

*Writing Across Cultures:
Sexual/Racial "Othering" in
Kamala Markandaya's "Possession"*

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EXponents of Kamala Markandaya's fiction who see *Possession* primarily in terms of East-West conflict tend to analyze the East and West and the colonizer and colonized as absolute, homogeneous concepts. Meenakshi Mukherjee claims that the struggle in the novel "is simple, almost predictable; between possession and renunciation, between wealth and fame on the one hand and freedom and obscurity on the other. [Markandaya] weakens the impact of the novel by making the contrasts too clear-cut, a solid black and white, cast in the now threadbare pattern of the spiritual East encountering materialistic West" (106). Uma Parameswaran's analysis of the novel emphasizes the Anasuya-Caroline relationship as emblematic of the Indo-British world: Caroline represents Britain and Anasuya India (241). Such readings not only smother the anxiety of racial and sexual otherness in the novel but allow the imperialist self to maintain, in Edward Said's words, "a flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (7).

Possession is actually marked by a double-voiced discourse: the dual vision that Markandaya brings to her fiction is not just that of the dispossessed but also of the dispossessor. As Bharati Mukherjee explains: "From childhood we learned how to be two things simultaneously; to be the dispossessed as well as the dispossessor. . . . History forced us to see ourselves as both the 'we' and the 'other,' and our language reflected our simultaneity" (29). No one exemplifies better the tragic precariousness of being both the "we" and the "other," the dispossessed and the dispossessor, than Valmiki in *Possession*. My study examines the

effects of unconscious desire and racial/sexual Othering in *Possession* by bringing into focus Valmiki's much-neglected relationships with his mother, Caroline, Anasuya, Ellie, and the Swami.

A Lacanian reading of *Possession* allows a richer understanding of a process that is too often understood by critics (Harrex, Mukherjee, Parameswaran) as a simple binary opposition—East/West, colonizer/colonized, white/brown, man/woman. *Possession*, in Lacanian terms, elaborates Valmiki's trauma, caught as he is at the edge of the abyss, between the mother's and his own conflicting desire; between an hysterical position in the real that resists symbolization and a compelling urge to identify with the symbolic father (Swami) and create his own identity beyond the mother's stifling desire; between the conflicting pulls of East and West. What happens when a male protagonist like Valmiki, denied easy access to language and the symbolic order, takes up a feminine position to become a non-man, a non-singularity in the patriarchal system? Serge Leclaire has described the hysteric as implicitly asking: "Am I a man or a woman?" (108). Valmiki asks the same question. If the neurotic structure reveals a person who does not know what she or he wants, as Stuart Schneiderman has asserted (3), Valmiki's problem is further complicated by his mother's ambiguous position vis-à-vis the phallus. The husband reduces Valmiki's mother to a human machine to produce babies and maintains closer ties with the "arak" (illicit liquor) than he does with his wife or son. What response is expected of Valmiki when the unconscious desire conveyed from the mother to the child is to be at one and the same time the substitute phallus replacing the denigrated father and the very agent that subverts the Name of the Father to recreate symbiotic *jouissance*?

For Lacan, analysis can proceed in a truthful direction only if the analyst recasts the question "What do you want?" as "What does the Other want of you?" The crucial question then is: What does the Other want of Valmiki? According to Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, the "repressed (m)Other functions as a bridge between primary and secondary repression and emits the 'message' that the Name-of-the-Father must be subverted were a mirror-stage symbiotic *jouissance* ever to be recreated. Desire may be seen as

the wish to reunite with the (m)Other beyond the father's name" (115-16).

Any study of the unconscious structures that condition Valmiki's identity and desire must necessarily begin with his mother and her position vis-à-vis the phallus. The mother is "doubly castrated" in not having a "phallus" (Ragland-Sullivan 297). The usual cultural interpretations of this difference between the sexes place the female sex on the side of the ineffable—fading and loss. Social injunctions urge women to identify with loss. Furthermore, as Shari Benstock explains, "[w]oman is not merely a social role imposed by the larger culture, 'she' is constructed as a (non)-category in language that signifies the fantasy of wholeness and guarantees (but also resists) the phallic order" (14). Valmiki's mother substitutes her husband as a phallic signifier in the real, but the unconscious desire communicated to her child at the imaginary level is to substitute the child for the loss. Valmiki then is asked to fulfill two desires: his mother's and his own. However, the two are intricately intertwined. His desire for the mother is thwarted not only by the third term—the phallus as a mark of difference—which says "no" to symbiotic union and *jouissance*, but also by the mother, whose own desire is frustrated by Valmiki's failure to gain status and power in the symbolic (public) domain.

