CHAPTER-3

Assimilation and Insurrection
The growth of a girl depends on the family condition, societal condition and cultural codes and conduct of the milieu she lives in. Growing as a girl is a very difficult task in this patriarchal society like India. A girl has to face so many problems in her life. She is trapped in suppressive culture, narrow minded family and changing complex society. These girls respond in different ways, some adapt the changes, some submit themselves and some revolt against them in their own way.

This chapter will glance into the girlhood depicted by Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai. Both the novelists delve deep into the psyche of their girl protagonists. This chapter will analyse Lalitha and Saroja in Kamala Markandaya’s *Two Virgins* and Raka in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*. All these protagonists show assimilation and insurrection to have self identity in the world. They all face one or the other challenges in their lives.

I

She had to admit that Raka was not like any other child she had known, not like any of her children or grandchildren. Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs. Like an insect burrowing through the sandy loan and pine-needles of the hillsides, like her own great-grandmother, Raka wanted only one thing- to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli. (Desai: 52)

Unconditional love is essential for the healthy growth of a child. Many factors play role of hurdles in the smooth flow of love, security and affection. Home is a place where a child is formed and shaped into a happy, confident adult and a good human being who can carry forward the same chain to the next
generation. A child is like a rose bud, but if it is marred, it will deform the full blossom. In the same way some attitudes of elders like domination, over-protectiveness, over indulgence, indifference and partiality damage a child’s free growth. If the personality and self-respect of a child is damaged, he/she will turn into a twisted, fearful, difficult, maladjusted adult. If a child is denied genuine love, he/she loses the sense of belonging and fails to relate himself/herself to others. Children’s greatest urge is to be able to depend on others for emotional support throughout their lives. Parents alone can give that support. If the children are denied genuine love, they develop what Karen Horney calls, “a profound insecurity and vague apprehensiveness” (18) For Anita Desai the childhood impressions are enduring as they shape the personality and attitudes of an individual.

Anita Desai is widely acclaimed as one of the foremost Indian women novelists. She is accepted worldwide. Her significance as a literary star has made her famous amongst her readers. Anita Desai is one of the powerful novelists in contemporary India. She is unique in her portrayal of the inner struggle of her female protagonists. Anita Desai is keen to depict interior selves of her characters. She shows the problems of a woman in various phases of her life, be it a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother. The novelist sharply focuses upon the emotional reactions of the woman as she experiences these stages. Desai has portrayed the intense conflicts that are produced in the individuals, the interpersonal conflicts as well as intra-personal conflicts. The self is subsumed by the conflicts at time. Sometimes they result in withdrawal, alienation, repression, neurosis and aggression.

Though Anita Desai’s characters are self-conscious of the reality around them, they carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She deals
with the dislocation of normal life, the recklessness of behaviour, morbidity of temperament and maladjustment in family life. Anita Desai adds a new dimension, turning into the realities of life and plunges into the depths of the human psyche to score out its mysteries, turmoil and chaos inside the mind of her character. According to P.F. Patil, “...in Anita Desai’s novels the inner workings, the inner sensibilities are more compelling than the outer weather or the visible action.”(47)

Anita Desai’s fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) which won her both the royal society Award and the Sahitya Akademi Award, explores the inner struggle of Nanda Kaul and her great granddaughter Raka. *Fire on the Mountain* is divided in three parts. The first part depicts Nanda Kaul, who lives in perfect isolation in her hilltop retreat Carignano. The second part shows Raka’s entry to Carignano. Raka is a great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul. Raka is an introvert haunted child because of the visions of her violent father and whimpering mother. The third part depicts the pathetic story of Ila Das, Nanda Kaul’s childhood friend.

