Chapter IV

Kamala Markandaya —Reflecting Transition.

A Study of: *Nectar In A Sieve, A Silence Of Desire*,
*Possession* And *Two Virgins*

Both Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya were writing at a time when the country was just emerging from the colonial days, and the euphoria of independence still enveloped society. On the surface at least, idealism, nationalism and patriotism still fired the young and the old, and helped in the process of nation building. However with the perception of literary sensitivity both Sahgal and Markandaya could detect cracks and fissures appearing in the fabric of society, disillusionment and discontent setting in, arising out of abuse of power, corruption at high levels and discrimination arising out of poverty and so on. The manifold problems of a new nation escalating over the years and the resultant conflicts allowed Sahgal and Markandaya both to respond to these issues in their specific manner. Sahgal deals with these aspects against the background of political happenings and by placing them against actual historical events. She analyses these happenings against personal and social life in novels like *Storm In Chandigarh*, *Situation In New Delhi* and *Rich Like Us*.

Kamala Markandaya expressed her views by focusing on both rapid and gradual changes coming to society and transforming the age-old social structure, traditional institutions, thought process and values and its effect on common people in both rural and urban societies. Both the writers are similar in their concern for the present day realities as an inevitable off-shoot of the past and how these changes, negative and positive are to affect the future in both life and literature.
Kamala Markandaya and Nayantara Sahgal are similar in their approach in specific areas of literature and relative attitudes. Both of them are conscious of positive and negative, effects of the west responsible for changing attitudes in Indian life. This similarity is the logical outcome of their writing at a time when the country was just emerging from the colonial era and the influence of the times was still strong. Markandaya analyses the effect of western influence on Indian life and against each other. The effect of Dr. Kenny on the life of Rukmani, Ira and others in *Nectar In a Sieve* is strongly beneficial, while that of Caroline on Val *Possession* is highly detrimental. Markandaya thus acutely analyses changes and the genesis of such changes and puts forward her views about a synthesis between the best of the east and the west.

Nayantara Sahgal also looks at Indian tradition and culture from different perspectives. In *Rich Like Us*, she examines Indian life culture, history and tradition from the view point of Rose the English woman- wife of Ram who made India her home till her brutal death. Michael an Englishman in *Situation In New Delhi* also views Indian life and politics from the viewpoint of a sympathetic though objective analyst.

Both writers had explored the relationship of India and the west from an early post-colonial perspective of conflict and co-existence, at the same time they were writing from their close encounters with the west as citizens of a nation, recently liberated, as also their close personal ties with England.

As with most sensitive and conscious writers Kamala Markandaya’s fiction is essentially a product of the cultural ethos, as it moulds and influences the individual consciousness against the background of time and space. Markandaya perceives and presents the range of tension that occurs between the individual and
the conflict between the twin concepts of freedom individual identity on one hand and responsibility social obligations, traditional restrictions on the other are thoroughly analysed and artistically presented in Markandaya’s fiction. Her art is free from propaganda and polemics and she is content to hold up the artistic mirror to society from the point of view of art and morality. The accent and emphasis of her fiction is on the drama of life, rather than on the dogma of an ideology in the given context. Her vision includes rather an exploration of human experiences in a particular cultural context, which includes being rooted deeply and sustained by the authentic Indian tradition. Markandaya’s protagonists are at the same time nurtured and influenced by the changing trends of modern Indian life. Kamala Markandaya’s novels show a genuine concern for socio-cultural problems besetting Indian society, she has made conscious efforts to bring her work into the fold of what she calls “socio-literature” or “literature of concern” which brings home……… elemental truths.” Her characters are very often “caught existentially between momentous choices and commitments.” (Kumar 79). This social aspect imparts a broader dimension to her work. Other concerns that interest her are the plight of the Indian masses, their quest for identity, gender issues, man-woman relations cultural and philosophical ideas. Issues debated and analysed by other writers before and after but even stereotypes are livened with her particular intense sensitive touch. 

