

# A Psychoanalytic Interpretation Of The Women In Kamala Markandaya's Novel 'Possession'

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**Abstract:** Kamala Markandaya is an internationally recognized Indian English novelist whose writings vividly depict the condition of Indian women trapped within patriarchal structures. Her narratives highlight how these women, confined by oppressive social norms, are often silenced to the point that their resistance goes unnoticed. A close examination of her works shows her deep insight into the human mind; she studies human emotions with remarkable precision and penetrates even the most concealed layers of thought. She stands out among Indian English writers for her bold and unconventional advocacy of women's sexuality and bodily autonomy. Markandaya demonstrates a heightened awareness of gendered morality and the social systems that uphold it. She is one of the few Indian female writers who dared to portray the discrimination faced by women in a predominantly patriarchal society, while envisioning a world of equality and harmony between men and women. Her sensitive portrayal of women—married or single—who feel confined within relationships reveals her perceptiveness and emotional depth. Her novel *Possession* explores multiple facets of the human psyche, especially that of women. The reading of the novel feels like a therapeutic journey in which characters gradually reveal their inner selves, particularly Valmiki, the central figure around whom the other characters revolve. Their complex emotional exchanges enrich the narrative and take the reader on a psychological ride. This paper attempts to delve into the deeper layers of *Possession*, interpreting it through a psychoanalytic lens.

**Keywords**— Patriarchy, resistance, sexuality, entrapped, therapeutic.

**Introduction:** Kamala Markandaya needs no introduction to readers of English literature. She is widely regarded as a distinguished Indian novelist with a significant contribution to the post-Independence Indo-Anglian literary tradition. A detailed study of her works shows her mastery in understanding the human mind; she explores it minutely and brings to the surface thoughts that are often unspoken or unexpected. She is an influential writer who steadfastly defends a woman's right to her own body and sexuality in unconventional, subversive ways. Markandaya's writings reveal her keen awareness of the gendered foundations of social and moral codes. She is among the small group of Indian women writers who courageously depict the injustices faced by women in a patriarchal society and imagine a world of balance and equality. She vividly examines the struggles of women trapped within relationships, addressing their dilemmas with acute sensitivity.

Stephen Ignatius Hemingway aptly describes her: "She is definitely one of the most productive, popular and skilled Indo-Anglican activists and an excellent representative of modern Indian women writing serious literature in English."<sup>1</sup> (The Novels of India, p.52)

This paper is an earnest attempt to interpret *Possession* from a psychoanalytic perspective, focusing particularly on the women who affect the protagonist's journey, and the way Markandaya paints them across the canvas of the novel.

The term psychoanalysis refers to a set of theories and therapeutic practices stemming from the work of Sigmund Freud. At its core lies the belief that all individuals carry unconscious thoughts, emotions, desires, and memories. Freud, an Austrian neurologist, contributed significantly to the understanding of the unconscious mind, applying scientific methods to explore its unknown depths. The unconscious is a storehouse of hidden feelings and memories that continue to shape behaviour without our awareness. It is often compared to an iceberg, where the visible part represents the conscious mind and the submerged part symbolizes the unconscious. Psychoanalytic criticism developed in the wake of Romantic literature, which emphasized exploring inner human experiences, instincts, and sexuality. David Daiches remarks "characters in literature can be more meaningfully understood in the light of modern psychological theories, especially when their behaviour aligns with known intricacies of the human mind." (Critical Approaches to Literature, p.337)

**Description:** Markandaya's *Possession* primarily deals with complex human relationships, political elements, and East–West cultural interactions. The clash between cultures becomes a significant source of psychological conflict within the novel. Through the central character Valmiki, the novelist depicts the transition of a tribal mind into a Westernized consciousness. Valmiki, a gifted young painter from a remote village, is discovered by Caroline Bell, an Englishwoman well versed in art. Fascinated by his natural talent, she decides to take him to England to mould him according to Western artistic traditions. Although her efforts initially succeed, she fails to understand that Valmiki cannot effortlessly adapt to Western culture, which differs fundamentally from his spiritual and cultural background. His devotion to Swami and his artistic inspiration are deeply rooted in his native ethos.

Caroline Bell is portrayed as a representative of materialistic Western society, adept at exploiting the poor for her benefit. She acquires Valmiki from his parents—tempting his father with money—and takes him to England, not only to gain financially from his talent but also to satisfy her physical desires. Valmiki's mother, though aware of the wrongness of this decision, is unable to oppose her husband due to traditional expectations, similar to Kunti in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Once in England, Valmiki undergoes drastic psychological changes. While he performs well in the beginning, he slowly becomes disillusioned with Caroline's intentions. Markandaya depicts how Western culture can exploit the vulnerable, both physically and psychologically. Valmiki experiences periods of anxiety, depression, and internal conflict. Eventually, he breaks free and returns to India, symbolizing psychological liberation and India's reclaiming of identity after colonial rule.