The story of *Fire on the Mountain* revolves round the inner lives of female protagonists Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. Deeply sensitive females are presented who are engaged in a painful search for identity and undergo psychic tension. Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr. Kaul, the vice- chancellor of the Punjab University. When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul is living in Carignano, far from the madding crowd. She wants to do away with personal and social relationships in order to live a life of her own, without any bondage. Her life so far, has been full on the surface but empty inside. After marriage, she had to care for others without being cared for. This lack of attention over the years, gradually built up in her an attitude of hostility towards people, which finally leads to her self- imposed isolation. She shuns all human company. Even the postman’s arrival to deliver the letter is frowned upon by her. But
this seeming quietude does not last long. Raka arrives at Carignano after her typhoid attack. The old woman and the young girl live in double singleness. Raka’s young life has also its sordid side crammed into her memory. Her childhood memories are devoid of fun and games, the romance of adventure, of any other happy associations, with sisters or brothers or friends with whom she played or shared secrets. The tension filled life of her parents has a disastrous effect upon her tender mind. Her intense desire for solitude and secrecy becomes a necessary part of herself. As days pass by, Nanda Kaul finds herself drawn towards Raka, something she had not expected. However, the little girl refuses to be befriended and escapes into the hills looking for company in solitude.

Ila Das, Nanda Kaul’s childhood friend visits Carignano to meet Raka; a onetime lecturer in Punjab university. Ila Das had lost her job subsequent to Mr. Kaul’s retirement. She has come to Kasauli, now in her own capacity as an officer in the social welfare department. She fights against child marriage by enlightening the local people about the evils of this practice. This invites the wrath of many of the villagers of whom Preet Singh is one. His attempts to barter his little daughter for a tiny piece of land and a few goats, has been successfully thwarted by Ila Das. He is lying in wait to settle his score with her. One evening when Ila Das returns late from Carignano to her humble house in the valleys, he chases her, rapes and murders her. When the news of Ila Das’s death is conveyed to Nanda Kaul over the phone, she is shocked and falls dead. Raka, unaware of her great grandmother’s death, rushes into the house proclaiming wildly that she has set the forest on fire.

The fact that the three parts deal with three different women does not mean that the novel is made up of three different and independent stories. The setting is the same throughout the novel and the women, Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das are all
related to each other in some way or the other. Of the three female characters, Nanda and Raka have withdrawn from society into a state of self-imposed loneliness, though for different reasons. The third, Ila Das is friendly and wishes to eradicate certain social evils which, however, result in her tragic end. One similarity between this novel and the other novels by Anita Desai is that the women are first deprived of certain emotional and personal needs in life, and it is this deprivation which results in their withdrawal and alienation from family and society. And this change brought in their mental perspective with the time and experience and produces a psychic strain.

Raka constitutes the core charm of the novel. In the whole range of Desai’s character, there is no one like her, she is the only child character in Anita Desai’s novels. An intimate observation of her activities in the novel reveals mysterious dimensions of her personality. If Carignano is an abode of solitaries, the most fitting one amongst them all is rake. When Raka comes to Carignano, the narrator describes Raka in following lines:

Raka meant the moon, but this child was not round- faced, calm or radiant...she looked like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs. Raka slowed down, dragging her foot, then came towards her great grandmother, with something despairing in her attitude saying nothing...old lady feel more than ever her resemblance to an insect.

(Desai: 43)

Raka is often referred as an insect, a cricket, a pet insect which suggest that she is completely at home with nature. If Nanda Kaul’s quest for ideal self spelt calm and peace, for Raka it is complete oneness with the elements of nature. Raka prefers
aloneness and is bitterly disdainful of any sort of censoriousness. She is opposed to all disciplines, order and obedience and has the gift of avoiding what she regards as dispensable. She has her distinctly secret life. Instead of Carignano, she is drawn towards a burnt house on the top of another knoll.

Nanda is surprised to discover that Raka has the gift of disappearing suddenly and silently for hours together. Solitude never disturbs Raka. She never asks for anything. She is very different from other children. She has come to Carignano for nothing else, but to be alone. Raka's bitterness makes her feel strongly drawn towards scenes of devastation. Hard acts not pleasant things or the sights, appeal to her. Jackals, snakes, thorny bushes and insects fascinate her. It is not without reason that the people at Kasauli finds her behaviour absurd and think that she is eccentric. It is possible that she has turned into what she is because her own mother suffered from frequent bouts of nervous breakdowns and may have passed on some of her disease genetically to her daughter. Whatever the reason, Raka evolves as a pyre-maniac because whatever is illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless fascinates her. It appealed to her so much that in a mood, she sets fire to the forest on the mountain. Raka’s unconcern behaviour disturbs Nanda the most.

