

Quest For Harmony In Life: A Study of Kamala Markandaya's Two Virgins

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Abstract – This novel describes the adolescent awakening of two sisters named Lalitha and Saroja, belonging to a lower middle class family of a south Indian village. The problem that Markandaya has taken is—the struggle between urban and non-urban elements of life, between pre and post independence, between old and new, between traditional eastern and modern western ways. It was the challenge before post-independence India to consolidate and preserve the new form of society that still was in the grip of poverty, ignorance and backwardness. People had to work hard to make India free of all these evils. However, those who took participation in the movement for freedom, not an insignificant number, though at the lower cadre, belonged to India's villages.

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Appa was one of them. So was Appa's idol, Rangu. Both had been fighting for independence, not like some as Appa said bootlickers, who had fawned upon the Sahibs for crumbs from their tables. The British packed; those who had fought for the freedom of India were rewarded. Sometimes he (Apu) told the villagers that he fought for the country and at others he said it was because he had given his all. Amma said, he had lost all through his own folly. This is a strange attitude. The freedom fighters who fought for India's liberty, now feel Jittery in the face of freedom. As an activist Appa participated in the movement in a very zestful way which his wife called his 'folly'.

The village background is given at the starting, with Appa, Amma, the two daughters Lalitha and Saroja, and Amma's widowed sister Alamelu. The issue of traditional versus modern westernized values comes to the forefront in the portrayal of the two 'virgins' of the story. While the one chooses modernity out of free will and of free choice, the other chooses tradition. The two sisters are poles apart from each other in nature and temperament, both of them spirited young girls pulsating with life and with a zest for living who react differently to the lures and temptations of a glamorous new world. As daughters of same parent, as pupils of the same school and teachers and as members of same society both of them share many common values and attitudes. Still they are different, judged by their responses to certain stimuli. Saroja's father, an active participant in India's struggle for independence, has some modern idea's behaviour and is liberal enough to send one of his daughters to a Christian school. Consequently, the two sisters grow up with a more liberal outlook of their class. Education with westernized bias brings with it a sense of liberation

and thus the difference between Saroja's family and that of Manikam, the milkman.

While one sister finds her way through rebellion and non-conformity, the other achieves her end through conformity of social moral. The novel has been written from the point of view of Saroja, the younger sister, who observes, bears, sees, thinks, comments on, and tries to judge all that happens in the novel. It is her impression that constitutes the staple of the novel.

The main focus of the novel is on the growth-problems of two adolescents. While the one grows up to accept the conventional codes of conduct, the other grows out of its precincts and away from its restraints. Eventually both become the victims of choices and circumstances in different fashions. While the one moves away from the village into the city, the other tastes city's benefits and evil and returns to village. While for Lalitha, the movement is actual, it exists more as a mental pattern for Saroja because she grows through the experiences of her sister. The stages in their growth are conditioned by their inherent temperament. Lalitha the elder sister is prettier, braver and more daring than Saroja. Moreover, she is conscious of her beauty.

Besides being beautiful, Lalitha has a desire to be modern. She is fascinated by a fridge in the house of Miss Mendoza, the Head-mistress of the school. Unable to keep her discovery to herself, she confides to her mother that it's barbaric, not having a fridge. Her mother, who is a simple lady, tries to convince her child by saying that only film stars can afford such luxuries. Dissatisfied with the Justification, she plainly tells her mother that these

days fridge is not a luxury but a necessity. Lalitha develops a desire to become a film star.

While Saroja develops a rather retiring disposition which makes her more obedient and well-behaved. But she has as much interest in sex, shows as predilection for learning the mysteries of sex life as Lalitha.

But Saroja gains self-consciousness; Lalitha is bound to lose whatever of it she has. It is Saroja who in the end is able to comprehend the correct inter-relations within reality. Through the comprehension of such experiences she is able to see the traps and steer clear of them. It is hoped that, she would no longer be cut adrift, in an alien world but rather live in a milieu which, though not a product of her mind, contributes to the development of self-consciousness in a necessary irreplaceable way. This is Saroja's education, but not the kind Appa boasted of and Lalitha possessed.

Lalitha is the favourite daughter of her father, and shares most of his advanced views. Lalitha like Saroja, grows in a restricting social atmosphere and is sent to Miss. Mendoza's 'Three Kings School', where she learns music and dancing. Her father feels proud of her talents and had a high praise for her high class tastes and opinions. She shows her talents in maypole dancing and other festivities. The family is also invited to school functions, occasionally. Miss Mendoza, who teaches at the school, indulges Lalitha to a large extent and it is her lavish praise and favour showered on Lalitha that is partly responsible for Lalitha's folly, her straying from the fold of traditional society.