One distinguishing trait in Kamala Markandaya which marks her out from other Indian English novelists is her awareness and sensitive depiction of the concept of change which has been taking place in Indian life since the last two decades or so. Society in India today is poised between an idealization of traditional values and beliefs and the inevitable, irresistible materialism. The modernity-
tradition conflict, the rising tide of western materialism threatening to swamp traditional concepts and spiritual values are issues, which form the focal point of many of her novels. “Change is the pivot round which her fictional world revolves.” (Kumar 204) Beginning with her first novel Nectar In a Sieve the dichotomy between tradition and change is presented compellingly. Her other novels like A Silence of Desire, Possession, Two Virgins, A Handful of Rice too talk about the many dimensional effect of change on a transitional society. In spite of marked changes in life and society of an India moving on her journey from colonial to post-colonial times Markandaya points to the cultural continuity in all her novels. Apart from her first novel Nectar In a Sieve (1954) which was an instant success, the other novels, which followed, were Some Inner Fury (1955) A Silence Of Desire (1960) Possession (1963), A Handful of Rice (1967), The Coffer Dams (1969), all written in the sixties. In the seventies decade were published the novels The Nowhere Man (1972) Two Virgins (1973), The Golden Honeycomb (1977) and in the eighties was published The Pleasure City (1982). A general survey of her fictional work reveals the fact that the quintessence of Markandaya’s art is a sensitive exploration of the human psyche is the context of certain cultural and philosophical values. This gives Markandaya’s work a significant position in Indian English fiction.

Kamala Markandaya’s deep sociological concerns are reflected in her incisive treatment of the tradition change conflict, and we observe a pattern of human relationship emerging from under the pressure of multidimensional trials and tensions. The conflict between the individual and the group central to most literary works form the essence of Markandaya’s fiction. Indian culture values all ties – Matrimonial, filial or sibling which rest on instinct, love or duty. However, like many traditional cultures, the changed temperament of the age with a focus on the
individual identity has dealt a severe blow to these relationships. Modern human beings living under the tension of these changed conceptions, facing tense uncertainty and rootlessness resulting in the death of these traditional concepts become the focus of Markandaya’s fiction.

Markandaya believes that the truth about human relationship can best be expressed in terms of institutions like marriage and family. Novels like *Nectar*, *Two Virgins* or *Silence of Desire* explore such situations. Some of the circumstances described in Markandaya’s fiction point out to the writer’s intense awareness of her identity as a woman and her attention to feminine problems. For this she does not create a specific world exclusive to women but presents the real world and examines serious questions about women with reference to attitudes, reactions, interactions of both the sexes against the backdrop of social institutions like the family, marriage groups, rituals, festivals etc. Interesting human relationships are portrayed in Markandaya’s fiction, for example the mother-daughter relationship between Rukmani and Ira in *Nectar In A Sieve*.

In Indian culture girls are “assured of their worth by one whom it really matters: by their mothers.” (Kakkar 61). For in her daughter the mother can re-experience herself. In *Nectar In A Sieve* in the time of her direst need when she is cast away by her husband for being barren and later when she bears an illegitimate child, it is her mother Rukmani who is Ira’s saviour. The relation between sisters, which is a unique and sensitive one of friendship, mutual identification sibling jealousy and love is portrayed vividly in the relationship, between Saroja and Lalitha in *Two Virgins*. Markandaya in *A Silence Of Desire* explores the more familiar and oft repeated theme of husband-wife relation of domestic discord in a unique and inimitable manner.
As a woman writer, the female question does crop up in Markandaya’s fiction, though she is not a radical feminist, calling for radical reconstruction of male female roles, her attitude to feminism is personal, analytical and exploratory, rather than stridently polemic. From her earliest novels to her latest ones, Markandaya’s novels are strongly woman oriented. Her women are a combination of tradition and modernity. Through various relationships like marriage, family ties, social relations, women in her myriad images and moods are depicted. From the traditional Sita Savitri archetypal pattern to the gradually emerging new woman, the Markandaya women depict the varied stages of a society in transition. Interestingly, in most Markandaya characters the woman retains the traditional role, remaining in her given archetypal Indian image, all the while facing the modern predicament and taking into her stride the changes that are part of a new society. Kamala Markandaya is extremely analytical and sensitive in underlining the traditional attitude to women in India. Delicately, subtly, these aspects are projected in her novels.

