CHAPTER II

"THE TRUE INDIAN ASCETIC" ; THE SHANK
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"THE TRUE INDIAN ASCETIC" : THE SWAMY

One finds a genuine holy man who wields a positive influence on the other fictional characters in two of Kamala Markandaya's novels - A Silence of Desire and Possession. The Swamy in both these novels, represents all the virtues of Indian sainthood - living a simple, austere life, silently ministering to the hungry and the sick and helping the people who come to him. Crowds gather round him wherever he goes and although he hardly speaks, he radiates peace and joy all around. In short, the Swamy comes to us as a "true Indian ascetic."

The Swamy in either of these novels has great importance in the plot. His role is complex in A Silence of Desire, but in Possession it is positive. To establish the triumph of Indian values, Markandaya demonstrates the spiritual poverty of Western living. She is proud of Indian spiritualism and focuses it in these novels through the Swamy.

I

In A Silence of Desire we find a constant conflict
between reason and faith, spiritualism and materialism, and we are left to draw our own conclusions. An unquestioning religious faith and relegation of the body to a subordinate place are characteristic of Indian mind. The Swamy has a definite role to play in the spiritual wasteland of Indian life. Sarojini, the heroine of the novel, believes that the spiritual power and the spiritual superiority of the Swamy would cure her of the ailment - a tumour in her womb. The villagers too, have absolute faith in him. This God - man has no attachments and worldly possessions. He receives gifts from whosoever gives and in return, feeds the destitute people who depend entirely upon him. He does not claim to be a performer of miracles, nor does he do anything miraculous. But, he radiates happiness and gives solace to all who flock round him. The Swamy has a serene face which is thin and pale with a luminous quality of too little flesh making visible the white bone beneath his skin - the face of a saint. He is the one to whom Sarojini goes to be cured of the growth in her womb and he blesses her:

She was sitting, cross legged, on the man's right. His hand was on her bowed head, and he was murmuring to her, his voice sometimes
The Swamy is neither the central character nor one of the major characters in the novel. He remains a minor character, but a very important one, affecting the lives of the other characters. The Swamy forms the pivot round whom the other characters revolve.

The Swamy plays a crucial role in the tangled domestic drama of average middle-class life of Dandekar and Sarojini, a husband and a wife through whom the conflict between tradition and modernity, faith and reason is presented. The husband, Dandekar, is a clerk in a Government office. He is modern in his outlook on life and has discarded superstition of his forefathers. Sarojini, his wife, is a traditional Hindu woman, a submissive wife and an affectionate mother. From the beginning, we see that there is a placid acquiescence on her part:

She was a good wife, Sarojini, good with children, an excellent cook, an efficient manager of his household, a woman who still gave him pleasure after fifteen years of marriage ... needs of his nature.

2Ibid., p. 6.
She suffers from a painful tumour, but refuses to undergo medical treatment. Instead, she regularly offers worship to the 'tulasi' plant and seeks the advice and help of the Swamy to cure herself. Fearing opposition from her husband, she keeps her visits to the Swamy to herself. The placid domestic equilibrium is upset by Sarojini's strange absences and lies. She does not tell her husband about the growth in her womb because she knows that he will compel her to undergo surgical treatment in hospital. But her mother and her grandmother died in hospital of a similar complaint. Having lost faith in the hospital treatment, she seeks the faith cure of the Swamy though she knows full well that her husband will not permit her to have that type of treatment. When asked by Dandekar, she confesses:

Yes, you, you would have sent me to a hospital instead. Called me superstitions, a fop, because I have beliefs that you cannot share. You wouldn't have let me be - no! You would have reasoned with me until I lost my faith, because faith and reason don't go together and without faith, I shall not be healed...  

3  
*A Silence of Desire*, p. 63.
This becomes the essential point of the conflict between reason and faith a very significant issue in the novel. The gulf between Dandekar and Sarojini widens because she completely ignores her household duties. He almost goes mad as she withdraws herself night after night from him. His life passes from a state of jealousy to a sort of nightmarish existence. He becomes a victim of deep anguish and self-torture. His work in the office suffers. He is fined and his salary is cut. He even visits a prostitute only to feel guilty and remorseful afterwards. The well-balanced economy of the family is disturbed because Sarojini begins to give away to the Swamy whatever money or jewellery she can lay her hands on in the house.

