

## East West Theme in the Novel of Kamala Markandaya – Two Virgins

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**ABSTRACT:** An unabashedly feminist novel *Two Virgins* from Kamala Markandaya. Saroja is a wonderful narrator, and her often-unusual insights into the world around her resonate. The final chapter drags a bit--and it is a bit reminiscent of the Mysore sections of *Nectar in a Sieve*--but even then, the interactions between characters, particularly Saroja and Lalitha, jumps out. Markandaya's novel *Two Virgins* deals with the theme of moral degradation in our society where man exploits man for selfish purposes. The novel also deals with the east west theme in the sense that there is a contrast between traditionalism and modernism, between city life and village life.

**KEYWORDS**—Contentment, City, Glamour, Lifelessness, Kamala Markandaya, Human Bonds and Bondages.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya has occupied a prominent place among Indian English writers as one of the leading women writers in English. She won international fame and recognition with the publication of her very first novel *Nectar in the Sieve* [1954], an Indian peasant's narrative of her difficult times. She has to date ten novels to her credit: *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *A Silence of Desire*, *Possession*, *A Handful of Rice*, *A Coffin Dam*, *The Nowhere Man*, *Two Virgins*, and *Pleasure City*. Markandaya started writing when India was at the threshold of just newly found freedom. Poverty, hunger and starvation were everywhere due to communal riots. Industrialization and urbanization were eroding the very basis of rural life. It goes to Markandaya's credit that she uses fiction as a vehicle for communicating her vision of life. In her novels she depicts race conflicts, temperamental disparities, cultural divergences and sexual perversions as factors working in the forms of barriers of communication. Her novels make an experimental journey undertaken in search of a solution which can suggest a way out of dilemma.

This understanding of the past that India has come through is relevant in the way that it focuses on the present situation of our country. It's true that Kamala Markandaya had written these works when India was at the threshold of newly found freedom and there was pandemonium everywhere. The British had left us hapless and confused. But to think of it more deeply we are in the same condition now in this 21st century than we were when we had just got our freedom. The plight of the farmers presented in Markandaya's first novel written way back in 1954 continues even now. So many of our Indian farmers live in a life of utter penury. Though they are considered to be the breadwinners of our country, we see them constantly battling with their meager income and hence forced to take loans at the cost of their own life. Hunger and degradation embarrassingly is a part of our country even now. Even when we talk about new inventions and technologies, a major part of our population is still plunged in poverty and exploitation. The East West encounter is a theme worth studying.

Kamala Markandaya has in her novels presented the east as being spiritual and traditional whereas the western values are often viewed as modern and materialistic. But in the 21st century scenario, we get to see a completely new picture. The east is slowly going to the western side whereas the west is seen reaching up its hands to the eastern values. The Indians of which we have always boasted on is today tarnished by the ineffectual usage of western thought and culture. And the west seems to be more interested in learning our scriptures and way of living. Politics has also not made much of a landmark since the time of independence. One has to delve deeper into these social problems and try the best to portray the present conditions prevailing in our country using literature as a strong foundation

### II. EAST WEST THEME

*Two Virgins* was first published in 1973; it is a sensitive coming-of-age story of two sisters — Saroja and Lalitha — who have very diverse ideas about life, their goals and ambitions. Lalitha, the elder and the more fairer and beautiful one, has it all very easy. She's Appa's blue-eyed girl, so she gets to attend Miss Mendoza's

expensive school where she learns maypole dancing. But it's not just maypole dancing that Lalitha imbibes; she also acquires elitist tastes and culture, which ultimately spells doom for her. What Lalitha begins to understand is that she's not cut out to lead the impoverished life of Appa, Amma, Saroja and Aunt Alamelu, who had more or less resigned to their fate. She wants to pull herself out of the quagmire, not knowing that she was landing herself in a deeper mire of the glitzy, glamorous city-life, from where there is no point of return. She finds herself at the crossroads and eventually loses her way in the city maze. Saroja, the younger and not-so-good-looking sibling, goes to an ordinary school, takes care of the buffaloes, rides bikes (between the sisters, she's the better rider!), enjoys Chingleput's sweets, wants to get married and have lots of cuddly children. She has, what Lalitha calls, 'a peasant's ambition'. But Saroja never feels humiliated; in fact there are very many qualities of the peasant that Saroja greatly admires.