Rukmani, Ira, Sarojini and Saroja are interesting character studies of women in a changing society. Marriage, family life, the woman’s role these issues are not treated in isolation but in a conglomerated whole to explore the issues of human life in general and women in particular. In *Nectar In A Sieve* when Nathan fails in his masculine role of provider and saviour and when the coming of the industry shatters and disperse their family, it is the strong and binding influence of Rukmani which helps the family survive the ordeal. The supreme example of a traditional rural woman, shedding her inhibitions to seek modern medical aid from the white doctor Kenny, for childbearing problems – an unheard of situation in those times is an example of the fusion of the traditional and modern in Markandaya’s
fiction. Sarojini in *A Silence Of Desire* a traditional housewife takes a strong personal decision thus asserting her identity. She agrees to her husband’s dictates only on the advice of her ‘guru’ the Swamy. Till the end Sarojini is an independent figure confronting male reality.

There is a redefinition of the image of the woman in some other women characters in Markandaya like Lalitha (*Two Virgins*), Ira (*Nectar In A Sieve*) and Caroline (*Possession*). They are shown as the ‘liberated heroines’ of Diana Trilling – “She, the liberated heroine is a fictional creation whose first concern is the exploration and realization of female selfhood.” (Trilling 510) Lalitha defies tradition and rejects the archetypal Indian role prescribed for young women in her desires and dreams. Her succumbing to the film director Gupta’s advances is an act of defiance against tradition mores as well as a declaration of liberty.

In her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Gayatri C.Spivak gives her views about the third world woman vis-à-vis western feminism and patriarchal nations. She terms this figure ‘Gendered subaltern’, and speaks of the third world woman who is often marginalized, silenced or displaced by the representational systems which claim to speak for her, creating a problematic situation for her, who is thus caught in the maelstrom of tradition and modernity.

“Between patriarchy, and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation the figure of the woman disappears…… a violent shuttling, which is the displaced figuration of the third- world woman, caught between tradition and modernisation.” (Spivak 89)

Through the growth and development of Rukmani’s (*Nectar In A Sieve*) and Sarojini’s (*A Silence Of Desire*) characters Markandaya shows how the new overlaps on the old and history and modernity intermingle in their lives. The
writer lets her important female protagonists to have their traditional roles, and at the same time addresses the question of modernity and change through the protagonists’ strong and convincing assertion of the self and from the self to social issues.

The destabilization and re-organization of the social context and the repercussions thereof are part of the socio-physiological study in her novels. Markandaya does not concern herself solely with the polarities between man and women or become obsessed with the feminine versus masculine conflict because she thinks that in the Indian situation there are other issues at stake. Markandaya’s novels concern themselves with the female protagonists’ response to the changes that overtake her world. In almost all her novels, the inevitable conflict between tradition and modernity is shown. The female protagonists’ search for values and the quest for her identity against this backdrop are studied with great sensitivity.

The concept of change has touched and modified the world of myth, folklore and legends, customs and rituals all integral parts of the meandering course of the history of India. The dominant feminine prototype is the chaste, self-sacrificing tolerant image of woman, regarded as the ideal or norm in mythical terms. These myths, which shaped the Indian mind, moulded relationships and formed the basis of tradition are based on texts, like the Manusmirti the Epics and other ancient texts.

Of late, writers like Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya have penetrated the consciousness of women and presented her as a real living human person far removed from the mythical, codified image, sanctioned by tradition. Markandaya, like Sahgal, believes that a woman’s virtue is courage — the willingness to risk the unknown and face the consequences. She has redefined the
pure or virtuous woman in her fiction. Into this mould is shaped characters like Ira and Rukmani of *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Markandaya evokes Hindu philosophy and religion to depict the individual and social predicament of life and responses of the characters concerned. Hindu philosophy's association of the male sex with the spirit and meditative principles and the female with matter and energy revealing the dichotomy, which has been responsible for, differentiated sex roles. 'Moksha' is attainable to women only in the domestic orbit, through service to family. Her (the woman's) identity is her husband and family, her space the domestic world and her 'Moksha' — salvation is service in a spirit of self-sacrifice. It is through marriage, family and service women are supposed to find emotional and material fulfillment but is spiritual fulfillment possible through these realms? If women are not considered fit for attainment of spiritual salvation through Samnyasa (discarding or abandonment of the worldly desires and materialism). What do they do if they desire if they desire this very salvation. This problem is identified in Markandaya's novel — *(A Silence of Desire)*.