A closer look at the Oedipal effect of the paternal metaphor offers us a better understanding of how Valmiki's subjectivity and hysteria are structured. Valmiki's father's failure to function as a paternal metaphor for his son is not simply the result of his selling Valmiki to Caroline Bell for five thousand rupees. More crucially, Valmiki's father strikes at the heart of his son's cause of desire—painting—by scoffing at, literally spitting on, the paintings that give meaning to Valmiki's life (63). Painting for Valmiki is the *objet à*, or fantasy object, that through representation allows him to maintain the delicate barrier that separates the real from reality. To Valmiki, "painting was a part of living—the deep and absorbing part that soothed him, gave him the kind of satisfaction that others so wildly sought . . . between urgent soliciting thighs" (163), a way to "keep a crazy balance in an earth that quivered and shifted, recording every move from isolate nobility

to pervading madness” (122). Put another way, Valmiki’s inordinate passion for painting becomes the medium that mirrors some sense of self and other in the imaginary and the symbolic orders, establishing the gap between signifier and signified, between the presence and the absence that constitute his divided self. This, for Lacan, is a way to eradicate the *rien*, the *nihil*, of the hole in the Other. It is quite literally an anchor to earth. By spitting on his work, Valmiki’s father tears down the barrier separating the real from reality and exposes Valmiki to *das Ding*, to being swallowed by the dark hole in the Other. What saves Valmiki from an otherwise inevitable descent into the abyss of psychosis is the Swami, who takes up the symbolic place the father abandons: “then one day I am alone, and there is Swami. He sees what I do, and he does not spit. After that,’ he concluded with satisfaction, ‘I am not alone’” (64).

Given Valmiki’s brittle family structure, lack of proper position in the symbolic order frustrates Valmiki’s attempts to constitute a stable ego in the imaginary and to take up his responsibility in the social order. The hysterical feminine position is for Valmiki a position consisting of a lack that refuses to be filled, and his feverish paintings sustain that lack while producing the illusion of identificatory oneness.

Our very first encounter with Valmiki in the text initiates the subversion of the Name of the Father. The reader and Anasuya are made to feast on an “agglomeration of colors.”

He was in rags, smelling a little of his goats. . . . Both of them were poring over the welter of color at their feet—saffron, vermilion and carmine, indigo, madder, ochre and cobalt—assembled in a strange and outlandish flotilla of containers: pots and pans and jars, broken saucers, seashells and coconut-shell halves. (11)

The mother’s repressed primordial desire is hooked on to these signifiers—“broken saucers,” “seashells,” “coconut-shell halves”—as matrices of meaning. This vibrant, throbbing signifying of colours returns in the form of “a monstrous vine, sprung from the realm of Jack’s bean-stalk, . . . leaves of violent green as large as platters, and the whole of it done in bold chalk” (18). The imaginary representation may allude to fertility and nurtur-

ance, but the repressed real trauma of separation from the mother reasserts itself in the metaphorical form of real symptoms. Valmiki's desire emits "messages," with their traces of unconscious truth, in an undeciphered and undecoded "text." The metaphorical substitutions like "monstrous vine" and "giant tendrils" are linked to the unconscious desire to reach out to the mother, to experience *jouissance* in the impossible symbiotic union with her by subverting the law.

Caroline and Anasuya, alternately, become surrogate mothers for the beleaguered boy. When the offer of taking Valmiki to England is made to his father, Valmiki's response after surmounting the barriers of language is one of immediate affection for Caroline: "He went over to 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" (15). Valmiki's desire for his mother, therefore, is displaced on to the other woman. The same painful call for affection, stemming, according to Lacan, from the primordial object of desire—recognition itself—accounts for Valmiki's substituting Anasuya for Caroline as he sets sail for England with the white woman: "To my surprise he took my hand and clung to it, and his mouth was suddenly unsteady" (43).

The transition from the biological mother to surrogates is far from simple for Valmiki. For Caroline, who also occupies an hysteric subject position, the question of her being manifests itself in her relationship with Valmiki. Is Caroline the surrogate mother or incestuous lover or both? Since identity is not natural or given but constructed in language, Caroline's shifting and uncertain subject positions ceaselessly frustrate any attempt to define the Caroline-Valmiki relationship. The slippages in Anasuya's narrative point up how easily Caroline slides from one relationship to another vis-à-vis Valmiki, none of them grounded:

The thought hammered at me again as I saw her white arm encircle him, . . . and I remembered this was just how she had held him long ago when he was a boy and she was establishing her claim to him as plainly as if flag in hand she were registering property rights. This stance once suggested, there were other reassuring props: the disparity in their ages, the differences of race, above all their long

association and close peculiar relationship which would bring an unpleasant whiff of incest to a carnal union between them.

