife from her firmly grounded faith; his mission becomes all the more complex and tortuous. Infact, Dandekar rests for “reality” rather for “suggestiveness” or idealism, and in keeping with his mood he demands all the valuables of his family from the dwarf saying «I wanted these things and I fought for them because they meant a great deal to me – that is a fragment of the truth. But I fought also for other things – my wife, myself, my children, and these are the other fragments of which even you must be aware» (*A Silence of Desire*: 224).

The novel delineates that Dandekar is more concerned with the survival of his own family. He has grown from strength to strength and attained new heights. It shows a big change in his psyche. Thus, it is noted that Dandekar's rebellion is merely a withdrawal from a reality which breaks his peace of mind.

A Silence of Desire is built around issues relating to tradition and change, faith and skepticism attached to a modern, mainly Western derived attitude. Dandekar's expectations of what life is and ought to be are revised by the experience he undergoes in the novel. He is to a degree westernized. But there are values, beliefs and attitudes, especially in matters of faith which are immemorial and which refuse to be cast aside in the process of change Sarojini's faith, for instance. The theme is introduced as a domestic problem but develops into a consideration of how faith and the acting out of that faith are met. The action it generates provides the central images of the changes occurring in the society (Thumbo, 1984).

Kamala Markandaya's *Possession* appears to be a sequel of *A Silence of Desire*. It is a story of a young fourteen year old Indian boy Valmiki alias Val, a talented folk painter who requires patronage and financial assistance. A young divorcee Caroline Bell takes him to London where his talents mature and grow. In return, she exploits Val physically and mentally and offers him all the comforts and luxury. Val starts feeling that his craftsmanship is being wasted. Meanwhile, Caroline shows him a fake letter from the Swamy, the spiritual guide of Val. After seeing the letter, Val regains his potentials to resume his painting. Val develops intimate relationship with Ellie, his housekeeper. Caroline brings a separation between them. Val tries to live with Annabell but Caroline poisons his mind again. Finally, Anasuya, the liberated Indian woman saves him from the materialistic and sexual clutches of the Western world and arranges Val's return journey to India. Val returns to Swamy, his spiritual mentor and decides never to return to the world of Caroline who possessed his soul for a long time.

Val's journey through negative freedom and an escape from responsibility to the self-realization reveals his psychic problems. «*Possession* represents the perpetual conflict between the Indian spiritualism and the western materialism, the former winning over the latter» (Misra, 2001). At the initial stages, Val is not even capable to think for himself. He surrenders his personality to Caroline who forcibly possesses him and deprives him of the power to ponder on himself. Val makes his escape from the village environment and imagines that Caroline would offer him a better life. Hearing that the English woman was going to sponsor him, «he went over Caroline, who had been watching us intently all this time, took her hand and gently, briefly laid his cheek, against it the way a dog will sometimes thrust its muzzle into your palm» (*Possession*:

12). Then, he goes to England and is almost turned into a sophisticated fop whose artistic genius gets wrapped in the company of his sponsor and patron. The abrupt taste of luxury and attention moves Val's head and he indulges in it as a medium of escape from his own self. Val, after leaving the spiritual aura of the Swamy, becomes culturally and psychologically conditioned by the west. In this process his spirit and artistic inspiration gets wrapped all of a sudden. His inspiration is tarnished in the artificiality of London.

There are some sound reasons behind Val's failure in the materialistic world of London. First of all, the domination of Caroline wanted to possess him completely. Secondly, Val finds that he has a moral license which he would not have cherished in the spiritual world of the Swamy. Finally, he relinquishes his duties in relation to Ellie and their child because it is much easy for him to be indifferent and selfish rather than fulfill his commitment to her and Annabel desolates him. «"You ran away", she said again with a kind of cold vengeance. You got her into trouble and you got out quick before the whiff of suicide could offend your nostrils and curl up those holy eastern sentiments of your about the sanctity of life» (*Possession*: 207).

Thus, Val imagines as freedom is merely a form of escapism. Even Val does not have the mature mental make-up to face life with full understanding of the nature of freedom. He uses his liberties to indulge in a pleasure-loving life. The English woman, Caroline offers him all the material facilities but Val's work is almost at a dead end. Though, Val's make his escape from Caroline on his own will, Val indulges in pleasure-loving idleness. Thus, without the maturity to comprehend himself, he can not function effectively.

Val's escape into the materialistic London community results from a loss of identity by his being thrown into an alien culture with different value systems; it suggests not only an inevitable culture-shock but also the end of security which he unconsciously seeks. His psychic crisis is such that subordination to Caroline would offer him the materialistic wealth, while a return to the Swamy's spiritual world means emptiness though he is yet to realize that the emptiness is only material, that there is an abundance wealth of spiritual power with the Swamy.

Val is salvaged from Caroline's diabolism partly through the intervention of Suya, and finally through the force of the Swamy who has escorted him the path of a deep-rooted spiritual heritage.

Val's return to the Swamy's fold, therefore, is not the complete failure of the East against the materialism of the West, but it is a breakdown of the western famine psyche. Caroline in her challenge to the Swamy that she will come back to hold Valmiki. She is very optimistic and confident to get back Val because she believes in the appealing force of the temptations contaminating Val's psyche.

The concept of spirituality in the *Possession* unfolds the Indian sense of peace and tranquility in the society and culture. Therefore, the crippling western impact upon Val does not last long; it cracks up in the face of the Swamy's spiritual aura. When Caroline reminds, Val of the awful "wilderness" of India, Val remarks «no crime – the wilderness is mine, it is no longer terrible as it used to be: it is nothing» (*Possession*: 220). The Swamy supports this with his reply: «Even this wasteland may have something to show, other than what you have seen» (*Possession*: 220). «In *Possession*, Caroline's possession of Val symbolizes Britishers' attempt to "possess" India. The British do their best to exploit the people, but the strong spiritual values keep the spirit de corps of the Indian very high and finally they hit coup de maitre to remove the Britishers from India» (Arora, 2006). When Val transferred back to the Indian ground, he slowly learns his responsibility to the supernatural power and thereby to his own artistic self, not to his decadent one. Thus, Val grows to a better maturity when he realizes that sacrifice and

suffering can also bring happiness and contentment. The character of Val represents the truth that a life of license is not exactly the one suited for fulfillment of artistic visions. He attains the mental maturity to face his situation in complete freedom where freedom is the maturity to understand oneself and the life around. Mental maturity is prerequisite for freedom. The Swamy's spiritual world leads Val to this vision without the force of compulsion.

Thus, it is revealed that in *A Silence of Desire*, the presence of Swamy as a spiritual figure seems to have such a spellbinding influence on Dandekar's psyche that far from his wealthy possession back, he gives charity from his own pocket. In reality, having won his wife back from the clutches of the Swamy, Dandekar does not give much importance to the materialistic objects. His mind too has attained, to some extent, the abiding spiritual faith where worldly things appear to be of less or no significance. Dandekar may have laughed at the Swamy but could not help being influenced by him. On the other hand, Val's psyche mirrors the growth of his realization as it enables him to resolve the complex dilemma of personal and artistic freedom and responsibility and finally Val returns to the traditional values of spirituality and duty which alone offer him a true meaning of freedom and self-identity.

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