The Swamy has a distinct part in the struggle between the husband and wife. Dandekar realises that his stable universe is getting shaken. He wants to confront the enemy who is destroying his domestic peace and happiness. But when he actually meets the Swamy, he finds that he can hold nothing against him. As long as he is in the presence of the Swamy, he experiences a peculiar calm and detachment from the humdrum of everyday life. But, he knows this to be temporary. Doubts and worries return the next moment he comes away from him. His feelings remain the same even
when he meets the Swamy for the second time. Once he leaves the domains of the Swamy, he feels "the pains crept back, the worry, the misery, the lust for gold chains and silver cups." He tries desperately to get Sarojini away from the Swamy, because he realises:

Our worlds do not mix. It is disastrous to try and make them.  

One can sympathise with poor Dandeskar who cannot fight with the Swamy and admire the strength of Sarojini standing alone in her faith. He appears only three or four times in the novel and on none of these occasions, what he says is of much significance. But he has some solace to offer to individuals who are torn by worries. Even Dandeskar does not question the Swamy's power, but he reasons out that "his reality is not ours." Since worries and frustrations return as soon as one comes away from him, it is good to stay away from a man who disrupts the even tenor of one's daily life. To Sarojini, the tenor of daily life has ceased to matter because she receives wisdom and peace from the Swamy.

4 A Silence of Desire, p. 112.
5 Ibid., p. 113.
6 Ibid., p. 114.
The situation becomes unmanageable and Dandekar pours out his woes to his officer, Chari. When Dandekar hails that he wants his wife back, Chari wants to know if his wife has left him:

She is still with me', said Dandekar, 'but it's only the shell. All that's real is left with the Swamy. Sometimes when I look at her, I know she has even forgotten that I exist. I know the Swamy world; it is not easy to remember - I have been in it, I know the forgetfulness it brings - but I want to exist, to exist for her. I want my world back, my children happy, my floor swept-

"Is that important too?"
"Yes, yes, yes" he cried. "In the world I'm in it's important, all the small things are important and I know it's small and petty but I'm a small and petty man."7

Dandekar, thus, asserts the difference between the two levels of existence. An ordinary man cannot afford to live on the higher level on which the Swamy lives. The private problem of Dandekar becomes a public issue. The Government officials start making enquiries to determine whether the Swamy is a charlatan or a saint. The people

7 A Silence of Desire, p. 139.
of the town divide themselves; some complain that the Swamy has established a dominion over them for his material ends while others want him to stay because they have faith in him. On the official level, Chari and his subordinate, Ghose, represent the two points of view. Chari, a local man with an instinctive understanding of the people, wants the Swamy to be left alone:

It does not really matter what I think. Or what you think. It is the people that count. 8

While Ghose, a Northerner, in his enthusiasm for rationality and abolition of superstition, tries to prove that the Swamy is a fraud:

'That he's a fraud, an imposter, a man who preys on the credulous, of whom there are so many in the South.' (answered Chari) Ghose did not trouble to refute or even pretend to refute this.

'Of course', he said contemptuously. 'There is no question about it at all. He's an out-and-out imposter, the whole atmosphere just reeks of it.' 9

Ultimately the Swamy himself solves the problem by leaving the town of his own accord. Sarojini is restored to

8 A Silence of Desire, p. 150.
9 Ibid., p. 146.
Dandekar, but the calm acceptance of the Swamy's departure itself is something that she has learnt from the Swamy. When she returns home, Dandekar is surprised at the spirit of acceptance and detachment, with which she conducts herself even after her guru's departure. Asked if she is not sad over it, she replies:

What should I do? I formed an attachment. It is broken, that is all. One must accept. Do you?' She said gently, 'Of course. It would be sinful to batter oneself to pieces because one refuses to recognise that another man's life is his own. If the Swamy chose to go, it was his decision. One must accept it in good heart. 10

She agrees to undergo surgical treatment for the growth in her womb, because the Swamy tells her to do so. The Swamy does exert some influence on Sarojini. He has enabled her to come to terms with her ailment and shed fears relating to operation in a hospital. Under his influence, she acquires a poise which sustains later.