(118; see also 140)

Perhaps Valmiki's ambivalent relationship with his mother, in which he becomes the mother's phallus only to be rejected equally by her, corresponds to the notably contrasting portraits in Valmiki's oil painting of Anasuya and Caroline. He portrays Anasuya with "lowering brows and brooding eyes and a somber mouth," with a note attached written by Caroline saying, "[t]his is what Val says you look like when you think about his future" (44-45). The picture is less a realistic representation of Anasuya than one that asks an imponderable question. The "brooding eyes" look beyond Anasuya to Valmiki's mother and, more importantly, to the Other, and ask: who am I/Valmiki to you both? In sharp contrast, the nude picture of Caroline, despite its being mediated through the narrator's eyes, provocatively depicts a sexual theme:

It was of a nude Caroline lying in a pleasurable swoon on a sandy beach in the sun. . . . pared flanks, long fine legs and slender thighs, the swan's elegance of her long white throat carried down the length of her body, only the aphrodisiac triangle of coarse gold fuzz interrupting, and emphasizing, the smooth satin of her skin. (199)

The portraits of Caroline and Anasuya, in different ways, fail to reproduce the prohibited mother-son bond that Valmiki unconsciously desires. They articulate, if anything, Valmiki's experience of a "fissure," in Slavoj Žižek's words, of an "irreducible gap" between the signifiers that represent the mother and the "non-symbolized surplus" of Valmiki's mother "being-there" (131). In other words, since there can be no representation without somewhere aphanisis, or fading, of the subject, Valmiki's mother cannot be reduced to the symbolic any more than the symbolic can be reduced to her being. The only way Valmiki can create that oneness is through his imaginary identification with his pet monkey, Minou. Play on the semantics of the monkey's name gives us the narcissistic bond between "me and you"—a recreation of the mired mirror-stage structure. Valmiki and Minou act out the reversible roles whereby each takes turns mothering the other, in need of shelter like helpless children. Valmiki nurses

the sick Minou "like an abandoned baby," much the same way as "[i]n the weeks since Annabel's going he had turned to Minou for comfort" (225).

The dialectical relationship between desire and law, in the case of Valmiki, is triggered by the Swami's taking up the position of the Name of the Father in the imaginary, symbolic orders, and Ellie's (the Jewish domestic in Caroline's household) occupying the painfully yet palpably hysterical position in the real. Caroline refuses to put Valmiki through school in England though she is required by law to do so. Valmiki's smooth entry into the symbolic order is thus thwarted (45), giving Caroline carte blanche to mold the boy selectively in reference to the Law of the Father to suit her vested interests. Because Valmiki has no language to symbolize his original "loss" of the mother, a loss that cannot be revoked, what we encounter is two years of complete creative freeze in the boy. Caroline's frantic efforts to break this creative lock by taking him to France, Italy, and Switzerland for a change of scenery are to no avail. All that Valmiki can muster during the two fallow years is one picture depicting the sterility and emptiness of a desert.

Valmiki paints again with a dizzying rage once he receives a letter he believes was sent by his Swami in India but was actually written by Caroline. Caroline shrewdly perceives that the Swami holds an ideal position in the imaginary order for Valmiki, and she fakes the letter with the cook's help to boost Valmiki's confidence. Lacan writes that, in reality, the symbolic is no-thing; the "primary signifier is pure non-sense" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 252). *Possession* exposes the symbolic as no-thing that revolves, in particular, around the issue of the counterfeit letters the cook writes at Caroline's behest. Even Caroline acknowledges that her words of encouragement have "no magic" as the Swami's do for Valmiki (56). On the Swami's visit to London, Valmiki, expressing his gratitude for the moral strength he had drawn from the letters, discovers to his chagrin how he had been deceived by Caroline and Anasuya. But the issue is not how well the "trick" worked or whether Valmiki would have remained, as Caroline asserts, "the dreary little zombie that [he] used to be" (156). At stake rather are the letters that cannot, even had they been

written by the Swami himself, encase the Swami's voice or person or message but become instead, in Lacan's phrasing, "the bearer of the infinitization of the value of the subject, not open to all meanings, but abolishing them all, which is different" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 252).

