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## Contextualising Opposite Forces: Feminist Insights in Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins*

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### Abstract

Kamala Markandaya occupies a prominent position in the pool of Indian English women writers. Her writings not only brought laurels to her but also won her international fame and recognition. She, being a female novelist, has feminine sensibilities and woman's heart to understand the psyche, angst and anguish of a woman. This unique quality enriches her works with such themes that attract the attention of the readers immediately. She prefers to portray and paint the actual status of women in the man-dominated society and those parameters on which they are judged and liked by men. Through the portrayal of rural landscape, she pours out the core realities which are not tinged with the outright judgments of androcentric world. She has written about racial conflicts, cultural divergences, sexual perversions, temperamental disparities, sexual perversions, and feminist reverberations in her novels in a breakneck style. Her literary creations are replete with man-woman confrontation, the fringe level of women in the social hierarchy, their double marginalization, the molestation of innocent girls, immaculate and contended life of village, sham and fallacious dazzle of the cine world and the last rites of the traditional rituals by the modern generation and its appalling consequences, etc. Confrontations, conflicts and clashes on the grounds of gender, culture, region and class have been delineated in this paper through Kamala Markandaya's novel *Two Virgins*.

### Keywords

Indian women novelists, Kamala Markandaya, *Two Virgins*, Saroja, Lalitha, Gender Discourse, Feminism, Marginalization, Aspirations, Hegemony.

Since ancient time, all the literary works and even great epics, books on various topics and mythological epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been written by men and it has been not so long that Indian women started getting education. Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule started the first school for girls in Bhide Wala in Pune on 1 January 1948. This epoch-making change brought a revolution in girls' life and many of them emerged as budding and even celebrated writers after it. They took the rein of free flow of pen in their hands and raised the voices of the women through their works. Umpteen prominent women writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Nair, Arundhati Roy, Sunetra Gupta, Manju Kapur, Nayantra Sahgal, Githa Hariharan, Namita Gokhale, Twinkle Khanna, Sudha Murthy, Urvashi Butalia, Deepa Agrawal, Indira Goswami, Meena Alexander, Urvashi Butalia, Amrita Pritam, Judy Balan, etc. have written about different feminist standpoints in their works. These writers have their style of writing and they have written their books challenging the hegemonic patriarchal system. Kamala Markandaya, an Indo-Anglican writer, also occupies a unique place in Indian Writing in English and she has won much accolade from all over the world for her works.

Markandaya was born in a conservative Brahmin family in a small village in Mysuru, Karnataka in 1924. She was born in a conservative family and her parents followed Hindu traditions and festivals blindly. She has written her novels about different types of clashes or differences, about the East-West cultural encounter, caste and class difference, rural and urban mindsets, gulf between the haves and have-nots, hunger, sex, identity crisis, social realism, etc. Kamala Markandaya

has taken the theme of the East-West encounter in her novels. She has written her novels in the period when India has got independence only a few years back. Dr. Sudhir K. Arora writes about Kamala Markandaya, “She had a feminist Dread that her domestic duties would stifle her literary career” (Arora 3)

As a diasporic writer, Markandaya has brought out the differences of two opposite forces in her novels. Pravati Misra argues in this context, “In *Two Virgins* Kamala Markandaya depicts the clash of values between traditional village life and westernized modern city life” (Misra 15). General human relationships and trapped women characters ensnared in the web of a foreign culture also are the dominant themes of her novels. Dr. M. K. Bhatnagar opines about Markandaya, “She is an impressive explorer of human consciousness and of the convolutions of the intimate inter-personal relationships, caught in the whirlpool of disparate and divergent cultures” (Bhatnagar 1).

Kamala Markandaya has closely understood the problems of women and she thinks that being a woman, she can better understand the problems of women. That’s why her novels have mostly female protagonists and *Two Virgins* is also not an exception because this novel’s main female character is Lalitha. Out of all this colossal literary oeuvre, her novel *Two Virgins* delineated the aspirations of a headstrong girl Lalitha and the simple life of her sister, Saroja.

*Two Virgins* (1973) can be called a piece of realistic fiction in which the reality of human life has been depicted that a person must live in his/her limitations. This novel is a sensitive and moving tale of two sisters—Saroja and Lalitha—who are poles apart in their thoughts, ideologies and goals in life. Saroja is a simple-hearted village girl who is quite happy and contented in her rural life. She prefers to spend her time in helping her mother in the household activities and rearing cattle. She derives pleasure from the small activities, “Mostly it was fruit, flowers, coconuts, honey and milk which they laid at God’s feet, which Saroja considered beautiful and proper” (Markandaya 23) but Lalitha is comparatively more beautiful and has high aspirations in her life. Dr. H. C. Ahirwar writes about her, “Lalitha is merely not a character; she is the representative of thousands of girls who go to the metro-cities to take modelling as a career” (Ahirwar 136-37).