Sarojini's operation is successful. Making his way home, Dandekar finds the sudden release from all his

problems some what overwhelming. He rests under a tree which happens to be a banyan. The way its gnarled roots reach into the earth from spreading branches to begin new life, gradually strengthening into new branches, is symbolic. The continuities to be reestablished are implicit. At this moment, he is still disoriented and walks on, drawn unconsciously towards the Swamy's house. The dwarf is still incharge, more agressive than ever in view of the circumstances. He again tries to generate guilt in Dandelkar by showing the deprivation suffered by the abandoned and derelict, their spirits snapped, their bodies will be finished soon. The Swamy used to support a hundred destitutes and ailing people with what he received as gifts from his devotees. When the Swamy leaves, these men remain behind and their resources dwindle. They reach the point of starvation. When the dwarf returns the gold and the silver gifted to the Swamy by Sarojini, Dandelkar refuses to take them back saying:

I wanted these things and I fought for them because they meant a great deal to me ...
But I also fought for other things - my wife, my self, my children and these are the other fragments which even you must be aware. 11

11 A Silence of Desire, p. 159.
Dandekar realises that the Swamy functions not as an individual who lives his own life, but as a public figure - a fulfilment of certain needs in society. The Swamy satisfies the needs of the people who want an object of faith. The insistence finally appears to be not on the spiritual, but on the social function of the Swamy. The question—"Was the Swamy a charlatan or a saint?" remains unanswered because the role of the Swamy is vague and ambiguous. Whether the Swamy is a saint or a charlatan is not half so important as the function he fulfils in novel. No one can doubt that he is able to offer solace to a deeply felt psychic need in Sarojini. And the influence in the final analysis is for the better and makes her more balanced and mature. Even Dandekar, at the end, as he goes home to his family, is obviously a better and wiser man. Both Dandekar and Sarojini have enlarged their understanding of each other and hence of human experience. In their reunion, the novel seems to offer "the hope of a new realisation of self, reconciling past and present in a better future."¹²

Thus, the Swamy's presence in *A Silence of Desire* is more felt than seen, often through his implicit influence on Sarojini's behaviour. He acts as the mirror in which opposed attitudes of the husband and the wife are juxtaposed, throughout he remains a shadowy figure whose statements are enigmatic and ambivalent, if not altogether vague. It may be this quality of self-effacement and unobtrusiveness that makes Uma Parameswaran say:

"Of all the Swamis in Indo-Anglian literature, the Swamy of *A Silence of Desire* is one of the best portrayals."  

Prof. K.R. Chandrasekharan opines:

"The novelist thus shows her reverence for the genuine Swamis of the country and the simple, unquestioning religious faith of her people."  

II

While the Swamy's role is complex in *A Silence of Desire*, it is simple and clear in *Possession*. The holy man, in *Possession*, influences the fictional characters in a benign way.

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Austere, enigmatic and omniscient, the Swamy guides the destiny of Valmiki, the goatherd, from the beginning. Valmiki, the protagonist of the novel, is a young South Indian shepherd boy who has great artistic talents and directs them in the service of religion. He is a born artist. Lady Caroline Bell, a rich artistic woman, who comes to his remote village, sees the boy and his apparently crude paints and paintings. She remarks:

He's a born painter. I don't know where he gets it from, but he's got it. You haven't seen half his work yet.

She decides to take him to England to reframe him in the image of the great Indian artists. When Val asks for permission to go to England with Caroline, the Swamy gives it without hesitation because he wants Val to learn by experience. He is, however, quite certain that Val will finally return to him and that it will be a real home-coming:

He came to me as a child," he said. "He was my disciple during the formative years. Nothing will touch that. Where other men despair, he will turn to God, unlikely though it seems to you now. If he is fretted by

wherever he is, he will return to me and it will not be the joyless void that you imagine, it will be a home coming.\(^{16}\)

Caroline buys Val from his parents and whisks him off to England. She takes him to various art galleries in the cities of Europe. She provides him every comfort, initiates him into the art world and arranges exhibitions of his paintings in England and in America. Val, thus, "possessed" by Caroline, serves to satisfy her egotism in the beginning and later her lust. He becomes the artist the lady intends, but at the expense of nearly destroying his soul. He finds waste and death in personal relationship.