Caroline is portrayed as a possessive and manipulative woman who wants complete control over Valmiki. She seduces him despite their age difference, but fails to own him. Swami, his spiritual guide, acts as a father figure, restoring in him the values he was losing. The contrast between Caroline's materialism and Swami's spirituality forms one of the novel's central conflicts. Anasuya, one of the significant female characters, serves as the narrator. True to her name, she is free of jealousy and observes events with clarity. As an Indian, she provides a culturally grounded perspective and offers insights into both Caroline's motivations and Valmiki's emotions. Iyenger suggests that through Anasuya's narration, Markandaya

symbolically presents colonialism and the shift toward neo-colonial relations" (Indian Writing in English, p.211).

Ellie, another notable character, is a young Jewish woman traumatized by Nazi brutality. Her tragic experiences have left her emotionally numb, yet she forms a genuine bond with Valmiki. Her suffering evokes deep psychological responses and highlights Markandaya's skill in portraying female neurosis. Although physically weakened, Ellie carries Valmiki's child and reflects the theme of silent endurance.

Caroline, threatened by Ellie, expels her out of jealousy and manipulates the situation to isolate Valmiki. She later interferes in his relationship with Annabel, a free-spirited young English girl, ultimately causing its collapse. When Valmiki discovers Caroline's deceit, he leaves England for good, choosing a peaceful life in his homeland.

The novel presents four women—Caroline, Ellie, Anasuya, and Annabel—each representing different psychological dimensions. Their interactions with Valmiki uncover themes of emotional vulnerability, insecurity, desire, and the longing for belonging. Markandaya highlights women not only as symbols of growth and fertility but also as figures burdened with suppression, neurotic fears, and emotional turmoil.

Kamala Markandaya's *Possession* provides fertile ground for psychoanalytic analysis, especially in its depiction of women whose longings, fears, and emotional tensions contribute significantly to the novel's psychological richness. Viewed through a psychoanalytic perspective, the female characters appear not simply as figures shaped by social, cultural, and colonial influences, but as intricate personalities grappling with unconscious impulses, repression, possessiveness, and the quest for selfhood. Their psychological struggles reveal the ongoing conflict between instinct and ethics, desire and restraint, affection and dominance.

Caroline Bell, the novel's principal female character, clearly illustrates the theme of possession in both a literal and psychological sense. Her strong attachment to Valmiki extends beyond artistic support and reveals an obsessive urge to control him, rooted in deep-seated insecurity and a fear of abandonment. From a Freudian standpoint, her actions reflect the hidden workings of the id, disguised by the ego's justifications. Her polished manners and intellectual confidence operate as defense strategies—especially repression and projection—allowing her to conceal her emotional fragility. Her ambition to mold Valmiki into a renowned artist can be understood as a form of sublimation; however, beneath this cultivated exterior lies a powerful possessive drive that exposes unresolved inner conflicts.

By contrast, the women from Valmiki's homeland symbolize emotional sincerity and natural balance. They appear less burdened by repression and less motivated by obsessive ambition. In psychoanalytic terms, they represent a more unified relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind, indicating a psychological wholeness that Caroline fails to achieve. This difference underscores the mental and emotional strain caused by cultural dislocation and Western individualism, which frequently lead to feelings of isolation and estrangement.

Furthermore, the female characters reflect the larger theme of identity as a complex psychological process. Their interactions are influenced by unconscious desires—such as the need for authority, fear of rejection, and the craving for affirmation—which shape their behavior more deeply than deliberate choice. The idea of "possession" therefore functions not only as a social symbol but also as a psychological reality: the need to control another person arises from unresolved feelings of emptiness and dependence. Their emotional journeys show how suppressed childhood desires and hidden impulses re-emerge in adult relationships, affecting patterns of attachment and authority.

**Conclusion:** Possession underscores the shift from domination to self-realization, illustrating a woman's transition from being possessed to reclaiming her individuality. The novel unfolds like a seesaw, allowing readers to alternately rise above and plunge deep into the psychological currents that shape the story. A psychoanalytic reading demonstrates that Markandaya presents women as multifaceted individuals rather than simplistic representations of good or evil. They are portrayed as complex personalities entangled in the dynamics of love, power, and insecurity. Through their experiences, the novel explores the delicate line between care and control, admiration and domination. Their internal struggles reflect the universal human pursuit of completeness and self-understanding, while also revealing the harmful effects of excessive desire and emotional possessiveness. Thus, Possession stands not only as a critique of society but also as a profound psychological exploration of the feminine mind, characterized by depth, sensitivity, and the persistent search for independence.

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