Unwilling to come to terms with the hole in the symbolic, the subject as castrated, as the Other, Valmiki in his fantasy conflates the Swami and the Other as representatives of truth and posits the Swami as a *sujet supposé savoir*, a subject presumed to know. The pattern of Valmiki's life is further disturbed by his lack of knowledge of Ellie's whereabouts since her dismissal by Caroline. Their eventual coming together is not just a fortuitous event; it is a form of response to the call of the "Other." The "doubling" of the two characters runs deeper than just surface similarities, just as Caroline and Anasuya, though hailing from the First and the Third Worlds respectively, share imperialistic tendencies. Both Valmiki and Ellie are in exile: Valmiki has been uprooted from his culture, society, and race to face the onslaughts of an alien, dominant white race; Ellie has "no parents, no state, no passport, no papers—none of those hollow stacking blocks on which the acceptable social being is built" (77). Valmiki's loveless childhood, scarred by the "full organized enormity of a hostile society" (34), parallels Ellie's horrendous, savage treatment at the concentration camp, which irreparably cripples her psyche and her body. "Lacan reminds us," writes Shari Benstock, that "there is nothing missing in the real" (9). For Ellie and Valmiki, the real as the lack of lack opens up the hole in the Other, thus filling them with anxiety and dread.

Locked in a "horrified contemplation of the diseased landscape Ellie's presence had revealed," Valmiki stops painting abruptly. He refuses to give up his *jouissance* as symptom. The metonymy of Valmiki's desire, hitherto articulated through his painting, is ruptured to map instead the immobilizing, repetitive, metaphoric structure of symptoms on the bodies of Valmiki and Ellie. Ellie's and Valmiki's mutually horrific histories feed on each other, precluding all possibility of a cathartic release through symbolization. For Lacan, the real is unsymbolized, but can be traced in language in bits and pieces. Shari Benstock

explains: "Against the Real's solid resistance to symbolization, the signifier repeats itself, knocking against the door of the Real, producing excess 'noise' to cover over its lack of knowledge. The production of signifying excess in an effort to make 'sense' is pleasurable" (18). Indeed, when Valmiki gives up the self-destructive *jouissance* as symptom for the *jouissance* of signification, he is able to paint prodigiously and symbolize the brutality of Ellie's experience, indelibly inscribed on her body. In Ellie's recounting to Anasuya of her excruciating experience in the concentration camp, it is the language of Ellie's body that speaks ever so poignantly: "They came for us every night. In the beginning I would ask them to kill me, but they only laughed . . . it made it worse" (123).

If Valmiki's paintings of Ellie reopen the wounds of her traumatic experience in the concentration camp, they also foreshadow the battered and emaciated body of Valmiki's mother as she lies dying of malaria later in the narrative (188-89). Ellie's face, described as "very much older" and "disintegrating," also suggests that of Valmiki's mother. The paintings thus reveal Valmiki's regression, which in Lacanian terms is the joining of the conscious and the unconscious systems. According to Lacan, regression must of necessity refer to the primordial mother in relation to whom oral and anal experiences, as well as visual and vocal effects, were first given meaning. So viewed, regression is always a reaction to an internalized Other relation set in motion by others (*Écrits* 44). Valmiki's reaction to the internalized mother is set in motion via "others" like Ellie. Anasuya draws on the striking resemblance between the two on what proves to be her last visit to Valmiki's dying mother: "Her gaunt face brought back Ellie to me, Ellie in all her tight and terrible locked-in tragedy; but there was no stain of horror here, rather a serenity, a surrender to forces that were not so much vindictive as inevitable" (188). Through his paintings, Valmiki at once embraces the dark-faced unconscious Other and displaces it through "object" relations. Here is the dual play, the double *écriture* behind Valmiki's paintings of Ellie: "In the stripped room, against a background of severe drapes and discreet lighting . . . was an anguished and anguishing portrait of Ellie; and flanking it six

splendid paintings of India lovingly remembered and scrupulously represented. . . ” (117).

The description of the paintings calls attention to its own stylistic devices. The curious co-presence of phrases like “striped room” and “severe drapes” evokes a representation that both starkly reveals and veils the truth. What is veiled is Valmiki’s mother’s “truth” behind Ellie’s apparent plight. Again the curious choice of words like “anguished and anguishing portrait of Ellie” sets in motion the intersubjective dialectic wherein Valmiki is very much trapped in the “anguishing” desire of the mother. The master stroke that hides and cleverly denies the unconscious “truth” comes from the “six splendid paintings” of India, “scrupulously represented,” that by their very topographical positioning as “flanks” buffer the shock of the Other. Paradoxically, the phrase “scrupulously represented” clearly shows not the adherence to conscious facts but the very insistence of unconscious truths in the conscious discourse of painting. Thus Valmiki finds in Ellie the perfect subject not only for his paintings but also for the release of his *jouissance*, which is a shrill cry from the real to the Other/mother, where the anticipated pleasure and death represent simultaneously exile and homecoming. The discourse of painting, once again “doubling,” vocalizes the untold, repressed, silent histories of Ellie and Valmiki, while drawing attention to their struggle to keep their *moi* (being) from being trapped in the desire of the Other.

