

## **CULTURAL ESTRANGEMENT IN THE NOVEL OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S 'POSSESSION'**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This Research paper is an attempt to examine the cultural estrangement in the novel of Kamala Markandaya's 'Possession' The novel 'Possession' deals with the theme of loneliness and alienation which are forms of estrangement. It is the story of Valmiki, the great oriental artist whose art stifles in an alien country. He is unable to adjust himself in a foreign country, though he gains recognition, he loses his spontaneity. A rich aristocratic English woman, Lady Caroline Bell discovers a talent for painting in the south-Indian boy, Valmiki. She takes him to England to re-make him in her image of the great Indian artists. Valmiki becomes the artist, Lady Bell intends but at the expense of nearly destroying his soul. He feels culturally estranged in the alien land and finds only waste and death in personal relationship to recover his true self he has to break with Lady Bell and come back to India. This paper is concerned to make an intensive study of the culturally estranged protagonist-Valmiki who positions himself in search of identity.*

**Keywords:** Estrangement, Cultural Rootlessness, Identity, Exile, Isolatio

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kamala Markandaya is the top most Indian Women novelist among the contemporary writers in English. She is the only accomplished novelist in terms of her handling of a foreign medium and her authentic presentation of the isolation and alienation which are forms of estrangement. Kamala Markandaya is essentially a cultural writer who does not treat the concept of estrangement at the psychological or at the philosophical level. She treats this concept at the cultural level with a total vision of human life and her novels deal with the cultural alienation. Estrangement as a concept is widely prevalent only in America and European countries where people, in spite of their riches, became victims of alienation. They mostly suffer from psychological and philosophical alienation. But Kamala Markandaya's protagonists seem to suffer cultural estrangement in the beginning and in the end and they also suffer from individual alienation. Kamala Markandaya's 'Possession' is concerned with culturally alienated person Valmiki who feels estranged when he positions himself in search of an identity.

## **Estrangement- A Trait of Modern Society**

Estrangement is a trait of the modern society. The development of technology, the growth of communication, the impersonal nature of public policies, the changing family and human bonds besides connections have left the man vulnerable. The various social, political, and economic conditions of the contemporary man have led to confusion, frustration, meaningless and total estrangement. The present man is in such a hopeless and helpless condition that he cannot be the master of his own destiny and the present forces are beyond his control to maintain them. The theme of exile, immigration and alienation is common in the twentieth century literary scene. Lost, lonely, drifting characters parade before us and their mechanical march point to the absence of meaningful relationships in the era of technological development and global interaction. Political, cultural, social, economical and geographical dislocations have made each man an exile. Cultural alienation has become a universal phenomenon.

## **Cultural Immigration- Historical phenomenon**

Immigration is a phenomenon as old as the history of civilization. The Book of Genesis tells the story of alienation and exile. Adam and Eve were alienated from the grace of God and banished from their home, the Garden of Eden, to labour by the sweat of their brows, Eves since exile; exodus and migration have been the fate of man. The motivation behind modern migration may vary from political or religious persecution to economic problems. Whatever be the reason, the impact of cultural dislocation on the individual psyche remains complex. It is not merely a physical journey from one land to another but it involves severing of spiritual and symbiotic ties with his mother country'. Post-colonial India has witnessed the migration of many Indian to the lucrative abundance of the West. It can be as an escape from the economic and communal chaos prevalent in India.

## **Estrangement - Common Motif of Contemporary Literature**

Contemporary literature dealing with the emotional problems of the modern man reflects the injuries, frustrations and the identity crisis that an uprooted individual undergoes. A good number of Indian writers have dealt with the experience of the exile. Santha Rama Rau's Remember the House, Arun Joshi's The Foreigner, Kamala Markandaya's The Nowhere Man and Raja Rao's The Serpent and The Rope deal with the tension ensuing from cultural and geographical displacement. Anita Desai, an expert in delineating the lacerated psyche portrays the ontological insecurity, alienation and anguish of uprooted individuals in Bye-Bye Blackbird and Baumgartner's Bombay. The problems consequent on alienation, immigration or expatriation can be best understood in the light of the two related yet contradictory terms 'exile' and 'home'. 'Home' is not merely the habitual abode; it is where one belongs to, that which gives him cultural and spiritual identity. It is his native soil, his mother country, his security which becomes part of his self. 'Exile' is enforced or regretted absence from one's country or home. It is "literally an uprooting and often as withering in its effect on the mind and spirit which is deprived the sustenance it has drawn from native soil". To an exile, home becomes everything he had lost: nationality, identity, culture. Estrangement reinforces the meaning of home more acutely than ever on the exile.