She had to admit that Raka was not like any other child she had known, not like any of her own children or grandchildren. Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs. (Desai: 47)

The child’s need for parental love and assurance is so great that if he/she feels neglected, his/her thirst for love reaches breaking point and turns to anger. When the children notice the open hostility between the parents, it affects their personality. Children are the mute sufferers of their parents’ drama. Home life without love is a
terror and children who have not had enough in childhood stand a good chance of
being socially maladjusted. Raka is the victim of the ambiguity of life in her short
span of life. Raka's childhood had driven her into a hard core of solitude and self-
sufficiency, rarely to be found in a child of so tender an age. She had been
transformed into what she is partly by her weak physical health and partly by a similar
set of circumstances in early childhood. Her intense desire for solitude and secrecy
becomes a necessary part of herself. She learns to lead an independent existence as
younger animals do. She arrives at Carignano at a time when she has completely
mastered the art of existing without aid or sympathy from anyone else. Nanda Kaul's
obvious rejection therefore does not hurt her. There seems to be no love between
Raka’s parents. Raka’s father, an officer in the Indian Foreign Service, fails to
socialize, the mother ceases to take interest in her even as a patient. This has an
adverse effect on Raka. Raka’s parents have no time to cater to their child’s need.
Consequently Raka enjoys the company of animals. William Walsh in *Uses of
Imagination* remarks that for the healthy growth of an individual, love is very
important:

The child of consciousness, which is partial and successive, does not
include a sense of the past or the future. It has to be discovered and the
provocation to learn it, is love. Affection is the seed of time. It is love,
intensifying the delight on the present and correspondingly bringing
discomfort in absence which introduces an element of permanence into
the child’s experience. (166)

Raka’s silent withdrawal is the result of her mother’s nervous breakdown and
her father’s inhuman behaviour. Raka has had no joy of parental love and therefore it
is her morbid psyche that sees madness and violence in the party in the club,
Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse—harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka...shut her eyes and wept. (Desai: 78-79)

Raka is at once a little girl with a splintered psyche and an unmistakable symbol of the individual’s quest for meaning. The jackals are symbols of the mystery of life. Not all children would dare to brave the rough terrains of the consciousness of the futility of human existence nor are they in search of values. The existential theme of the quest for meaning undertaken by those who refuse to remain merely as members of the multitude is well brought out in the lonely and mystified wanderings of Raka. In this respect it has been pointed out by Shantha Krishnaswamy,

Her [Raka’s] childhood has hardened her into a little core of solitary self-sufficiency and now a young girl up here in the mountains...her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting. ‘I don’t care, I don’t care anything.” (Desai: 73) The conventional sweet smells and sounds of girlhood are ignored, she feels drawn by scenes of devastation and failure. The forest fire tingle her and she bursts from the shell of Carignano like a sharp, keen edged explosive to set fire to the mountainside. (261-262)

Raka’s act of setting forest on fire comes as a surprise to the reader. There does not seem enough motivation for Raka to take this sudden bold step at that particular juncture in the novel. Moreover, it appears to be a well-planned, and not an impulsive action of a neurotic child. However, since the step has been taken,
one could justify it as Raka's giving vent to the fire of her inner anger and frustration by setting the forest on fire.

Ever since her arrival at Carignano, Raka evinces a keen interest in wild fire. This obsession with the forest fire provides yet another dimension with the forest fire provides to her existentialist preoccupations. Immediately after her arrival at Carignano, on witnessing a fire in the forest, she becomes obsessed with forest fires, for they seem to her the empirical manifestation of her inner conflict, whether to continue with her mediocre, painful and aimless existence imposed upon her by heredity and environment or to revolt against their dictates and attempt to create her own values. By an elaborate expression of her free will and demonstration of her ability to choose and act, she sets the forest on fire towards the end of the novel. The fire created by her is the result and manifestation of her existential angst to destroy the old and meaningless to make room for the new and significant. It is an affirmation of her search for values. What is ironical is that neither Raka nor Nanda has been happy by being unnatural or by behaving abnormally. The experiences of both have been different. What makes them alike is that each one runs away from the place and the situation which caused her anguish; but the curious thing about it is that each knows what she is running away R. K. Gupta states that, the end of the novel is:

Expressive of Raka’s resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural, therefore aligning Raka’s act of violent destruction with the resistance she feels towards the feminine roles she is already expected to uphold. (106)

After witnessing so much hurt and lack of love in her mother’s life, Raka feels that she should run away and by her best not to get caught and forced to submit to being a mother and a wife. P.D. Dubey has rightly said, “Raka’s act of setting fire to
the forest is symbolic of her revolt against the cruelty and violence rampant our society.” (121) Raka’s behaviour resembles what Simone De Beauvoir says about the comforts girls find in fields and woods,

In the parental house reign mother, laws, custom and routine, and she wants to wrest herself from this past: she wants to become a sovereign subject in her own turn: but socially she only accedes to her adult life by becoming woman: she pays for her liberation with an abdication; but in the midst of plants and animals she is a human being; a subject, a freedom, she is freed both from her family and from males. She finds an image of the solitude of her soul in the secrecy of forests and the tangible figure of transcendence in the vast horizons of the plains; she is herself this limitless land, she can follow, she will follow these roads that leave for an unknown future; sitting on the hilltop she dominates the riches of the world spread out at her feet...she is no longer cursed, she proudly claims her kinship with leaves and flowers. (Beauvoir, 2011: 387-388)

Two portrayals of girlhood are given in Fire on the Mountain Raka’s girlhood is the present and actual one. Her great grandmother Nanda’s is past and imaginary. Both the childhoods are father- oriented and in case of Raka the father is a terror and in case of Nanda he is an indulgent man. Raka’s childhood presents the reality of a girl child’s actual existence and Nanda’s reveals the longed- for world of a girl child. Raka is packed to Carignano, to her great grandmother, by her grandmother as her own mother is down in hospital and her father on duty abroad. Her parents led a hopeless married life of violence and Raka never misses her parents much because there is no strong bond between her and her parents. She seldom wants to know about
them and when once Nanda tells her about her mother being hospitalized in a nursing home in Geneva, she notices:

Her face was pale, but composed. She might have been indifferent, although deliberately so. After all, she had known her mother ill, mostly in bed, under a loose pink blanket that smelled of damp, like the lilies. It was no new shock. (Desai: 89)

Another girl child of seven is given a passing reference in the novel. She is Preet Singh’s daughter who is going to be given in marriage to an old man for his prosperity and piece of land. Fortunately Ila Das interferes and the marriage is put off. It is the same Preet Singh, who vengefully rapes and murders Ila Das at the end of the novel. One thing is clear from the pictures of the two girls, whatever be the society in which the girl child finds herself, whoever her parents be, she is a marginalized one and always at the receiving end. Such deprived childhoods do not carry the promise of a healthy or even normal personality.

In this novel, the difference that Desai makes between the two characters, Nanda and Raka, is subtle and persuasive. The lack of communication between the two is an outcome of a wounded psyche in each case. Nanda's unhappy domestic experience and the traumatic childhood experience of Raka have made them both loners. Each tries to hide and conceal what she needs most i.e. a feeling of security and fulfilment of love. In a way both Raka and Nanda are escapists but the irony lies in the fact that while the situation has been left behind, the old identity remains. Nanda's seclusion from society is her sacrifice, but since Raka has nothing that she can sacrifice as she is not mature enough to sublimate her negative emotions, she
seeks to obtain some relief from the fire within through the objective correlative of the burning forest, undoubtedly a violent expression of her frustrations.

Desai is considered a psychological novelist. Her concern is mainly with the vague atmosphere of the female psyche. Each of her protagonists is presented as an inscrutable individual. They are sensitive, sometimes emotional, always misfits within their world, and struggling to preserve their integrity in the face of demands made on them. Trapped in a repressive culture or insular family, these female protagonists attempt to retain autonomy by responding in two ways: they withdraw into a subjective world, often acting in ways the society considers neurotic or mad or they cultivate coldness or indifference, refusing to give in.

Anita Desai’s protagonists are socio-psychic rebels, alienated selves who find it difficult to compromise with this milieu. Her characters reflect the mystic reality of our life through the complex interaction of the self and the society.

