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Virginity! Thy Name Is Saroja!

Dr. Indu Singh Rajput
Associate Professor,
G.D.H (P.G.) College, Moradabad.
&
Fariduddin Ahmed
Research Scholar,
Moradabad.

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Abstract:

Concept of virginity has been asserted by Kamala Markandaya through the righteous conduct of Saroja. Her novel *Two Virgins* points out the conflict between urban and rural life. For her town stands for materialism, industrialization, corruption and irrational growth whereas rural people still attach importance to fortitude, mental freedom, right conduct and right philosophy. Like Richardson, Henry Fielding and Jane Austen, Kamala Markandaya condemns Lalitha for her rash decision and lust for a life of glory at the cost of her virginity. Even after abortion she does not stay with her family. On the contrary Saroja supports her poor parents when they feel mentally shattered. As a round character, she has her own views on family life and freedom struggle of India. She has studied book of life though she has no university degree. She is aptly regarded superior to Lalitha due to her virtuous conduct.

Keywords: Right philosophy, Right Conduct, Spirituality, Spiritual Affinity, Personal Identity.

Introduction:

Through Saroja Kamala Markandaya answers a few important ethical questions such as — What is self-restraint? Can the theory of right conduct be followed in this age of materialism? Is it possible for a young girl to control her temptations and obsessions? Can she survive in a village far away from urban facilities? How does she respect her Appa and Amma? Is she proud of the fact

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that her father has been a freedom fighter? How does she adjust in her school when hostile criticism is made against Lalitha's sudden disappearance? Does she imitate Miss Mendoza, the principal of Missionary School? Is she selfish in her conduct towards Lalitha and other friends? How does she escape from the flirting nature of Chingleput? Why does she seek her identity in village itself as city is full of dirt, dust and pollution? How could she be a virgin like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi?

In the 4th part of the novel the author refers to Appa's approach towards children as he has always granted equal rights to them. As an advanced citizen of India he believes that education should be given to daughters too. When Lalitha deserts home without any information Aunt Alamelu sarcastically remarks — This is the result of giving rights to girls! Yet Appa is not prepared to withdraw liberty of expression and personality development from young Saroja as he has full faith in her integrity. Appa asks:

Are we to be stumbling blocks in the path of our children?

(TV 120)

App has full faith in democratic ways and hence does not control his children with a rod. He does not trust the theory — Spare the rod and spoil the child. Even Manikkam's wife has lust for money but not Saroja as the latter understands the financial limitations of Appa and cuts her coat according to her cloth.

At the very outset the artist refers to the culture of town which is remarkable for industries and machines. (TV 1) But Saroja does not feel attracted towards the glamour and lustre of the town. She never asks her Appa to take her to the town as she is satisfied with her rural surroundings. Quite a few women talk of protecting their breasts and hence don't feed the children with breasts. Saroja feels shocked when such references are made by Manikkam's wife in her presence. This is what happened after independence when Indian girls started imitating the western women. Saroja has no desire to be westernized in any way.

Then the author makes a reference to the abolition of Zamindari system (TV 4) when Pt. Nehru granted the rights of land to the peasants who were ploughing piece of land. Zamindari bonds were issued to feudal-lords in lieu of the land and they had no rights up now the land of their ancestors. Appa tells Saroja that the land is a gift to him from the new government. She feels pleased with this economic reform as declared by Indian government.

Here Saroja can be contrasted with Caroline who is proud of her properties and high standard of living. In the novel *Possession* she wants to control Valmiki physically and mentally as she does not allow him to move freely. With the passage of time Valmiki becomes conscious of real self and wants to fly freely like bird but then she creates problems for him at every step. She is a victimizer but Saroja hates every bondage like virtuous girls. She does not find anything disgusting in her school and hence follows all the rules and regulations. It is true that she is not a very brilliant student and yet can be admired for following the theory — To thine self be true! Just she hears the major events of Indian freedom movement from Appa and appreciates the efforts of Gandhi who raised his voice against slavery of the nation. But she has no desire to join any political party. She hates the idea that the Britishers considered her Appa a 'terrorist' which he was not. How can a freedom fighter be regarded a terrorist? At times Amma asks her not to pay undue attention to the tales of Appa. Of course, she is shocked to know the disaster that spread in India and Pakistan at the time of partition. She thinks — How can people be cruel to each other in the name of communal consideration? The author admires Saroja's spiritual growth and remarks:

Although, of course, her soul was quite safe, Saroja knew you couldn't destroy the soul. But she loved her mother's body as well. (TV 6)

This confirms the fact that there is perfect understanding between Amma and Saroja.