After Valmiki is comfortably established in London, he finds that he cannot do any painting because the fountain of inspiration has dried up with in him. It is only when Caroline produces the forged letters supposed to have been written by the Swamy that he recovers from his lethargy and gets restarted as an artist:

The message was brief ... written in artless Tamil, a few lines to say, the Swamy was well, as he hoped to Valmiki was, that he often thought of the boy, whom he greatly

\(^{16}\) *Possession*, p. 100.
missed, that his dearest wish was to hear he was working hard at his painting and that he was always near, in spirit, to him. 17

Notwithstanding Val’s transformation from a goat-herd to the modern artist, his loyalty to the Swamy and the Indian values he cherishes, remain undisturbed:

However strongly Western-influenced, it was from India that his strength came. He would have to return it again and again when that strength was drawn or his resources ran low, to recharge himself. 18

Disillusionment and disappointment, at last, drive Valmiki back to India and into the arms of the Swamy who has been waiting for his return in confident expectation.

In her quest of possessing Val, Caroline finds an adversary in the Swamy. On the contrary, the Swamy takes the whole situation with passive resignation. Caroline is shrewd enough to understand that the Swamy has tremendous influence on Val. She has her own doubts whether the Swamy would permit him to go with her to Europe. The struggle between the Swamy and Caroline for the custody and control of Valmiki, becomes symbolic of the struggle between Indian

17 Possession, p. 61.
18 Ibid., p. 170.
spiritual values and Western materialism for the heart
and soul of India. As H.M. Williams aptly says:

The Indian way is suggested, though not
explicitly explored, in a Swamy’s represent-
tation of disinterested love in opposition
to Western possessiveness.¹⁹

Caroline comes to India to try to recover Valmiki and
complains to the Swamy that Valmiki has returned to a
mere wilderness. To this, the Swamy replies:

Even this wasteland may have something to
show, other than what you have seen.²⁰

Caroline is not disappointed when Valmiki refuses to come
with her again. She argues with the Swamy:

He has tasted other satisfactions that I
have given and which he knows I can give.
One day he will crave them again and again.²¹

She even throws a challenge to the Swamy that one day
Val would want to be hers again. She says:

And on that day I shall come back to claim
him.²²

¹⁹H.M. Williams, Indo-Anglian Literature: A Survey

²⁰Possession, p. 228.

²¹Ibid., p. 232.

²²Ibid., p. 232.
Thus, the Swamy emerges victorious in his encounter with Caroline. One may find a strong suggestion here that the wasteland, that is, India, can be redeemed and her soul saved, only by a return to her ancient spiritual ways and values. The Swamy, thus, becomes the dominating figure in the novel playing a crucial role in Val’s emancipation.

The Swamy in this novel is the true Indian holy man whose aim is to achieve detachment from the world. He represents all the virtues of Indian asceticism—living a simple, austere life and helping the poor who come to him. He even radiates peace and joy wherever he goes though he becomes the guide and mentor of Valmiki before the Caroline finds him, he makes no claim on him. Caroline and Anasuya (the narrator) meet the Swamy on a hill, along with Valmiki who wants to take leave of him:

The holy man, however, was in no sense a misfit, edged out by his fellow-men. More likely, he had fled them, coming to rest in the crumbling upper reaches of this hill in the name of peace. He was deep in meditation when we came, a thin muscular figure without an ounce of spare flesh anywhere, not a stitch of clothing on his body, a man probably of middle years though he looked younger, in a meditation so
deep that his closed eyelids did not so much as pucker, his pose alter by a fraction of an inch at our noisy approach.23

When one attains abiding spiritual faith, material possessions lose all their value. This truth is symbolised in Val's action of discarding and putting into the dark cave the ruby ring given to him by Jumbo, the sovereigns left for him by his mother and all the uncashed cheques sent by Caroline -

Symbols all of power and influence promising the kind of strength that Valmiki no longer needed, emasculated, meaningless now and arranged herein dumb show.24

Such is the tremendous influence of the Swamy over Valmiki!

We find a similar disdain for worldly wealth illustrated in A Silence of Desire. After the Swamy has been removed from the town at the instance of Dandekar, the latter goes to the now deserted premises where the dwarf sees him. The dwarf is furious at the sight of Dandekar and throws on the floor the silver articles and other costly presents that Sarojini had given to the Swamy earlier. But, Dandekar refuses to take them back as they are meaning-


24 Ibid., p. 230.
less to him now.

The Swamy is a traditional holy man wielding spiritual power in solitude as well as a modern one, undertaking lecture tours. Though he appears on a few occasions in the novel, his role is very significant. Even though he undertakes religious tours in India and abroad, he is not, in the least, interested in the affairs of the world and is always surrounded by disciples. To Valmiki, the holy man proves to be real. Along with Indians, there are a number of foreigners who are influenced by the Swamy's powers. The Swamy remains a source of inspiration for Valmiki though the latter goes to England with Caroline. Caroline, the English lady, is not, in the least, interested in Indian spiritualism and way of looking at life because of the society in which she was brought up. She comments:

"It's seduction," she said, "spiritual, if you like. There is no place for it in England. He ought never to have been allowed in." 25

She makes casualness a religion applying its supple standards and ingratiating gross to all aspects of living. She considers, the Swamy a 'medicine man' who is helpful in the progress of Valmiki's art. Though she makes religion

25 Possession, p. 143.
A casualty, she does not question the powers of the Swamy because she is interested not in him, but in Valmiki.