Since childhood, Lalitha is given more facilities than Saroja. The father loves Lalitha very much and that’s why he gets her admitted in a convent school run by Miss Mendoza while her sister, Saroja is admitted in a government school. Miss Mendoza tells Lalitha’s father that they teach dance also in their school. Lalitha becomes very happy to hear all this because she thinks that she would be able to learn dance easily in this school. Lalitha’s mother was not happy to send her daughter in a convent school because she thinks that her daughter will be cut off from the Indian roots. That’s why she was quite apprehensive about her daughter’s future. The novel presents different mentalities of both the sisters and the impact of modernization on the young girls. Karthikeyan and Gunasekaran also write about this novel, “In *Two Virgins*, Kamala Markandaya touches the traditional ways of Indian rural life and the damage brought by the impact of urbanization” (Karthikeyan and Gunasekaran 149).

There were some outside forces which become the reasons of Lalitha’s high aspiration and her fall. She is shown a glamorous world but she is not made aware about its diabolic consequences. One day Lalitha was performing dance in her school and she was looking very beautiful. Her parents were very happy to see her dance performance because her performance was not less than of any model. Everybody in the school praises Lalitha for her dance performance. Lalitha realizes that day that she can also become a model and she starts spending more time to improve her looks. She starts wearing western dresses and spending more time in front of mirror. This direction takes her towards her deviation.

It can be called the most controversial novel because this novel deals with the theme of sexuality in it. Dr. Anil Kumar Bhatnagar also observes about this novel, “*Two Virgins* has drawn a lot of criticism because of its too much indulgence in sex” (Bhatnagar 126). There are other women writers also who also deal with such kind of themes in her novels. Shobha De is also criticized for writing incestuous material in her novels. Kamala Das was also criticized for her frank discussion of sex and sensual imagery in her poetry.

Through this novel, Kamala Markandaya has used the differences between the traditional mindset of rural girls through Saroja and the modern attitude of girls through the character of Lalitha. Dr. Neerja Garg remarks that “*Two Virgins* points out social life at two levels: rural life unaffected by the western way of life, and urban life largely influenced by Western education, culture, and civilization” (Garg 53). Lalitha thinks that she should try to become a heroine.

Lalitha’s dreams become more piquant when one day, Mr. Gupta, a film director, comes in the village and he promises to give her a break. Lalitha becomes very excited and when she does not get any message from him for a long time, she reaches Mumbai to meet Mr. Gupta which shows Lalitha’s impulsive nature. By this time, Lalitha has developed a kind of hatred for the village life and she thinks that only bigger cities can give her a better platform. Anita Mahajan also observes in this context:

Lalitha, being modern in her ways and outlook, always disparages the traditional village life considering it primitives due to the absence of comforts and facilities the city life has, such as refrigerators, telephones and electric fans. (Mahajan 161)

But soon Lalitha is exposed to the dark side of the film industry when the wicked Mr. Gupta just uses her without giving her any role in his films and impregnates her. Lalitha had never thought that Mr. Gupta could cheat her like this. It is a truth that many girls go to the metro-cities to become models and heroines, but they fall into the hands of wicked people like Mr. Gupta. The ugly face of the film industry has been depicted through this novel. Jyoti Arora writes about it, "This is the horrible story of these crime-ridden metro-cities" (Arora 36).

Now Lalitha has no option but to return to her village. She becomes very disappointed and she comes back to her village. The village life is very different from the fast life of the metro-cities where family prestige is given preference than money. It was a matter of shame for Lalitha's family to keep a pregnant daughter in home without marriage. That's why her father goes to Mumbai silently to Mr. Gupta and asks money for Lalitha's abortion.

Through this incident, the poverty conditions of Lalitha's family have been depicted. Mr. Gupta gives him money and does all the arrangements for the abortion. The novel projects the image of the rural life where many poor people have no extra money for any other expenditures except making their both ends meet and they have to remain dependent upon others. Moreover, an unmarried pregnant girl is considered a blot on the family. That's why such pregnancies are concealed from the society.

A person who has seen the glamour of Mumbai cannot easily remain satisfied in the dull life of a village and the same happens with Lalitha also. She spends some more time in the village but after that she takes a bold decision to leave her village. One day she leaves her home leaving a letter behind that she cannot live in the village and they should not try to search her. When her sister, Saroja comes to know about all this, she becomes disappointed and she goes to Mumbai to Mr. Gupta where Devaraj, Mr. Gupta's assistant, tries to persuade her to have sexual relationship with her. It was Saroja's good luck that she somehow controls her emotions and rebukes that crooked assistant. In the attempt to save her sister, Saroja would also have become a victim in Mumbai like her sister.

In this way, it can be stated in conclusive remarks that Markandaya's *Two Virgins* is an outstanding documentary on the village life. The dark side of the film industry works as an opposite force in this novel. The difference between the rural and urban life, traditional and the modern outlook, Eastern and Western clashes, gulf between the rich and the poor, etc. themes have been narrated by Kamala Markandaya in this novel. Dr. Neeraj Garg also remarks about this novel, "*Two Virgins* presents an interesting aspect of Indian domestic life, though the novelist aims at showing the gulf between East and West cultures" (Garg 36). The devastating impacts of following the modernization without knowing the hazards are the main emphasis of this novel. Dr. Parul Tyagi and Neeraj Kumari also write about this novel:

Indirectly Markandaya accepts the conventional codes of rural society but she is conscious enough about modernity, necessary for progress in all spheres. Modernity is acceptable but not at the cost of demoralization or alienation. (98)

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