Nucleus:

Lalitha was conscious of her physical beauty and felt that she had 'status'. Due to her long lashes, there were emissaries for her. But Saroja didn't pay attention to physical beauty and regarded it artificial and temporary: '... for show' only. With the help of perfumes, she was advised to grow her eye lashes but in vain! Lalitha made the remarks:

It is a pity, some people are pretty, some people are plain ... Saroja knew which she was, but she had become used to being plain. Secretly she hoped one day she would turn out beautiful, like a butterfly ... (TV 9) the theme of the novel confirms the statement of John Keats who said: Beauty is truth, truth is beauty ... (GU)

With her self-restraint and self-discipline Saroja proves prettier than Lalitha. It is true that Lalitha studies in the Mission School and smart principal Miss Mendoza is her source of inspiration. Like Hardy's Eustacia Vye, she regards village hell for herself and aspires to be in a town to enjoy a life of glamour. She fails to have any identity of her own depressed soul. It is true that she learnt moral science in Three Kings School but fails to follow ethical code of conduct. But Saroja attaches due importance to right conduct, righteousness and right knowledge.

Amma and Aunt Alamelu wish to protect Lalitha and Saroja from the evil eyes of loafers like Lachu. Here the elderly ladies show their regards for Lord Krishna and regard Him personification of God. Unfortunately, Lalitha has no interest in temple prayers, religious books, meditation and theory of punishment and rewards as she is a butterfly of fashion. Due to milk of human kindness Saroja feels sympathy for the Indians who were tortured by British authorities before 1947.

The important aspect of Saroja's personality is that she does not imitate Lalitha till the end of the novel as Lalitha remarks: Imitation is the best kind of flattery ... (TV 19) She asks herself — Why not to develop one's own qualities? Why to depend upon Lalitha? What is so unique in Lalitha? How is she a perfect model for others? Of course, Saroja does not have the courage to visit the village

haunted well all alone due to sense of fear. But her superstition does not mar her career.

Times were changing fast in India after 1947 and many philanthropists and political leaders supported the cause of education to uplift society. Birth-control methods were taught to masses as it was the need of the hour. Joint family system was breaking down. Lalitha survives in her own world of fancy and does not care for the result of her own rash decisions. On the contrary Saroja is fully conscious of the poor status of Appa and wants to protect his reputation at every step. Condition became pitiable in village when epidemics spread.

Saroja is surprised to see a lot of money with Perumal as she had not yet seen huge amount of money. It is irony of fate that some people possessed a lot of money and others were starving. Like Appa, Saroja accepts that education is the best means for improving the conditions of women and rights have got to be given to them. However, she was satisfied with her toys and specially the wooden cart. In her leisure hours she turned towards God to seek His blessings.

Towards the end of first book the author asserts that town life and its miseries were beyond the understanding of Saroja. Of course, she had rough idea about the town life but then its corrupt ways were totally unknown to her. Village boys told a lot about urban life when they visited the village and yet she never felt lured towards the same. She felt happy when Appa bought bicycles for Lalitha as well as Saroja. Raleigh cycles were bought for them as Indian industries had not yet produced attractive cycles by then. Appa wanted that Indian women ought to be westernized and sooner it is done the better it is. But Saroja fails to understand and follow this concept. She asks herself — How is she stagnant and static? Lalitha could never control her ambitions but Saroja could. She delves deep in her real self and wants to know — Who am I? What for have I taken birth? Western spoons and forks fail to attract her. Like Lalitha, she wants to be 'flower-fresh' but then she does not pine for it keenly. Like Lalitha, she is not crazy for a slim body as she allows nature to take its own course. Miss Mendoza informs them that many careers are open for Indian women. Unfortunately, Lalitha decides to be a film actress but not Saroja.