The obverse of regression for Valmiki is repetition, another Lacanian joining of the conscious and unconscious systems. According to Shoshana Felman, the Lacanian repetition is not of independent terms or analogous themes but of a structure of differential interrelationships in which the Other always returns (139). The return of the Other in Valmiki’s paintings is in two different registers—in conscious and unconscious systems—and is fundamentally different in each register. It is curious to note, and yet indispensable to our argument, that Valmiki drew one picture each of Caroline and Anasuya, whereas Ellie constitutes the subject of the bulk of his paintings. For Valmiki, Ellie’s pictures fail to frame, fix, and encode her in any unitary identity. In sharp contrast, Caroline assumes that Valmiki’s and Ellie’s

identities are fixed and unchangeable and takes great pleasure in articulating their character traits. Valmiki says as much to Ellie:

Ellie, the people here who frighten you, who know so much—do they know what you know? . . . I tell you if I painted them as I have painted you it could all be said in one canvas and even so I would have to thin my paints—But your face! Twenty, thirty pictures and I still have not caught you. (131)

The triadic structure—the easel, Ellie, and Valmiki in the process of painting Ellie in the nude—sets up the intersubjective discourse, with each reinforcing the narcissism of the other. Although Ellie and Valmiki have had different torturous histories, the past invades the here and now and makes pain, alienation, and torture the source of narcissistic reflection and oneness.

The topography of the Other at the unconscious level gives an outlet to intrasubjective discourse, a term explained as follows by Ellie Ragland-Sullivan: "The intrasubjective element appears mysteriously to consciousness when a person experiences 'self' as an object of an-other's gaze—whether present or absent. . . . The other's look or words have connected with the repressed discourse linked to the Other's gaze" (95). Behind Ellie's looks and body there is the Other's gaze—Valmiki's mother's *regard*. The mother's gaze gets more complicated here because of her own ambiguous relations to the phallus. On the one hand, the mother urges Valmiki to subvert the Name of the Father to recreate imaginary *jouissance*. On the other hand, she coerces him to become the phallic signifier for her. When Valmiki says to Ellie that he had drawn "twenty, thirty pictures" of her and still has "not caught" her, the unconscious intrasubjective discourse points to the mother and to Valmiki's wish not only to free himself of her oppression but also to contain the mother within his own desire. But the symbolic, as indicated earlier, is no-thing; the Other is not omnipotent but the very hole in the symbolic. Valmiki's wish, therefore, is just as impossible as his desire to join with the primordial mother in *jouissance*. Neither Ellie as the other (with a lower case "o"), nor Valmiki's mother in her guise as the Other (with an upper case "O"), can ever be entirely caught

in the signifying chain, be it consciously or unconsciously created. Each fades into the untotaled universes of human quests.

As Lacan points out, “*The woman can only be written with *The* crossed through. There is no such thing as *The* woman, where the definite article stands for the universal” (*Feminine Sexuality* 144). That is, there is no primordial symbol for woman. Ellie as the *objet à* of Valmiki’s desire experiences *jouissance*, which is always in “excess,” something “left-over” after analysis and beyond the scope of language to comprehend or contain. Moreover, what Valmiki desires is not so much the “essence of Woman” but a sense of completeness to which Valmiki thinks Ellie holds the key. Valmiki gains his sense of self through Ellie as the “other” and places her in the imaginary dark face of his own unconscious being to regain a “semblance,” a sense of the being of the supposed mirror structure. Ellie is also a conduit to Valmiki’s mother. Having identified with the mother’s desire, one conditioned by “lack,” Valmiki sees a “lack” in himself and takes women as imaginary supplements to his imaginary lack in the substitution where, according to Otto Fenichel’s theory, “girl = Phallus” (qtd. in Sheridan 207). Valmiki moves from one woman to another—first Ellie, then Caroline, and finally Annabel—hoping in vain to “fill” the “lack” that constitutes his desire. More importantly, the primordial mother at the mirror stage, the structural base of the ego, becomes confused for Valmiki with woman; and women are consequently seen as secretly powerful. The mother within Valmiki, displaced onto other women, makes Valmiki put Ellie on a pedestal one moment and inflict mental cruelty on her the next. Ellie’s pregnancy fascinates Valmiki, and he claims “every single painting came out of that” (228). But he also in his own way drives her to commit suicide, although it is Caroline who is primarily responsible for that suicide.*