Markandaya's first novel *Nectar In A Sieve* (1954) presents the saga of traditional Indian life at the grassroots, the impact of industrialization and subsequent social, cultural and economic change through the consciousness of a peasant woman: Rukmani. An early novel, the book is considered almost a classic in the mould of Pearl S. Buck's famous novel *The Good Earth* also a saga of rural life in the process of change. The central theme of *Nectar In a Sieve* is the dichotomy between tradition and change. The tannery, which lays the foundation of an industrial society, a world of temptation, greed and materialism symbolizes change. It also spells the slow eroding of the older, essential values of life. The
peasants of Rukmani’s village are enamoured of the tempting trifles of change—like
gaudy shops, tea stalls and the bioscope, but Rukmani’s intuition warn her of
impending disaster which turn out to be the truth. The change brought in the wake
of the tannery devours the whole, village and turns it into a spiritual wasteland. It is
responsible for turning Rukmani’s innocent daughter Ira into a prostitute and her
sons into angry, discontented, rebellions young men. It destroys the idyllic pastoral
countryside with its traditional lifestyles and values symbolizing the impact of
material culture on traditional principles of Indian life. The classic quality of the
novel is expressed in the character of the central protagonist Rukmani. She portrays
the complex and divergent image of Indian womanhood in her myriad roles “from
deity to devdasi, from Shakti to Abala” (Jacob 130). The strongest traditionally is
the image of woman as the Mother. Rukmani in Nectar In A Sieve stands tall as a
symbol of the all encompassing Mother figure. This novel derives its strength from
the sensitive, courageous life giving quality of motherhood in Rukmani. Her
sacrifice for her family takes her to great length even to the extent of breaking stones
to feed her family facing starvation. The concept of the Mother Goddess—Shakti
incarnate finds expression in the character of Ira—Rukmani’s daughter. Even as a
young girl, Ira’s feminine instinct for nurturance results in her acting as surrogate
mother, to her younger siblings. Her decision to become a prostitute to feed her
ailing brother and to bring up her illegitimate baby is both a statement of strength
and resilience and a strong protest. The traditional concept of Indian womanhood
showers both strength and weakness on its women. The patriarchal tradition as
‘Shakti’ power and prakriti-nature mother, she is the live giver and preserver.
Markandaya highlights these aspects in both Rukmani and Ira, to depict the essence
of Indian womanhood.
*Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya's first novel is one of her greatest achievements because it presented an authentic picture of Indian village life in the process of transition. In this novel, Markandaya brings into focus what she herself calls “the stupefying degree of endurance and resignation” of which the Indian peasant is capable. (Joseph 127)

The impact of industrialisation on a tradition bound society, the small, south Indian village, the rural background in this context and the “consciousness of individuals as they react to economic change or industrial development.” (Rao, Menon 15). The subsequent cultural and sociological impact of this on each of the characters and their lives, all narrated from the viewpoint of Rukmani a peasant woman who is both a participant and an observer in the novel. Change and transition, and the concept of freedom of the individual are also related areas, which the writer explores through the theme of the novel. The writer's choice of Rukmani — a traditional village woman as her heroine gives her a chance to project the attitude of a conservative consciousness to change. Here tradition and change are pitted against each other. The changes depicted are both internal and external. The most obvious and blatant symbol of change is of course the tannery which comes blasting its way into the village, eating up the green and charming pastoral ambience and creating a thorough metamorphosis in the village life. The white missionary doctor represents the cultural and philosophical changes brought into the life of the characters. This doctor, Kennington medically help Rukmani in the process of childbearing (sons) and later Ira who is cured of her supposed barrenness. The symbols of internal change are represented by Rukmani’s own sons Arjun and Thambi whose decision to work in the tannery and later migrate to Ceylon go against the wishes of their mother. Rukmani just cannot understand her sons, they
seemed like strangers to her. Freedom, the most valued aspiration in individuals is affected by the power of the socio-economic system in the novel—“Rukmani’s basic yearning for a contented life is hampered repeatedly” (Rao and Menon 16).