**Cultural Estrangement in 'Possession'**

In 'Possession', Kamala Markandaya depicts the intercultural tension and conflict between the materialistically possessive West and the spiritually non-possessive East and between the secular and divine sources of art. With remarkable penetration and convincingness the novelist attempts "to concretize the invincibility of the spiritual power of the East confronted with the glamour of the materialistic society of the West". The novel also present "the plight of the artist, Valmiki who, enticed into the glittering world of alien values, experiences the resulting conflict between the licentious freedom and responsible liberalism in a baffling novelty of atmosphere. The novel dramatizes the search for true identity of Valmiki, nature's own gift to the world of art in the traditional South India." Valmiki, a born artist, is a "permanent outsider". He feels alienated as much in his native village as in the urbane London. He is a poor, neglected lad, a simpleton, not able to learn "even the simple skills their living required". His art has no relevance for his poor family. The members of his family simply reject him.

When Lady Caroline Bell, a rich aristocratic English woman, comes into contact with Val the latter "is young and no shell has formed to protect him as yet". She discovers in this illiterate goatherd an extraordinary artistic genius. She realizes that he needs freedom to broaden his artistic talent and to give vent to his artistic expressions in an atmosphere conducive to growth. As an assertive English woman she adopts him forcibly and tries to possess him in order to exploit his artistic genius for commercial purpose. No doubt, Caroline gives him freedom at the beginning and saves him with her money from want, from utter poverty and from the need to back scratch. But she deliberately restrains his spontaneous activity. Besides Caroline's physical and psychological domination, Valmiki's artistic growth is curtailed by other factors also. After taking him to England Caroline, arrogant and insolent by nature, tries to possess him physically, psychologically, culturally and spiritually too. Since he has been uprooted from his spiritual and cultural heritage to face the onslaught of an alien, dominant white race he obviously suffers from a sense of rootlessness. He feels terribly homesick and finds that he is transplanted into the alien milieu where he receives acclaim as a painter.

The arrogant and insolent attitude of Caroline is not helpful to reanimate him. He feels 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 complaints 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 awareness is much worse than being a neglected goatherd. Although Valmiki was living in a squalid condition in his village before his departure to England, he found adequate compensation in the spiritual company of the Swamy and in the latent and the throbbing affection of his mother. But in London, being uprooted from his native soil, feeling rootless, this sensitive artist "experiences emotional isolation and is over-powered by alienation".

The period which Valmiki spends in Europe is considered a glorious period materialistically. It is almost "tempestuous period of worldly glory-money, power, repute, sex and travel". Leading a bohemian life, Valmiki enjoys life to the maximum with recklessness and adopts the mercenary values of the "gilt-edged society" which alienate him further from his roots. That he is often estranged from his traditional roots is often remarked by Anasuya, the

narrator. Under the powerful influence of Western culture he becomes promiscuous. He makes love first to Ellie, then to Caroline and later to Caroline and Annabel by turns. But his love relationship with Ellie is different from his affairs with Caroline and Annabel : Val and Ellie are waifs seeking comfort and companionship in each other. But with the other two, he is a mere pleasure seeker. These years can be considered a period of alienated activity in which he loses touch with the core of himself. His attitude towards life now becomes out and out disoriented. H. M. Williams comments: "Valmiki becomes an artist Lady Bell intends but at the expense of nearly destroying his soul. He finds only waste and death in personal relationship and to recover his true self has to break with Lady Bell and return to India". Though critics tend to consider the novel an allegory of Great Britain's attempt to subdue India, it is certainly an individual's struggle to find his spiritual identity in an alien environment.

The glorious materialistic life led by Valmiki in London can be described as the "having mode of existence", to borrow the terminology used by Eric Fromm to define a life which solely rests on money, power and status in contrast to the "being mode" which is marked by "aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world" requiring one to relinquish one's egotistical attitude and selfishness. Despite the hectic period of remarkable success, Valmiki happens to be lonely and an outsider. Since his life lacks perceptiveness and a pattern, his art, even at the height of his aesthetic glory, reveals a lack of discipline which his art critics censure. As he feels rootless and detaches himself from spiritual and cultural roots and heritage his paintings lack divine and spiritual glow. After his rift with Caroline which deflates his self-esteem Valmiki undergoes a tremendous psychological crisis. Like an exile in an alien culture Valmiki feels rootless and develops into a twisted personality. K. R. Rao's opinion of Ramaswamy is applicable, in a way to an exile like Valmiki in *Possession*.