Experiencing his subjectivity as a void outside the realm of language, Valmiki simultaneously subverts the symbolic on the one hand and supports it on the other. An instance of this is one of the nude, full-length portraits that Valmiki draws of Ellie: the portrait reveals a pregnant Ellie (carrying Valmiki’s baby) transformed into art that foreshadows the suicide of Ellie and the unborn baby. Anasuya notes:

a nude, in oils, and it showed Ellie sitting in a chair, her face twisted away to show only a brief blurred profile, but the body naked and open and fully revealed. . . . There was a hint—a slight disproportion of belly to torso, a spreading and darkening of the areolae of the small flat breasts, which made me turn sharply. (122)

In Valmiki's "one-man show," most of Ellie's nude portraits are conspicuously absent. He withholds "most of the Ellie pictures, passionately declaring that he could not abide being parted from what was a slice of himself" (127). For Valmiki, art becomes life, as life becomes art. Paradoxically, Valmiki shores up the symbolic by staging Ellie in the field of representation—a "slice of himself"—only at the expense of being.

And yet the unconscious desire that resides in Valmiki's discourse of painting reveals an-other side to him—an hysterical side that must, in order to keep a lack a lack, ruthlessly subvert the symbolic. Valmiki's confession to Annabel goes beyond his persecuting self-reproach to the heart of the problem. Just as Valmiki's father kills a piece of Valmiki the moment he spits on his paintings, Valmiki too in turn replicates the degenerative family romance when he strikes at the core of the father-child covenant by his unconscious acquiescence to Ellie's suicide, by his transgression of the law. By not wanting to think about or know of Ellie's fate, Valmiki, through inaction, betrays the obligation to law. The symbolic and imaginary lace together in what Lacan calls *méconnaissance* when Valmiki strikes at the symbolic. As if shadow boxing, Valmiki punches through the empty place in the symbolic only to turn the gloves on a "slice of himself": Ellie and the unborn baby.

The same fear of his mother's secret "power" impels Valmiki to uncontrolled aggressivity in his sexual act with Annabel: "It's not just feeling for me, it's seeing . . . I couldn't bear not to see that look on a woman's face . . . like an animal fighting you, begging to be wounded and sucking you dry, and then everything's gone, purged clean, it's like the peace of religious absolution" (209-10). There is a curious ambivalence in Valmiki's statement. At one level, Annabel's desire to be "wounded" reinforces her own unconscious hysterical subject position and her desire to cling to pain to assure continuity rather than let go of her

symptom. At another level, since Valmiki's reaction is revealed in his own direct speech to Anasuya, the question legitimately arises if the wish to be wounded is not Valmiki's own desire displaced on to Annabel. Put another way, Valmiki's denigration of Annabel and the vacillating positions of angel and nonentity occupied by Ellie in Valmiki's scheme of things point clearly to the uncertain relations to the phallus that constitute his own hysterical position in the unconscious. The sexual act testifies to Valmiki's own desire and the way in which the void in his unconscious is constantly filled up by women as phallus.

Valmiki's struggle to free himself from his mother's tenacious hold on him is nowhere more apparent than when he learns that his mother is dying of malaria. The curt reply, the narrator tells us, is the first sign of Valmiki's rejection of his mother. He has been in a titanic struggle to express his own desire all along. Anasuya tells us: "It was even difficult to tell, now whether he had dictated the letter which rejected his mother, or whether he had left its composition to Caroline, so close to her had he come during her tutelage" (188). Valmiki has rejected his own mother only to be ruled by Caroline, his substitute mother. Caroline is a kind of "bad mother" who wants to own, engulf, or swallow the child—even to the extent of indulging in incest with him.

But the mother's insistent hold of the unconscious takes its toll even as he tries to repress her. (Repression is yet another Lacanian joining of the conscious and unconscious.) Valmiki's mother's death is only a precursor to Ellie's suicide and her carrying his unborn baby to the grave. In an outburst of shame and retribution Valmiki tells Anasuya: "Two lives snuffed out. Hers. My child's" (228). Valmiki hardly realizes at this stage that his guilt and shame are closely linked to his desire to fulfill his mother's desire. What is more, he is instrumental in his child's death, having rejected his paternal responsibility, thus rejecting his own father and mother in the unconscious signifying chain. Valmiki rejects both Ellie and his mother. And Ellie's death is like his mother's death. Moreover, the child that dies with Ellie (or with Valmiki's mother) is also Valmiki. As painful as the choice may be, Valmiki is finally somewhat free to pursue his own desire when he leaves for India. The unsymbolized unconscious pain

(the real) has been his own rejection as a child by his parents. The hurt that he has repressed surfaces in his symbolic murder of his child.