Similarly, Ira’s life is one of trauma and tragedy, hampering her desires and freedom to enjoy a happy, tranquil existence. Nature and destiny playing a pivotal role in the manipulation of life is typical of the Indian situation—“Nature is like a wild animal ….. so long you are vigilant ….. it will give you its aid… be heedless or forgetful it has you by the throat. (Nectar 39). Like Hardy’s protagonists, Rukmani and her family are vulnerable to the forces of nature, fate and destiny. Like O-Lan of Pearl S. Buck’s classic novel The Good Earth, Rukmani too has the power of extreme endurance to survive ordeals and weather sufferings. The ancient Chinese tradition and its impact on the life of the rural folk finds an echo in the lives of the Indian villagers in Nectar and are points of similarity between the two novels. In the novel, the hiatus between the two generations is made apparent by the attitude of Rukmani’s sons towards the tannery, which they regard as imperative and the resultant changes as imminent. Injustice, cruelties and exploitation are to be fought and not accepted as destiny. Ira acts in defiance to traditional morality as a protest against injustice and hypocritical convention at the same time defining a new moral code. In spite of the tragedy suffering and futility of effort in the novel aspects of positive change are expressed at the instances of Kenny and Selvan’s success in building a hospital and bringing medical aid to the village, the adoption of the orphaned Puli and his cure and Rukmani’s embracing spirit, her inner strength and “spiritual stamina” throughout the whole novel. (Bhatnagar 134).
Though there is not much of interplay of character in *Nectar* as in some of her later novels like *A Silence Of Desire* or *Some Inner Fury*, characters like Nathan, Ira and Kenny do figure prominently and the writer points to the effect of circumstances on these characters. Nathan, the epitome of the victimized Indian peasant, a prey to destiny (Nature) and the forces of exploitation, traumatised by change is devastated and defeated unlike Rukmani, his wife, who is made of tougher mettle and who remains a survivor. Ira, his daughter, is a symbol of commitment, strength and tenacity. Ira’s character grows and develops from the passive, obedient daughter and wife to the passionate, protesting, branded woman to emerge as the symbol of Markandaya’s strong woman a character who demythicize the *pativrata* image. Kenny’s is the voice of change, individualism and social responsibility –vis-à-vis the social commitment of the traditional Rukmani. Kenny represents the impact of the west on the Indian consciousness – a recurrent theme of Markandaya and through him the writer questions the validity of certain outdated and inimical concepts of the Indian social cultural and religious system.

The story of *Nectar* narrated in the first person is in the form of reminiscences, the language used is simple, and unadorned in keeping with uncomplicated, simplicity of the rustic narrator – Rukmani –the central protagonist. Certain terse, moving moments – moments which remain etched in the mind of the narrator along with her reader are narrated in the present tense; though the rest of the story is in the past tense. The poignant tragedy of this scene of Raja’s death narrated in the present these bring pout the haunting quality of the moment.

“Already I think, the eyes must be closed though death has glazed them and I do so.” (*Nectar* 90) Images and symbols abound in the novel, the central symbol is the land—of hope, of life – the source of sustenance, the roots to which the
peasant clings — "I looked about me at the land and it was life to my starving spirit." (Nectar 189) Images like the tannery and the garden are turned into symbols. The snake is a recurrent image throughout the novel. The killing of the snake is an omen — it is a fertility symbol and Rukmani significantly does not conceive after Nathan kills it. The Shiva Linga, the traditional phallic symbol is used as a fertility sign.

The land is the symbol of the peasants' sustenance—the very essence of his existence, the source of his roots, his hopes. When Nathan and Rukmani move away from their land, it is as if they are uprooted and they wither and die thus the symbols are closely interwoven in the text of the narrative.

Though in Nectar In A Sieve, relationships are discussed, it is more of a novel of social concerns depicting change and its effects, pitted against tradition and its values. Her novel A Silence Of Desire (1960) is a work of subtle relationships, probing of psychological aspects of the central protagonists once again, against the backdrop of tradition and change. In this novel, Markandaya depicts the psychological maladjustment of a married couple, which is the "result of absence of understanding." (Rao and Menon 45). Though the crisis in the novel occurs as a result of a clash between spiritual faith and rational belief, yet it is a sensitive account of interpersonal relationships with family life being threatened. Through the insecurity of Dandekar and the mysterious activities and puzzling silence of Sarojini, Markandaya sensitively explores relationships threatened and renewed, which in turn make or mar the worlds in which individuals live. Sarojini in A Silence Of Desire takes a strong personal decision, a traditional Indian housewife; this is her way of asserting her identity. She agrees to her husband's dictates, only on the advice of her 'guru' the Swamy. Till the end Sarojini is an
independent figure, confronting male reality. This novel traces the marginal position Sarojini occupies in Dandekar (her husband's) world. To Dandekar's mind, his wife Sarojini's only role was to keep his family's life in order like "an efficient manager of the household." *(Silence 8)*. That Sarojini might desire to expand her horizon and limited space of her domestic existence, represented by "the narrow courtyard and the patch of blue sky" *(Silence 8)* is incomprehensible to Dandekar. When his wife seeks this, Dandekar is angry and bewildered. Sarojini's quest for a world beyond her domestic confines through her involvement with the Swami, for a spiritual cure for her ailment, moves beyond the husband-wife conflict. It talks about the clash between patriarchal tradition and female longing as also between materialism and spiritualism.