As a humanitarian Saroja thinks of the rights of animals too. Yet she does not regard poverty as a curse for herself and continues to discover virtuous ways of living (TV 51) Saroja is shocked to know that the British government was developing the trade of opium in India and China for profits. Lalitha boldly tells Saroja to make use of the opportunity that knocks her door because — opportunity knocks only once! Let her develop her art and skills to make use of the material and physical opportunity present before her. But alas! This suggestion does not strike Saroja.

It was a matter of chance that Mr. Gupta and Dev Raj visited their village to make a documentary film and selected Lalitha for the major role. This gave impetus to Lalitha as she felt elevated with this acting. Now there was no limit to her expectations, obsessions and ambitions. Mr. Gupta assured her of future films. This was grand period in her life and other village girls felt jealous of her. Miss Mendoza suggested that Lalitha should be given all facilities for new career in films. But orthodox Aunt was opposed to this idea as it made Lalitha only a degraded dancer only. Gone were the days when films were prepared on the life of Sita, Draupadi, Savitri, Shakuntala etc. Now themes needed new smart girls and Lalitha eagerly waited for the call of Mr. Gupta. When there was no call from the film unit, she caught a bus after stealing some rupees from Appa's pocket and deserted the village to fulfil her ambition. Her rashness proves to be hamartia as she does not know the wicked ways of the film industry. Ultimately, she had to pay a heavy price for this 'creative vocation'. (TV 72)

Saroja does not aspire for career in the film industry as village life is satisfying for her. Here everybody has a name. Each animal, each tree, each flower, each river, each person etc. has a name and its utility is accepted. There is no dust, dirt and pollution here. Villages are free from corruption and crowded streets. German scholar Max Muller asked his students of Oxford University to visit Indian villages if they wanted to have knowledge of Indian culture and civilization. It is so because virtuous women like Amma, Aunt Alamelu, Saroja, Mrs. Manikkam etc. live here. If Lalitha had physical grace, Saroja possesses intellectual and spiritual qualities and can be ranked with William Shakespeare's Olivia, Celia, Cordelia, Desdemona, Miranda etc.

In the middle of 2nd book Lalitha remarks:

Everything was revealed in time. (TV 75)

Lalitha continues to degrade herself with progress of time and fails to learn anything from her past. During her pregnancy period she fails to decide her future action but Appa and Amma feel highly worried. Saroja thinks that something is wrong with Lalitha. At the proper time the unwanted child is aborted in the hospital and there is a temporary relief for Amma and Appa. They have decided to go back to their village the next morning. But man proposes and God disposes. Now Lalitha deserts them again as she regards village life hell for herself. She is in search of new identity and does not consult Appa for that. Still Appa, Amma and Saroja search her in major streets of the town and feel frustrated and broken-hearted. In one secret note Lalitha advised Saroja to stay in the town at every cost if she wants to make progress. But Saroja hates this suggestion and tears off the piece of paper. Appa had already faced a lot of disgrace and humiliation due to Lalitha and Saroja supported him in every situation. Had Saroja also left her Appa, it would have ruined the old man.

Conclusion:

Lalitha is proud of being an artist though does not know the meaning of art. She does not know the relation between art and life and between art and literature. She tells Aunt Alamelu: ... you can see evil in the most beautiful things ... (TV 79). The irony is that she fails to understand the dark side of Mr. Gupta's character and ultimately ruins herself. She fails to realize that 'all that glitters is not gold'. She fails to analyze the fact that Mr. Gupta and Dev Raj spread traps for beautiful and ambitious girls. They make misuse of the term 'artistic affinity'. (TV 79)

In the beginning of third book Lalitha tells Saroja: You will see, my day will dawn. (TV 89) But the dawn brings disaster, desertion, moral turpitude and ethical decay for her as she had no wisdom in herself. Just she became a tool in the hands of Mr. Gupta, enjoyed sex freely, felt attracted towards his high standard of living and the glamour of film industry. On the contrary Saroja feels

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tempted towards Dev Raj for a few moments and then controls her obsession for him. Ultimately, she protects herself and does not share her passion with any one. She follows Appa's theory:

... peace flows from what is right ... (TV 93)