II

She hated the city. She didn’t belong to it, she wanted to go away and never come back. She wanted to go home. At home there...No one could ever be lost, not by trying...You always knew where you were, you know who you were. The city took it all away from you. You were one in a hundred, in a thousand, you were no longer you. You have been an amoeba. You drifted, amoeba, like through the baffling streets, wondering where you were, what business you had. (Markandaya: 187-188)
The growth of a girl in Indian society is seen mainly in relation to her attitude towards her family and her duty towards it. Coming into sharp conflict with the sense of family duty is the girl’s burgeoning feeling of self identity. It is in the course of this conflict that the full identity of the girl is formed. The successful formation of this identity depends upon the delicate balance that the girl maintains between submission and revolt.

The burden of the female child is more tedious than that of the male child because aspects of her body, the function of her femaleness intrude upon the growth of her personality. Not only the parents, but also the society as a whole is influenced by the physical appearance of the girl child. This is a great hindrance in the inner growth of the child. It is in the adjustment that the family makes to the biological processes, and the girl’s attitude towards the family and parents that the identity of a child gets defined and firmly established.

The modern Indian Renaissance witnessed the rise as well as the creative release of feminine sensibility. The novels of Kamala Markandaya fully reflect the awakened feminine sensibility in contemporary India. Kamala Markandaya is aware of the changing Indian society in post-independence India. She observes a definite cultural continuity amidst the varied social, economic and political changes in modern India. She explores the impact of change of the human psychology more of the female characters in her novels. In this connection Margaret P. Joseph has commented:

Kamala Markandaya’s novels are generated by the tragic vision that finds in contemporary life in fruitful seed-bed for conflict. She is sensitive to the suffering that is the result of the struggle between
traditional and the modern, the individual and society or one race and another. (211)

*Two Virgins* by Kamala Markandaya deals with the problem faced by young girls in the modern complex society. This novel describes the adolescent awakening of two sisters named Lalitha and Saroja, belonging to a lower middle class family of South Indian village. Markandaya’s text is clearly an indictment of the city- the site of moral degeneracy in several of the novels. This concern places *Two Virgins* in the tradition of post-independence fiction which deals with the effect of modernity on the ways of traditional India. R. M. Varma studies this aspect of the novel and comments:

*Two Virgins* shows great concern about the irresistible encroachment of new and material values borrowed from the West, on the ancient Indian beliefs and old established relationships within the family and the village. (qtd. in Misra: 18)

In *Two Virgins* Kamala Markandaya presents the new face of degradation, which is the result neither of hunger nor of poverty. Rather, it is the outcome of a fashion of the modern society which claims to be advanced. *Two Virgins* deals with the problem faced by young girls in the modern complex society. As Alice Drum points out:

It is the economic difficulties that create problems in the later novel (*Two Virgins*) but the difficulty of growing up in a complex society where new ways encroach upon the old and create new conflicts, especially for the young who have not elected one set of values or another. Young Indian villagers like Saroja are confronted daily with the erosion of traditional values, the ascendancy of Western
technology, changing roles for the family and society’s increasing control over the individual. (124)

In *Two Virgins* Kamala Markandaya attempts a study of the basic problem of the adolescent girls in modern India seeking an escape from the world of strict adult supervision, from the rural boundary into a wilder world of wealth, glamour and pleasure. The “Two Virgins” in the novel are two sisters Lalitha and Saroja. Lalitha is an elder sister who likes the modern ways of life. Saroja is a younger one who is a simple but matured girl. Both the sisters live in an identical environment with their parents and their mother’s widowed sister Aunt Alamelu. Lalitha and Saroja are in some respect alike, and yet in certain other respects, the author makes them different, so that the two sisters have their individual self knowledge by the end of the novel. Significantly the two sisters go to two different schools- Lalitha to an expensive and superior school run by an Anglo-Indian named Miss Mendoza, while Saroja goes to the traditional school in the same village. Gradually the girls grow up and Miss Mendoza introduces Lalitha to the film director Mr. Gupta. She is cast in a documentary film about the village. Attracted towards the glamour of the film world and modern ways of life Lalitha runs away from the village to the city without the permission of her parents. She is seduced by Mr. Gupta and returns home pregnant. As Gupta disowns responsibility, an abortion is arranged. Lalitha is lost in the city’s glamour and decides to continue there while Saroja returns to the village having learned her lesson.