In this novel, the conflict is between the spiritualism symbolized by the Swami versus the scientific, rationalism of Dandekar and his office colleagues. Here the conflict between tradition and change transcends the level of the social to the personal. It reaches interpersonal levels, like affecting domestic happiness and peace of mind of two individuals and their families.

*A Silence Of Desire* is Markandaya's third novel. This book is distinguished from her earlier ones in that the writer concentrates not merely on the impact of human action on society but on human psychology. Other concerns central to Markandaya are of course subtly interwoven in this novel of marital conflict and silent but acute divergence of beliefs and conviction. Among these concerns are the tradition-modernity hiatus, the crisis of identity and alienation. This novel is a sensitive depiction of human psyche resulting from a conflict in belief – between Dandekar and his wife Sarojini, between faith and reason. Dandekar, happy with his wife of fifteen years, the epitome of the dutiful wife and
loving mother and all else; she is good with the children, an excellent cook, and efficient manager of the household; a woman who gave him pleasure after fifteen years of marriage. He however fails to understand her suppressed feelings—loneliness, despair, frustration, the very meaninglessness of her existence. The tumour symbolizes the growth of her repressed anger, though ostensibly she has no faith in medical science since her mother and grandmother both died after operations for the same disease. The central conflict in the novel is the drifting apart of this couple and the imminent rift in their traditionally ideal Indian marriage. The pativrata Sarojini's image undergoes a drastic change after her husband suspects her of infidelity the result of her secretive manners and mysterious activities. The individual dilemma of the central protagonists and the interplay of high strung emotions are handled with sensitive subtlety in this novel by Markandaya. The novel is interesting not only because of the novelist's inversion of the traditional Indian set up of marriage, morals, faith and archetypal images but also because it poses questions on the identity crisis. The twin themes of alienation and loneliness of the individual also demonstrates the fragility of the apparently rock hard truths of life and the value of certainties always taken for granted. The Swami stands as a figure opposed to rationalism and modern materialism. Dandekar tries his utmost to remove Sarojini from the Swami's influence but encounters the latter's strength and irresistible force and recognizes his own weakness. "When you were with the Swami, actually there, nothing material or physical mattered —Rose above your body, know for a while the meaning of peace." (Silence 159)

In the heroines of Markandaya, we see the unique blend of tradition and modernity. A character like Sarojini fulfills her 'given' role all the while asserting her own individuality. Her silence is that of inner strength and conviction.
The silence between husband and wife is that of parting ways--- of alienation. Markandaya explores the psychological and sociological divide of a married couple within a backdrop of day-to-day reality. Parallelly the writer details the reality of an India caught between eastern values of filial ties, emotional responsibility and faith and the western concept of the aloof individualism and personal freedom. Sarojini is thus a fighter whose weapons are her quiet powers of resilience and unshakable faith --- a silence that speaks of immense possibilities.

In this novel, Markandaya adopts the masculine point of view with Dandekar as the narrator. This indicates the marginal position of Sarojini is the marital partnership as well as the peripheral status of women within the Indian family set up. Ironically, however Sarojini is the indispensable factor in the family and Dandekar’s world, like the Hindu Goddesses devoted to the preservation of order in the cosmic world. (Whose prints adorn the Dandekar house). Sarojini’s illness though physical has spiritual and mental connotations.