Nevertheless she did not go near the Swamy. He subdued her, she was afraid of him or if not of him, of the power he still wielded over the clay she had moulded and pressed to an image she could love. In a way, he was something of an obsession, become so, partly because she could not bring herself to emasculate it by personal encounter partly because she was jealously aware of the years that had gone before she had had Valmiki. 26

The only character who suspects the Swamy is Anasuya, the narrator, who lives in England though an Indian. Though not religious, she does not abandon it totally. Her interest is only to keep the Swamy informed about Valmiki, his disciple. Once she meets the Swamy at the hotel, sitting amongst his disciples, who are mostly middle-aged women - European, American, parsees and Hindus- who craved for the tranquility he embodies. This scene disturbs Anasuya and she begins to suspect the Swamy:

What else could be the explanation of the sudden appearance here in this fashionable hotel, among affluent women - of a man I had last seen naked on a barren hillside lost

26 Possession, p. 144.
in the single mystic contemplation of God. 27

It is this apparent contrast of his past life and its present apparent plusher that splits reality. But later when the Swamy appears again in England and in India, his behaviour and attitude prove that he is genuine and that his influence is positive on the characters.

III

Thus the emphasis in A Silence of Desire and Possession is on the domination of spiritualism of which the Swamy is the representative. The figure of the Swamy remains either as a source of benevolent influence as in Possession or as an ambivalent and complex character as in A Silence of Desire. In both the novels, the Swamy remains in the background influencing the other characters in them. But he does not try to possess the characters and remains passive or detached. He is

... the true Indian ascetic—and in my mind I had no doubt the Swamy was one — is not a parish priest, a missionary, a revivalist, concerned with keeping tabs on a human being to plot his spiritual progress. His whole aim is to achieve detachment from the world. 28

27 Possession, p. 98.

Kamala Markandaya portrays the holy man as a true religious figure. The Swamis remain powerful adversaries in Possession and A Silence of Desire because their influence is abiding. The Swamy fulfils the social function as he satisfies the need of the people who crave for peace and tranquillity and want an object of faith. In A Silence of Desire, the Swamy offers solace to individuals who are torn by worries, whereas in Possession, he acts as a guide and mentor of Valmiki who draws inspiration as an artist from the Swamy. In Possession the conflict between Indian spiritualism and Western materialism reflected in Valmiki and Caroline respectively, gains importance. In A Silence of Desire, Kamala Markandaya very sensitively depicts the nuances of relationship between spiritual and non-spiritual spheres of life.

The Swamy in both the novels, has pivotal importance in the plot and embodies the best in the tradition of sainthood. The Swamy in Possession is the first person to recognise the artistic talents of Valmiki and guides the destiny of the shepherd boy from the beginning. He does and says nothing spectacular, but inspires the same devotion and loyalty in Valmiki, the cripple and the man who guards his retreat, the fashionable ladies who assemble at the hotel to meet him and the sophisticated devotees who invite him to London.
As K.R. Chandrasekharan rightly points out,

No one who has read Possession and A Silence of Desire can be in the least doubt regarding Kamala Markandaya's faith in India's genuine holy men. The Swamy in either of these two novels ... embodies the best in the tradition of sainthood. 29

The implied message in Kamala Markandaya's novels appears that India should confidently pursue her own path holding fast to her traditional values and using methods appropriate to her culture. It is true that while the novelist recognises evils and deficiencies in Indian life and society and warns her countrymen against a slavish imitation of the West, she does not offer any ready made solutions to many problems facing the country. Her emphatic teaching is that India should preserve her soul and carve out her own destiny. In religion she should be proud of her great legacy and her constant aim should be the attainment of purity, equipoise and altruism represented by the Swamy in Possession or A Silence of Desire.