There is no limit to her anguish, panic and despair when she talks to Lalitha on abortion. Lalitha tells her that the physician cut her child to pieces. But Saroja finds herself helpless in this situation. How could society accept a child before marriage? Why did Lalitha not take right steps in the film industry? Lalitha regards city her 'spiritual home' (TV 97) and not Saroja. The younger sister just pities her for her ignorance as the elder one does not understand the depth of 'spirituality'. Saroja remains a virgin though Lalitha regards her a 'simpleton'. Of course, Saroja often feels offended with Lalitha. The author remarks:

She (Saroja) felt she hated her sister (Lalitha). (TV 98)

In the research article *Symbolism in Markandaya's Two Virgins* Dr. Ramesh K. Srivastava remarks:

Saroja symbolizes the dewy freshness and innocence of village life, gradually withering in the aftermath of India's rapid industrialization. She looks yearningly to the city and to the west, has a taste of urban life, but feeling disappointed, she comes back to her rural life, where lay real happiness for her — all else being ephemeral. (SMTV 138)

Dr. Ramesh K. Srivastava adds:

But she (Saroja) continues to win the confidence of her mother who prides in Saroja's innocence and her act of blushing in contrast to Lalitha's shamelessness. (SMTV 139)

In the third book Lalitha realizes that money is the root cause of corruption and anarchy in the town. Of course, Saroja fails to understand the rash decision of Lalitha — How could her sister ignore the ethics of family? Regarding power of tolerance in women Manikkam's wife tells Saroja:

A woman gets used to it. (TV 114)

In the beginning of fourth book of the novel Chingleput admires Saroja's skills and tells her:

You don't have to be a sun, rays in all directions, just one skill is sufficient to warm you. (TV 116)

Lalitha returns to village as a pregnant woman and Saroja, like Jane Austen' Elizabeth Bennet, does not welcome her with warmth of heart. She asks herself — How can Lalitha boast of Mr. Gupta? Is she not ashamed of her conduct? Of course, Saroja tries her best to analyze the tensions of Lalitha when the latter's pregnancy becomes an open secret. Lalitha regards home a trap but not Saroja. Saroja wishes that Mr. Gupta and Lalitha should get married. But who cares for her suggestion? Chingleput remarks:

There are whores everywhere. (TV 138)

Quite often Saroja thought high of Lalitha's qualities. (TV 147) The author says that Saroja 'had not experienced the life ... (TV 148) In the fifth book Lalitha often wishes to be simple, rational, active and yet innocent like Saroja. (TV 161) However, Lalitha fails to enjoy 'the creation of life' in herself. (TV 171) As she was no more a virgin, she had lost ethical and human rights — How could she command respect in a male-dominated society? How could she convince Mr. Gupta that he too was at fault? But Mr. Gupta escaped from the tragedy unscathed and there is no nemesis in the novel. Lalitha and Saroja recollect their childhood when life was without complexities and tensions.

In the sixth book Saroja sees a dream and finds herself making love with Dev Raj. She feels the sensations of his kisses. Then she sees Lalitha as a naked woman. (TV 175) Here the influence of Sigmund Freud can be easily traced as

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the artist enters the unconscious and subconscious mind of Saroja. But then the dream remains a dream and Saroja is in a position to control her real self. Then Lalitha tells Saroja that every woman has to suffer certain agonies and Saroja is no exception: ... you're a woman, aren't you? You aren't going to slide through life untouched, you don't think. (TV 179)

Out of sympathy Lalitha advises her: ... The thing to remember, my sweet, is never to cry over spilt milk. (TV 179)

Lalitha's loss of virginitly teaches bitter lesson to Saroja as the latter decides to be rational and ethical and never to surrender before temptations. Like Henrik Ibsen, she accepts that it is society that is responsible for human sufferings. Now she accompanies Appa and Amma to reach the village as city stands for immorality, cheating and moral decay. The author remarks:

She hated the city.

She didn't belong to it, she wanted to, go away and never come back. She wanted to go home. (TV 187)

Thus, Chastity is the ornament that Saroja wants to put on throughout her life. She does not want to be run down in the eyes of Appa, Amma and the villagers. She can be ranked with Richardson's Pamela who preserves her virginitly at every cost. Then she can be put in the category of Henry Fielding's Sophia Western who knows how to take risk for the purity of character. Like R.N. Tagore, she follows the slogan *Akela Chalo*.

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