In *Two Virgins* Saroja represents the concept of didactic girlhood. Saroja stands in rich contrast to her sister Lalitha. Kamala Markandaya shows how two sisters, born and brought up in similar environment and share similar background, have opposite ideologies. Saroja is an epitome of a traditional girl who prefers
traditional ways, on the contrary Lalitha is a follower of Western liberal lifestyle. The father’s liberalism, whose seed was shown in him in the days of national struggle during the pre-independence period, makes him more inclined to Lalitha, “Westernized Appa backed her up, he liked Indians to be Westernized, which advanced them into the big worlds instead of remaining static in a backwater.” (Markandaya: 43)

Lalitha is a favourite daughter of her father and shares most of his advanced views. Lalitha, like Saroja grows in restricted social atmosphere and is sent to Miss Mendoza’s school where she learns music and dancing. Her father feels proud of her talents and has a high praise for her high class tastes and opinions. Lalitha shows her talents in maypole dancing and other festivities. 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. As Saroja, “wondered if it was Miss Mendoza’s school that made the difference, or if it all came natural to Lalitha.” (Markandaya: 46) While Lalitha and Saroja’s Amma is firmly bound to Indian traditions and customs Appa considers himself to be a progressive and liberal, least bothered about cultural values. Appa encourages Lalitha to develop liberal ideas. Father’s inclination to Lalitha is shown in the novel in the following way:

A prettier new born babe I never set eyes upon before or since, Appa said in his boastful moods, but Amma said all our babies were beautiful, not a flaw or blemish on any of them, why do you have to make a difference between them? But Appa could not help it. Lalitha was his favourite because she was pretty and pert...There were always reasons, Appa said and Saroja knew it was true. (Markandaya: 9)
In a girl’s case her appearance always matters. A beautiful and pretty girl is always favourite of all than the plain one. Girls mostly are appreciated not on the basis of their understanding and nature, but on the basis of beauty only. Saroja is a smart girl who understands this very well. Saroja, a little girl is very modern in her thoughts. She takes everything positively. She is glad that she has such a beautiful sister like Lalitha. According to Saroja, “Being beautiful was more trouble than it was worth”. (Marakandaya: 101) Lalitha on the other hand cannot understand this, in her view, “It’s worth all the trouble in the world.”(Marakandaya: 101)

In Two Virgins Markandaya narrates yet again an unconvincing tale of Indian village life by contrasting between two sisters Lalitha, the child of grace, who wants to become a town miss and Saroja, the child of the soil and the country miss, is utterly mechanical. The novel attempts to probe into the mental and psychological states of two young girls of upbringing middle class. Two Virgins depicts the story of two spirited young girls who with their zest for life react differently to the changing new society. A.V. Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon observe:

The issue of traditional values versus modern Westernized values comes to the forefront in the portrayal of the two virgins of the story. While one chooses modernity out of free will and of free choice, the other chooses tradition. (125)

In Two Virgins Lalitha is shown in contrast to her sister to be wilful, daring, egoistical and in quest of a style of life associated with the city elite in general and film stars in particular. Lalitha also displays elements of the sexual licence who views men as little more than tools for her selfish desires and goals. Lalitha, too, is aware that being pretty wins her admiration and accords her status. She flaunts her
physical charms and flirts with all men, including Gupta and Lachhu, the village paedophile. Saroja diagnoses Lalitha’s flirting as a habit. When Amma catches Lalitha flicking her lashes at Lachhu, Lalitha responds in the following shameless way:

What if? Said Lalitha, and tossed her head: he is a simple man, he wouldn’t harm a fly, he just dallies with girls, didn’t Krishna dally with girls? Krishna was a personification of God, cried Amma, are you daring to compare him with this gutter lout? (Marakandaya : 14)

Lalitha is shown to have an artificial corrupted awareness which is foreign to the rural milieu. For her the village is a backward place and lacks civilization. Lalitha is selfish and does not sympathise with anyone. Lalitha is hard. When Mannikam’s son dies of smallpox, Saroja cries for him, but Lalitha says that she should be glad because he was suffering like anything.