Set in post-Independence era, Markandaya's work of fiction constantly brings up the clashes between Western liberalism and Hindu orthodoxy. While Saroja's Appa upholds Western ideas, modernism and progressiveness, her Aunt Alamelu is a stickler for Hindu culture and practices all things conventional. Appa and aunt are continuously at war, and it is through their bickering and arguments that Saroja and further enlightened about the cultural conflict, and the benefits and problems of change.

### III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Kamala Markandaya writes novels which are as clear as the tea in a glass served in her native India with stories as simple as the oldest one that's ever told. But to be sure timeless. This one is set in one of those hopelessly impoverished little villages where the milk sours, the turds stale attracting blowflies, or a baby dies of smallpox. Saroja, plain and practical, grows up there with her far prettier sister Lalitha -- Lalitha who gets a chance to dance a small part for a traveling film unit, Ambitious and spoiled, she has dreams of being a movie star that are fulfilled when a film-maker casts her in his documentary on village life.

Overnight Lalitha becomes the talk of the town; her latent sexuality manifests itself and she uses her elevated status to her advantage. Basking in Lalitha's reflected glory Saroja tries to imitate her womanly wiles, which results in confused ideas about sexuality and ambition. But when the family is faced with a scandal, Saroja emerges with a practical outlook on life. Lalitha who goes up to the city and returns pregnant, Lalitha who has an abortion. . . . This has all the quiet virtues of the Markandaya novel and once again painfully accepted truths rejoin the ashes of tradition while quietly flows the Ganges.

The trail of events leading to Lalitha's unwanted pregnancy, her abortion, her sudden disappearance, and then the frantic search by her parents and younger sister Saroja to find their 'beloved Lalitha', takes place fast and furiously in the second half of the book, leaving immensely perturbed. Like the protagonist, Saroja, one can't help questioning herself: Why does society have to be the beastly tamer? Why can't it let the children of sin — who, the conventionalist, call 'fruits of unbridled lust' — survive? Why can't society stop meddling and probing into the lives of others, of innocent children and their unwed mothers? Would the world be less happy, if it had to accommodate them? Perhaps, yes. Which is why, they need to be eliminated, because there's no room for the 'children of sin'. If only society was less harsh and more forgiving!

### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Two Virgins reflects the author's fluid and magnificent literary style. The unflinching curiosity with which Markandaya takes us through the dreams, ambitions, revelations and journeys of the two girls, keeps every one hooked to the novel. Her writings touches to the traditional ways of Indian rural life and the damage brought by the impact of urbanization. The story centers around two sisters – Saroja and Lalitha, the former being rooted in Indian tradition and customs and the latter being influenced by the western ways of living. Saroja is a God fearing village girl. Generally the villagers acknowledge God's mercy and love by giving offerings to God in the temple. In the novel she has constantly made the two sisters Saroja and Lalitha to choose between the Eastern and the Western way of perceiving the world around. The contrast between tradition and modernity between India during and after British rule, between the older and younger members of the family, between the sons and the daughters are all there around the two, in their school, at home, and in their upbringing in general. Despite their advancement and economic development, modern, unhealthy, crime ridden cities are unable to even provide fresh air and food, what to speak of peace of mind. Modernization has totally destroyed the traditional culture and values and modern man has descended to a level of a massive hard-working machine. Lust, greed, anger, sense gratification, avarice etc. have become the constant companions of modern men and women. Though modern man does not believe in hell, he is busy creating it on earth by leading a machine life.

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