Finally, the title of Markandaya's novel itself resonates with multiple meanings. Caroline possesses Valmiki in terms of both his body and his talent; his mother possesses Valmiki through others, such as Ellie, Caroline, Annabel, and Anasuya. When Valmiki leaves Caroline to sail for India, his artistic reputation in England even before his departure is nonexistent and he is as easily "dispossessed" as he was earlier "possessed" by Caroline. Caroline's supreme freedom, emanating from her class and race, empowers her to place Valmiki calculatingly within the white race to set him apart from Ellie. "She's Jewish," said Caroline. "She's not like you or me, Val" (166). Once Caroline appropriates his paintings, Valmiki is "like the Jewish waif" Ellie, just another "dreary unstable foreigner" (220) to be dispensed with. Markandaya indicates that racism extends from England and America, across the Atlantic, to the far shores of India.

This brings up the issue of sexual/racial Othering in *Possession*. Read within the context of Edward Said's worldly text, the critic can argue that the epistemic violence in Caroline's transactions with the East demonstrably reflects "a flexible positional superiority" that puts Caroline in a "whole series of possible relationships" with Indians without her ever losing the "relative upper-hand." From Caroline's displacement of Valmiki from "all the life he had ever known" into "some new world she was shaping for him" to the end of the novel, the last word, in both senses of the expression, belongs to Caroline. In no uncertain terms, Caroline promises to be back to "claim" Valmiki from the Swami: ". . . Valmiki is yours now, but he has been mine. . . . I shall take care to make him want me again: and on that day I shall be back to claim him" (249). Her actions, executed with "deliberation and lucidity," are ways of "controlling other people's lives" (126). No one who comes in contact with Caroline escapes the "orbit of her powerful influence" (126).

At the level of representation and of the grammar of the plot, one cannot agree more with Anasuya's conclusion about Caroline: "It would take many more knocks, I thought, hard ones, to

topple her off that pinnacle of infallibility, so proudly and powerfully based on her faith in herself" (83). Reading *Otherwise*, to use Shoshana Felman's phrase, allows me to situate Caroline's discourse in a different discursive path. Like Valmiki, Caroline occupies an hysteric subject position whose delicate balance in the game of life is maintained by a master signifier. Valmiki, ironically, "molded and caressed to an image she would love," occupies the gaze of the other around which Caroline's life revolves. Caroline's "face, her eyes, her beautiful body in its glittering trammels, were all touched and transfigured, uplifted by triumph. The triumph of another, and that other not even her own flesh" (117). Caroline's hysterical question to the master is, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, "Why am I what you are saying that I am? . . . [H]is/her basic problem is *how to justify, how to account for his/her existence* in the eyes of the big Other" (131; emphasis added). Her precarious subject position in the symbolic, already manifested in her slide from surrogate mother to (incestuous) lover in relation to Valmiki, culminates in her chilling discovery that in spite of her "terrible overpowering craving for possession" she can, with just as much ease, be dispossessed.

Nothing exemplifies better Caroline's detection of the Other's lie, her "little faith" in the phallus, as Moustapha Safouan puts it, than her fear of Valmiki's parents taking him away from her once he had "arrived" in the world of art, a fear that thinly disguises her poignantly articulated unconscious fear of the symbolic not supporting her identity. She says guardedly to Anasuya: "Val's becoming known now . . . sooner or later, I suppose, they'll learn about it, and then will they want him back?" (109). The same dreaded fear of fading as a subject compels Caroline to see the Swami as a threat to her place in the symbolic, as "the real adversary—the one who could . . . resist her taking and keeping possession of what she wanted" (110). To counter the fracture of her racial/sexual identity in language, Caroline bonds with Anabel, who is of the same race, at the close of the novel, setting them apart as a racially and sexually cohesive group against the "unstable foreigners" like Valmiki and Ellie, who cannot be relied upon (221).