The amiable memories of the past as well as the painful realization of his own isolation, both in time and space weigh on his soul oppressively. He cries out in a mood of seemingly total vacancy and dejection. There is nobody to go to now: no home, no temple, no climate, and no age. His agonizing sense of alienation and non-belonging reduces him to the predicament of a mere nobody in the wide phenomenal world. He becomes a prey to uncertainty and anxiety, and the traumatic memories of the past hang heavily over his mind. Valmiki is agitated not by the wicked nature of Caroline, nor by Annabel's malicious attitude, but by his own self-castigation. During this miserable stage his selfless love for pet animals are created in their right and man should not exploit them. Although self-reproof could have led him to self-reprobaton and self-hate which would have automatically resulted in self-destructive actions, his self-awareness and love of honesty and integration help him overcome the bitter crisis.

Valmiki's mother agrees to leave her son for a few rupees and for a better life of her son; whereas Caroline is not prepared to leave Valmiki in the hands of either Ellie or Annabel because she desires to him. The way she takes Valmiki away from his parents, no one even predict that Caroline would use him as her man. Caroline's special contribution to Valmiki's life lies in the fact that she harnesses his crude talent, changes his rustic manners and makes him gentleman acceptable to the fashionable society of London. She tames Valmiki as he has domesticated Minou, a monkey. He dances like a monkey to Caroline's tune. Caroline always craves to dominate over a young man absolutely-culturally, physically, morally and

economically. The nature of Caroline, at a large extent, is possessive. Margaret P. Joseph rightly points out: “While Caroline succeeds in the first three-making Valmiki a well-known artist, becoming his mistress, teaching him her materialistic values- she fails in the last, for in every crisis he turns to his mentor the Swamy”. Caroline has redefined his manners and made systematic his artistic knowledge and talent, but she fails to overpower or tame his peculiar Indian sentiments. She only helps him to change his external life and manners, his dress and behavior, his deportment but not his inner life and his emotional needs. Valmiki wants to remain a true artist with a free and frank heart, which cannot be subdued by a foreign agent. Valmiki’s Indian temperaments make him a misfit in Caroline’s household as her sexual partner and both get estranged from each other.

Valmiki’s condition is akin to that of the monkey, Minou, which he carries with him-cut off from its kind, deprived of its natural habitation and freedom. In spite of his westernization, Valmiki is not completely cut off from his roots and sense of identity. Metaphorically, the death of the monkey portends the end of his showiness 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 spiritual roots. In London he was an emotional wreck. There he faced difficulties, experienced life at different levels, gained worldly knowledge. Finally, he comes back to his native village as a man of self-realization. And once a man has achieved self-knowledge and self-awareness he no longer oscillates between becoming and being. Back in the spiritual world of the Swamy he regains his self. He finds the wilderness of the caves loving because here his spring of inspiration is perpetually resuscitating. Valmiki has no rancor and malice against anyone, “he is at peace and satisfied”.

## CONCLUSION

It brings to light the inherent conflict between the two different value systems of the East and the West. Kamala Markandaya seems to follow the dictum of Kipling’s famous line of “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet”. She feels that the cultural chasm is so wide that there is almost no meeting point between the two. Hence, Markandaya underscores the cultural hiatus repeatedly in the novel: “Undiluted East had always been too much for the West; and soulful East always came lap-dog fashion to the West, mutely asking to be not too little and not too much, but just right”. This novel ‘Possession’ may be described as an allegory of the direction, independent India has to take on its onward march to progress. The story of Valmiki and Caroline Bell suggests that India has to draw sustenance from life-giving springs of its own culture. Valmiki is a rustic Indian artist; he is a symbol of the raw Independent India for the possession of whose soul, Caroline Bell, symbolizing the Western civilization, make an all-out effort. Alienated from the spiritual roots of the country, Valmiki’s artistic talents wither and smother. His final return to the Swami is suggestive of the reality that while a brief contact with the Western culture is useful, finally India’s fulfillment lies in its own nourishing spiritual power. The adaption of the alien culture has been proved very difficult. Kamala Markandaya has succeeded showing the immigrant sensibility in ‘Possession’ through the character Valmiki who positions himself in search of identity when he is estranged in foreign land.

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