When the baby died Saroja cried for him, but Lalitha said one ought to be glad really.... She could be quite hard like that. Saroja wanted to know if she were suffering would she prefers to die or go on living and suffering, but Lalitha would not answer, screwed up her eyes and said, That depends. There was a fear in her eyes which Saroja interpreted. (Marakandaya :27)

Through Lalitha’s character the author portrays a girl’s reaction to the changing environment of Indian life. Lalitha revolts against the restrictions of the traditional bound society and follows the modern, luxurious way of living. According to her, straying away from the suffocating restrains of the tradition and fulfil her desire at any cost is the true liberation of a girl. Lalitha’s wrong notion towards modernity
indulges her with Mr. Gupta and she loses her virginity, bringing disgrace to the whole family. Lalitha’s life sets an example of how unbridled freedom, autonomy and revolt against parental and social authority prove to be disastrous. Lalitha gains nothing rather; she loses her self-respect and the affection of her family. As Amma says to Saroja, “Your sister wandered too far, she said wearily, she was lured outside the code of our community and is paying the penalty that is all.” (Marakandaya : 180)

The issue of submission and revolt against the traditional restraints, codes and conduct comes to the forefront in the portrayal of two girls, Lalitha and Saroja. While Lalitha chooses to revolt against tradition and chooses modernity out of free will and of free choice, Saroja chooses to submit herself to traditional conductive. The two sisters are poles apart from each other in nature and treatment, both of them are 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. One sister finds her way through rebellion and non-conformity, the other sister achieves her end through the conformity of social moral. The novel has been written through 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.

Saroja, at this young age is matured enough to have her opinion on certain things and she is firm in her opinion on certain things. Saroja who has been often accused of holding a sentimental view of village life, is not sentimental about her problem ridden rural life. She is fully cognizant of the inequalities prevailing in the rural as well as urban societies. She feels sorry for people who clear latrines and are not allowed to enter into the temple. She thinks that they are also human being, they are not polluted as people think them to be. She thinks it is just the nature of the work they do. As the narrator says,
Saroja felt sorry for them huddling together for strength and everyone else shrinking away as if they were not... it was the nature of the work they did, it created mental images, which was off-putting. (Marakandaya: 27)

Saroja perceives that it is cruel to be poor like Mannikam and it is stupid to have unwarranted pregnancies like Mannikam’s wife. She also understands that it is unjust to be alone and crippled like Chingleput. She also learns that it is quite horrible to live without a status, like Aunt Alamelu. Aunt Almelu is a widowed woman and Saroja knows that in India a woman whose husband has died does not have any status. Saroja feels very bad that though the calf has died, Mannikam pretends to have a calf on his shoulders and the milk starts flowing from the cow, and Mnnikam sells it. Saroja feels it is wrong. According to her, “the calf had an entitlement to its mother’s milk.” (Marakandaya: 50) When Saroja’s brothers inform her about the farmers who sell newly born calves to slaughter for making money, Saroja considers them mad and thinks that if she were in their place, she would have never done that in any circumstances. She thinks that if this is the way society is organized, she prefers it to be reorganized. Saroja firmly believes that, “Every living thing had its rights and it was wrong to deprive them entirely.” (Marakandaya: 51) Saroja also feels sorry about the people’s different reaction on pregnancy of a girl if she is married and if she is not married. According to Saroja,

It was wrong, a crime against the baby, which was the same whether you were married or not, but she knew her elders like Aunt Alamelu, who were the majority did not agree.” (Marakandaya: 154)
Saroja realizes that contemporary Indian society is nothing but a conglomeration of traditional Indian and modern Western cultures. She is aware that modern India is undergoing rapid social changes from within and without. The people who live in the village are no longer assured of the security of their traditional ways of life. Saroja, therefore perceives that the stability should come from the inner strength of the characters. Saroja prefers traditional ways of life, in the same way she does not hate modernity. Saroja is a young girl, as Meera Bai correctly says, “Standing at the crossroads of transition from tradition to modernity trying to evaluate both and accept the best out of the world.”(93)

Saroja’s world is like an oyster. Her world is different from others. She has made it strong that nothing can penetrate into it. As the narrator says,