A curious twist to Caroline's hysteric structure consists of how she empowers herself by paradoxically becoming the object of an-other's desire. In other words, by being desired rather than desiring. For example, at the party she hosts to launch Anasuya's new book, Caroline introduces Valmiki to her distant cousin Annabel, knowing well the threat that Annabel, being closer to Valmiki's age, poses to her hold on him. In keeping with the hysteric's desire to keep a lack a lack, she throws on herself the mantle of the noble martyr by tacitly approving of Valmiki's moving out to live with Annabel in a Soho apartment: "Caroline knew about the move, she knew Valmiki was leaving her, but she did not even try to stop the course of events beyond asking him, once more, to wait and be sure of his own emotions. He had already done that, he said: at which she attempted no further stop" (213-14).

Clearly, Caroline's symptom speaks through her discourse of self-negation. She, however, in a contradictory fashion, blames Ellie for her loss of Valmiki: "That little bitch Ellie—she destroyed so much and she didn't even have the brain to realize what she was doing" (241). Caroline's unconscious desire speaks in her speech in an-other register. "Something stumbles," to use Lacan's words, in Caroline's "spoken" sentence. "Freud is attracted by these phenomena," adds Lacan, "and it is there that he seeks the unconscious" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 25). Her real adversary is no more the Swami than Ellie herself; the enemy is not without—the racial/sexual "other" that she so often scapegoats—but within, it is her "other scene" or the hole in the gaze of the Other. Faced with a blank outside the realm of the symbolic and yet doubly split within it, her epistemic violence originates in language. It is that "no-thing" of the symbolic, as Juliet Flower MacCannell so eloquently writes, "which doubly splits the human from not simply his so-called 'own' desires, but, more importantly, from the other humans without whom desire literally makes no sense" (125). Moreover, Markandaya's superb prose style evokes the Swami's and Caroline's mutually held fear of the other. The Swami's rhetoric of defiance, to match Caroline's threat to claim Valmiki, is at odds with the language of his body: "The Swami's eyes were troubled. 'If that day comes' he

said" (249). In the final analysis, then, both the Swami's and Caroline's "legitimate entitlement" to Valmiki "show up for shadows" (110); both are trapped in the web of a fictional power relation. The symbolic reveals nothing other than its own lack, the phallus as the no-thing it both veils and unveils.

Valmiki goes back to India not as a hero, but as a stigmatized goatherd. His return marks, nonetheless, a dramatic turn in his maturation. From an hysterical position in the unconscious, he moved to a state resembling psychosis when he had no desire and felt within "nothing but deadwood" (227). Ellie felt as "dead" before their relationship activated her desire. But Valmiki is returned to his symbolic father by Anasuya, the same woman who conspired with Caroline to decentre his identity. Valmiki finally has an answer to the tormenting question of whether he is a man or a woman. The regained homeland allows him to accept limits, the law of the signifier. He accepts castration and submits to the Name of the Father through the Swami to gain his male identity and a place in the social domain. Does that mean that all the "lived" experience of the mother is absorbed into conscious life? The mother's desire still persists in the unconscious, but Valmiki's position vis-à-vis his unconscious has changed.

Having been restored to the phallic, Valmiki now channels both his desire and that of his mother towards divine knowledge and enjoyment. His *jouissance* is not dissimilar to Saint Theresa's, discussed by Lacan in *Encore*:

It is as it was for St. Theresa—you have only to go to Rome and see Bernini's statue, to understand at once that she is, without doubt, in the act of enjoying. And what does she enjoy? It is clear that the essential testimony of mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but do not know anything about it. (71)

For Valmiki, as for St. Theresa, the *jouissance* is both a psychic ecstasy and an orgasmic coming. This orgasmically joyful *jouissance*, which is both life and death and release and bondage, is maliciously closed for Valmiki and Ellie by Caroline but providentially opened again for Valmiki by the Swami. Neither his mother's gold nor Caroline's plea to return to England has any effect on Valmiki. Fortified by the strength of a divine "unknown" knowledge, Valmiki's art and his enjoyment of life have no begin-

ning, no end, only a continual flow that puts him in touch with a beyond. It is an ecstasy that is here, nowhere, and everywhere.

Kamala Markandaya's *Possession* ultimately presents us with a much richer picture than has been available to us in critical perspectives dominated by binary oppositions. Analysis through a Lacanian lens offers a challenging way to read her novels. The Lacanian topology of the subject, structured by the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real, orders that link like a Borromean knot, provides an alternative to the "binarity" of deconstructive readings. Since our subjectivity is not simply constructed, but reflects the complexity of the conflicting ideological components that make up our identities, Markandaya insists on a much more subtle engagement with the issues that dominate the East-West dialogue. *Possession*, in my reading, therefore, is not a "failed" novel as some critics would have us believe. Rather, her sophisticated writing across cultures provokes us to find new ways to pose the question of our unconscious desire and sexual and racial "Othering."¹

NOTE

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