Lalitha gets irritated under the restraints of her family and the village society and through the friendship with Miss Mendoza, she chooses the vanities of so-called "modern" life. She then longs for "freedom" from the constraining environs of the village and dreams up fantasies of a luxurious life. Her progression is, therefore, not towards the betterment of the inner life, but from vanity, flippancy and ambition to conceit, moral decadence and recklessness. From being a vain schoolgirl filled with fantasies of herself as pretty, she grows up to be selfish and contemptuous of her family and surroundings. In the end, when she leaves her self-sacrificing parents and affectionate sister, she thinks neither of their happiness nor of their respectability in the eyes of society, but only of herself. Thus, she moves towards a negative freedom which is an escape toward license. The return to security and conformity, in this novel, is executed on the part of narrator-heroine Saroja's who vicariously experiences false freedom, sees the city with all its glitter and sordidness and returns to the safety of village. Saroja's movement towards the city can be seen as representational of her possible escape to a freedom from conformity but she returns to a state of conformity and to the sense of responsibility to the

family. As for Lalitha, she would either make it for some insignificant roles in minor films which would be obtained only after suffering several moral indignities at the hands of immoral moneybags and conmen or end up as an inmate of a brothel. This is the ultimate fate which she brings upon herself in the effort to survive in the modern city with its meretricious value system in contrast to the traditional village with its conventional ways of living. Lalitha pays the price not only with chastity but dignity as well; she escapes into a cage of existential confusion. She is an example of total betrayal of traditional values and also of a total lack of sense of responsibility to herself.

The progress of Lalitha to false modernity begins when she is given a chance to feature in a documentary of village life produced and directed by Gupta. The Christian environment at school adds strength to the individualistic strain in her. Aunt Alamelu accuses her and her parents about the way she has been brought up.

Miss Mendoza who is a symbol of Modernity for Lalitha, praises her beauty and certifies her suitability for a film career.

Lalitha is invited to city by Mr. Gupta, the film director. She feels extremely happy at the idea of seeing the city life. On her return to the village, she expresses her disgust at the terrible heat in the village. This lure for a luxurious life is shattered soon. After viewing the premier show of the film Lalitha returns to the village but only to go back city without her parents consent. She becomes quite.

A few months later she becomes pregnant with Mr. Gupta's child. On her return to village she tries to commit suicide. The traditional Indian society think unwed motherhood to be worst form of degradation that could happen to respectable woman and her family Lalitha, at long last, realizes that Saroja is right because she could keep away from the colourful temptations.

Lalitha's father visits the city along with his family to call on Mr. Gupta. Mr. Gupta ignores them and makes it clear to them that he is not responsible for Lalitha's pregnancy. Ultimately, Appa, broken-hearted, returns to the village. Lalitha has to undergo an abortion. In spite of all these happenings and bitter experience of life, Lalitha's charm for the city life does not grow dim. One day she leaves the house quietly for ever.

Appa with Amma and Saroja makes a vain effort to search for Lalitha. They got nothing but frustration. Saroja views the world and society through Lalitha's experience she matures through it. Her own experience with Gupta's assistant, Devraj who attempts to take advantage of her youth and helplessness also helps in her development. She develops hatred for the city life. She chooses to

return to the security and solidity of village life. While Lalitha moves away from the traditional life of village, returns to it, and finally escapes again to the city—a symbol of a moral neutrality and anonymity. In the Indian social context we see girls as shown in *Two Virgins* torn between the desire for self-expression and the need of social obligation in a given community. In the middle class Indian society, even with liberal ideas as of Appa's about the need for free intermixing of girls and boys, no formal sex education given to children, which results in conflict between the social self and the biological self. Man is really not infinitely adaptable. The basic animal need like food, sleep and sex call for satisfaction. Lalitha makes a rebel through physical escape; but Markandaya never suggests that she can be happy forever. Saroja checks her unwholesome, if not harmful, longings and accepts her principle of conformity for security and survival. She reposes her faith in the moral value of social code. Markandaya believes happiness and true fulfillment can lie only in such an adherence; Markandaya's vision gets reflected through Saroja's final stand.

Lalitha identifies herself with the city, its atmosphere and its attitudes. The city breeds discontent and frustration. But Lalitha opts for the city of her own choices not once but twice, the second time being for ever. It is her choice Gupta thinks she had been forced into the city the first time. The city and the village as in *A Handful of Rice* (1966) assumes the form of total contrast between states of existence, signifying chaos and peace respectively. In the former, struggle for life and survival of the fittest work while in the latter everything has an ordered place. The jungle-city devours; the way in which Lalitha disappears into the flux of city's terrors at the end shows the monstrous capacity of city. The city and the village are representative of two eras as well as two value systems of man's civilization. What Markandaya seems to suggest through this novel is that one must be exposed to various experiences of life but one must have full control over one's senses, must have discriminating eye in order to imbibe only positive values.

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