Appa said when Saroja was off, she could shout himself blue in face but the reality of it was she did hear, only what she heard did not concern her in her world, it ran off her like raindrops off, the waxy petals of oleander. The shape of the orb would have spoiled, if it hadn’t, would have got twisted or wrapped and lost its perfection if the outside had got in. (Marakandaya :40)

Saroja is a girl who realizes that true fulfilment and happiness lie not in doing away with social codes and conventions under the impact of the west, but in acceptance of the moral values of a social code and the principle of conformity. Freedom is best enjoyed with a deep sense of maturity and understanding and it also involves responsibility to oneself. Saroja is thus a happy compromise between the older generation and the younger one to achieve a proper confluence between conflicting reason and feeling, tradition and modernity. Saroja emerges at the end of
the novel as a unifying factor of tradition and modernity. In his perceptive commentary on the role of Saroja as a unifying force, K.S. Ramamurti remarks:

She (Saroja) has achieved a wonderful balance and stability partly under the influence of Aunt Alamelu and partly learning from her sister’s experience. The ending of the novel for all its crudeness, is symbolic of the wonderful stability, which Saroja has achieved and in fact Saroja herself becomes a symbol of healthy reconciliation of two different attitudes of life. (206)

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 it 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 takes city’s benefits and evil and returns to the 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.

Through Saroja’s character Kamala Markandaya wants to show that freedom does not entail the casting away of traditional restraints. Saroja who matures through the wild experiences of Lalitha realizes this and hence prefers to confine herself to the codes of the community. The novelist emphatically points towards the limitations of individual freedom when it is conformity and realization of one’s responsibility within the structure of given society.

One of the significant accomplishments of the novel is its evolving consciousness. While Saroja becomes aware of the changes that take place in the society, she herself changes and grows. She is certainly not the same person at the end
of the novel that she was at the beginning of it. Saroja learns lessons of her life as she witnesses the fate that befalls her sister. To her Lalitha becomes a living example.

Lalitha gets irritated under the restraints of her family and society. She chooses the vanities of so called Modern life. From being a vain, a school girl filled with fantasies of herself as pretty, she grows up to be selfish and contemptuous of her family and surroundings. She moves towards negative freedom which is an escape toward license. The return to security and conformity in this novel is executed on the part of Saroja.

In *Two Virgins* Kamala Markandaya attempts a study of the basic problem of the adolescent girls in modern India seeking an escape from the traditional boundary into a wider world of wealth, glamour and pleasure. While Lalitha is hopelessly lost in the faceless crowd of the metropolitan world, Saroja gains wisdom from her sister’s downfall. Saroja is portrayed not only as the key figure who surveys the whole action of the novel, but also as a symbolic point of didactic girlhood who reconciles between submission to and revolt against the traditional codes and conduct.

In these novels the protagonists are girls like Lalitha, Saroja and Raka. Lalitha and Raka both revolt against the traditional norms of society, but the mediums used for revolt are different. Lalitha goes for the modern world and modern thoughts. Raka becomes indifferent and aloof from society and people. Both go through different facets of life in their very young age. Lalitha has to suffer because of her luxurious needs. She goes through the dirty face of this modern age, where girls are used by men for their pleasure. Raka has to suffer as she faces the cruelty shown to her mother by her own father. She also becomes rebellious as she has seen the brutal face of her father. She is devoid of parental love and care. Saroja is a girl who learns to balance
between modern and traditional norms of society. She at a very young age understands that in her journey towards growth, a girl has to come across so many problems and she must learn to face the challenges in life and move ahead. Saroja understands that growing is a very tough task for a girl in a patriarchal society like India.

The experiences of these girls like Raka, Lalitha and Saroja portray the real picture of Indian girls’ lives. Society demands from even a very young girl to be smart enough to face the challenges of life. They have to fight their battle on their own without anyone’s support and love. By giving examples of Raka, Lalitha and Saroja Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya inform the girls that what has happened to these protagonists in their life can happen to any girl. A girl can learn from Raka, Lalitha and Saroja’s experiences how she wants to deal with such life. A girl can decide whether she wants to submit herself intelligently to the complex life or revolt against it.
REFERENCES:


