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THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY: *TWO VIRGINS*

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Abstract

The predicament of woman comes from different forms of violence which becomes an impediment in shaping their identity. Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* positions the ineffable emotions of women. Female body is seen as a mere entity for pleasure, an unsolicited touching which often takes with normality and an abortion becomes the only choice for a woman when she is not accepted. This paper will focus on the primary concern of the writer in relation to women's quest for identity.

Keywords: Quest, identity, womanhood, betrayal, abortion.

Indian Writing in English has been enhanced by many gifted women writers who voiced out the voices of many women. The cried of the mute has been recorded in their writings. They opened a window where we can see the strength of a woman as well as the struggles they go through in pursuing their identity in the society they live in. The universal understanding of identity is who we are. Identity is shaped by many factors such as the house we live, the dress we wear, the talents and gifts that one has, the job that one holds and many more. Judging on those factors the society gives space and an identity to a person. An individual goes on in a quest to fulfil accordingly to occupy a room in a community.

In the words of L K Sharma in her work *The Position of Woman in Kamala Markandaya* she stated that "Markandaya's novel is instinct with a profound symbolic significance in the development and resolution of the plot. She may be classified as a documentary novelist of India, who uses for her plot

the lives of the people, especially of the poorer classes, as the substance of her fiction" (15). The setting of the novel *Two Virgins* is in an Indian village where Saroja narrates about village life. It portrays the low-class families and explores the lives of ordinary people. Like any other novels of Markandaya, the central character in *Two Virgins* is a female character.

In the works of Markandaya, some of the major thematic concerns revolve around the dilemma of people with conflicting Eastern and Western, tradition and modernity. Another major motif that runs parallel to the core theme is the sense and the quest of identity. The writer weaves a multicoloured picture of life and skilfully touches the feminine sensibility. Her novels give an incomparably vivid picture of Indian life and delineate the struggle of the individual as a female in society as represented by the character of Lalitha.

Lalitha, the elder sister of Saroja gets more attention from Appa because of her beauty. She had status because she was beautiful. She had delicate feet, long, lustrous lashes. She knew her beauty. "She was not afraid of anything, not even ghost but she was terrified of spoiling her beauty" (Markandaya 27). This indicates how the idea of beauty has been embedded in the mind of a young girl, giving immense importance to beauty. Vaccinated mark was not on her arms unlike other; Lalitha had the marks on her thigh to avoid disfiguring her arms. Appa, the father remarked on the beauty of Lalitha when she was born "A prettier newborn babe I never set eyes upon before or since" (9). When Amma told that all their children are equally beautiful Appa could not help but to admit that Lalitha was his favourite. Lalitha's skins glow "as if candles were burning under her skin" (55) Not only of Appa but she was also the only favourite of Miss Mandoza. On the other hand, Saroja was completely contrary to her sister. She was not beautiful as her sister yet she possesses the beauty of the soul. Though Saroja accepted the way she is, she wished to be beautiful. Saroja also wanted to have lashes like Lalitha but she never has had, but it did not surprise her. However, "Saroja hoped that one day she would turn out beautiful, like a butterfly bursting out of a chrysalis, perhaps when she was older" (9).

Lalitha was transferred to Ms Mendoza's Three King School where she learnt science, dancing, music and other artistic skills. Saroja was still studying in the state school where the students do not get opportunities to learn new skills like that of a private school. She also wished to learn music but she knew that her parents will not be able to afford to pay the fee for music class for her. When she asked her father, he replied "Perhaps when she was Lalitha's age, but Saroja knew he was only saying it to make her feel better" (37). In Saroja's school, the girls wanted to be more rounded and curvier, like goddesses in pictures, but in Lalitha's they were crazy for slimness, the fashion was to be skinny everywhere except breasts. Beauty is often associated with girls. The basic idea of beauty defined by society is having white skin without marks and being slender. Beauty has been given a lot of weight. The importance of breast has also

emphasised where the girls wish to keep their breast large. And, with the narration of Manikkam's wife who told about women from a rich family who sent their babies to her for feeding her milk because they did not want to spoil the shape of their breast and keep firm for their husbands. To a baby, it's about survival and good health. To a husband, it's about pleasure. However, here the women choose their husbands over their child. Why do they give much importance to their husband? Is it because they are scared to lose their husband since it is considered that women's identity is connected with her husband after she gets married? The women's body has been materialised and becomes a possession of her husband. In doing so, she loses her selfhood of who she is.

The novel takes us to a journey of a young girl from adolescence to womanhood. The writer has highlighted a sense of fear among the young girls by bringing in the character of Lachu, whose actions disturb the school going girls. In Indian society, the unwanted sexual remark and touching women in public spaces are one of the problems that a woman faces most often. It seems to be simple and does not assault women however it creates physical as well as a mental ordeal for woman. In the novel, Saroja was dreadfully afraid of falling into Lachu's hands that sexually harassed the school going girls. Lachu will sit by the roadside stretching his hands towards the girls who were on their way to school. Sometimes he would hide behind the bushes, and this was the worst thing for the school girls for they go towards him slowly without knowing that he was waiting. When they sensed they would walk at a faster pace so that he would not get hold of them and drag them into the bushes. When the girls reached their school compound, they feel safe. The school-going girls like Saroja make them feel unsafe and insecure to move out alone in a public space.

Lachu's hands had been described by Jaya, Saroja's classmate as terrible, puffy and fat and compared his hands to a bunch of bananas. Jaya narrated "What terrible things those fingers could do if they reached up under your skirts" (13). Saroja at once closed her thighs and asked Jaya to tell precisely about what had happened to her. Perhaps she was not ready to share her experience and told

her that "It was not to be described" (13). Amma and the other mothers of the girls remarked that it was scandalous and they formed a group of representatives and approached the police. When they called on the police, the sub-inspector said, "He knew, he knew, wasn't he a father himself? But you couldn't put away a man who was innocent and a man was innocent until he was found guilty, that was the law, and where was the evidence?"(14) The mothers went away from the police station and they remarked the law "Ass". Everyone in the village knew the character of Lachu and what he does to school-going girls but they were helpless since they did not have any evidence to put forward against him and that "none of the girls would testify" (14) Though this novel was written in 1973, this kind of matter happens in our present society. It has not changed. The woman being a victim does not dare to voice out and testify due to societal pressure of demeaning her identity, family and terrified of the new face of attack. There are many incidents where the bold victims register their complaint to the administration and they often become targeted.

The plight of a woman is difficult to comprehend, a problem that has no name as noted by Betty Friedan in her work *The Feminine Mystique*. From being a girl to woman, she is confined to a strike rule to follow certain rules demarcated by society. In the words of M.K Bhatnagar in his book *Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Spectrum* he stated that-

Indian woman's journey from the cradle to the tomb passes through different stages, playing familial roles. Yet she remains an enigma. Misfortunes, loss and societal restrict her freedom but they can never destroy the spirit within. Markandaya's women, though victims of nature and society never give in completely. Beneath the veneer of fragility and weakness lies an inherent strength. (133)

In the novel, Lalitha was lured by the false promises and became a victim under the hands of Mr Gupta, the film director. He is an everyman who takes advantage of an innocent girl who wished to move forward in life with a motive to become someone

who will earn a name for herself and her family like Lalitha.

Lalitha's zeal to become a film star started to emit light. She started dreaming the oyster as her world where she will shine and live a good life. Lalitha shared her thought to Saroja about her dream to become a star. She wanted to seize an opportunity to become a film actress, a personality of the cinema. Lalitha's eyes were starry and serious when she shared her dreams to her sister to show that she is earnest and were not daydreaming.

The film director Mr Gupta witnessed Lalitha dancing and he was impressed and that he started to enquire about Lalitha to Miss Mendoza. She introduces Lalitha to him, who came to visit the village with an intention and proposed to make a documentary about the village life. He decided to employ Lalitha in the documentary. There will be shots of the village pond, weaver's quarters, a wedding and a funeral as well. Lalitha was so excited to take a role in the film. "They filmed the village market, and the funeral of a young man, and the baggers who queued at the temple, and the monkeys that were plaguing the countryside. They filmed the grain distribution centre and the school with Miss Mendoza. There were several shots of Lalitha.

When Lalitha was dancing around Mr Gupta could not take off his attention from her. His eyes have been described as similar to Lachu's eyes. She danced on Indian dances and clicked some shots posed gracefully near the well. After which she felt so happy and said, "I feel like a dove on the wing, I could soar away, away like an eagle to the topmost peak of the sacred mountain." Every individual wants to soar up high in life. Lalitha also wishes the same as every person will dream of. This event boasts her to move further without her knowing about what is going to happen.

After the filming was done Mr Gupta visited Lalitha to say thank you and goodbye. As Mr Gupta shuffled his feet the dove which Lalitha designed a dove by her fingers using scuffed powder became blurred. Tears fell, she knelt and brushed away and drew again. "This time it was an eagle, a golden eagle soaring over the plains" (82). Lalitha imagines the

eagle to be her, who will soar high up. This image has a symbolic representation in forecasting the future of Lalitha. Dove is a symbolic representation of innocence which has been shuffled by Mr Gupta's feet.

In many pieces of literature, the dove is a universal symbol represents peace.

Lalitha was allowed to go for a week to view the film which was shot in the village. She was so much obsessed city life. Lalitha was so sure that she will be a star and that she called the city to be her spiritual home. Mr Gupta offered her to take part in his next film which she had accepted. She was so excited but there was no call from him for two months which makes her lost in her appetite. To fulfil her dreams Lalitha took a very strong decision that is to flee away from the village to a city. Appa had a hope that Lalitha will do well in everything she is doing for the advancement of her career. Later we found out that she was being pregnant by Mr Gupta. This event becomes a turning point in her life. She has been trap in the hands of a hungry young man, a hunger not of food but flesh. Lalitha represents every woman who risks their lives and goes out of their home to make their career and lose in a male maze. Their dream becomes topsy-turvy and their quest for identity loses its track and it grew blurred. Lalitha was no longer her.

Lalitha and her parents went to meet Mr Gupta to discuss about the matter if he is willing to marry Lalitha. He was not ready to do so and was ready to spend medical expenses for abortion. Appa and Amma agree to this and she was taken to hospital for abortion without taking her consent. Adrienne Rich in her remarkable work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* viewed that "A man may beget a child in passion or by rape, and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, and the raring of a child branded "illegitimate". (12) In the case of Lalitha, the choices that her parents choose for her is to do an abortion because that is how the society is organized. In doing so the mother goes

through many emotional, mentally as well as physical trauma. At first place, she has been used as an object for the fulfilment of the physical needs, secondly, she is being rejected and label with negative identity and going through physical pain in the process of abortion.

Clearly, the first violence done in abortion is on the body and mind of the pregnant woman herself. Most people, women and men alike, find it difficult to perform even a minor operation upon themselves an injection to lancing an infected figure or removing a splinter. It is nothing less than grim, driven desperation which can impel a woman to insert an unbent coat-hanger into her most sensitive parts, to place her body in the hands of a strange man with unverified credentials or to lie down without anaesthesia, knowing that in doing so she risks illness, grilling by the police, and death. An illegal or self-induced abortion is no casual experience. It is painful, dangerous, and cloaked in the guilt of criminality. (Rich. 128)

In the novel, we can feel the pathos which Lalitha went through when she narrated the process of abortion to her sister Saroja. "They sucked him out, said Lalitha, bit by bit. He came out in pieces. I could feel him going, though they said I wouldn't feel anything. It took ten minutes" (Markandaya 179). Lalitha wanted to bring the baby into the world but she knows that there was no home for him and he will be labelled as an unwanted child by the society and an "expression of a forbidden love" (Rich 160). "If I hadn't wanted him it might have been different, she said, an unwanted child is better off unborn. But I did want him. I wanted him the most when he was going, those last ten minutes of his life" (Markandaya 179). Haply her parents gave her the choices she has had choose to bear the child and face societal judgement like Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet letter*.

Kamala Markandaya, being a women writer, she has successfully brought the women character into being by delineating their plights, aspiration, foibles and failures. "She breathes life in her women characters who with the strength of adaptation

convert the challenge of life into pursuit of finer values that make life worth-living" (Arora 5). By the end of the novel, we find Lalitha moving forward and that for the second time she sets out from her comfort zone to fulfil her dream like Meghna Mathur in a Bollywood drama *Fashion* directed by Madhur Bhandarkar.

Lalitha represents every liberated individual who strife hard in finding out the possibilities of their identity in a male maze society. Through this novel, *Two Virgins* Markandaya has flamboyantly brought in not only the sense of fear, emotional distress but also a sense of hope. Lalitha venturing out again has given a beam of hope to many women who seem to lose everything. It has given a purpose to myriad women who are probing in the dark and where there is an absence of a sense of belongingness.

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