It signifies the silent sufferings, the quiet longings, unexpressed desires and frustrations expressed through the metaphor of the cancerous growth significantly of the uterus --- an exclusively feminine infirmity. The genetic quality of the disease indicates “the hereditary nature of female oppression.” (Mukherjee, 66) The clash between modern rationalistic ideas emphasized by individualism, unfettered freedom and family ties, community duties and responsibility, on the other hand, is significantly portrayed. Dandekar’s act of crossing the river to reach the Swamy signifies the transition from one to the other. Dandekar’s uncertainties, Sarojini’s acceptance of medical aid and removal of the Swami suggest the in-between, ambiguous stance the writer is adopting pointing to further development of these and related themes in her later novels.
Indian English Literature called the “twice born” being the product of the inter-cultural nature is appropriate for the delineation of fiction like Markandaya’s *Possession*, which deals with the intercultural theme where the protagonists search for identity—“a common and recurrent theme in Indo-Anglian fiction………” (Mukherjee 66) forms the focal point of interest. Valmiki a young rustic boy from a remote south Indian village with natural artistic talents under tutelage of a Swami was discovered and lured abroad to London by Lady Caroline, a rich aristocratic English lady where Valmiki finds himself exposed to a totally alien existence and culture. The East-West contrast in philosophy, culture and civilization and the individual’s (Valmiki) concern with his identity and selfhood together with Lady Caroline’s obsession with Valmiki form the core of the novel—*Possession* (1963). The story of Valmiki’s discovery by Lady Caroline, his subsequent exile to England and his rise to artistic and material heights finds an echo in the account of the life of the great philosopher J.Krishnamurti who was discovered by Annie Besant and taken to London. Through the story of Valmiki’s de-Indianisation and Caroline’s physical and cultural possession of him; Markandaya scripts the exiled hero’s loss of identity in an alien culture. His return to the world of his ‘Guru’ – the Swamy is an indication that he has rediscovered his roots and that he has regained his lost identity. As Anasuya the narrator says—“However strongly western –influenced, it was from India that his strength came. He would have to return to it again and again when that strength was drawn…… to recharge himself. (*Possession* 39)

Markandaya’s vision of life finds sustenance in classical Indian mythology and eternal philosophy. Allusions and references to mythology are scattered throughout including names of characters. Rukmani, Anasuya, Mira, Irawady, Sarojini, Valmiki, Murugan are but a few instances. Valmiki the central protagonist
in Possession and his situation is an analogy of the creator of Ramayana-Mahakavi Valmiki. Like the mythological Valmiki-Val is also a natural artist—God gifted. His art has spiritual annotations, it is above material consideration, and only later at the behest of Caroline does his art become stained by lucre. Even in the materialistic west, he as an artist and human being is inspired by the tragic story of the Jewish refugee, Ellie—a victim of concentration camps. Ellie, for Valmiki, is the symbol of suffering humanity and like Rishi Valmiki his creative prowess is inspired by tragedy and suffering. At one level the tussle for Val between the aggressive Caroline and the gentle Swami attains cosmic significance. Caroline’s entry into the life of Valmiki is a destructive intrusion. Caroline’s world is a wasteland that depersonalizes the individualistic Valmiki. Her craving for possession of Val and his art becomes so terrible and overpowering that it dehumanizes the personality of the natural genius and finally kills the artist in him. Val’s return from the material ‘glitter dust’ world of Caroline, to the spiritual abode of the Swami signifies a reclamation of his true self and his lost identity. Valmiki’s talent in the true Indian tradition can be rededicated back to God, his talent, his possession; the divine gift treated as holy Prasad.

From the spiritual to the social and cultural, Markandaya deals with the various levels of the intercultural, inter-racial relationships. Here is a novel where the male is dominated by the female. Val is Elaine Showalter’s “woman’s man” for Caroline. From the time of her discovery of him to the time when finally he escapes and returns he is totally possessed by Caroline. Showalter believed that the heroines created by women writers “were extensions of themselves” and the heroes suitable for them should be “whole people”(Showalter 152). They portrayed in their heroes the helplessness and dependency that women face all the time- Men must learn they
believed how it feels to be a women— a dependent status. Caroline is an autocrat who is obsessed by a selfish desire to possess Val. She is in the mould of the patriarchal exploiter who exploits the feminine hero. The character of Caroline is the prototype of the western feminist and in the post-colonial context emerges as the figure of the “feminist imperialist” (Sharpe 91). Caroline in her instinct of possession in the intensely powerful craving to have, and to hold on becomes dominating and menacing and her personality assumes a malevolent form. In her attempts at possessing Val, to fulfill her own desires and ambitions, she removes Anasuya, the Swami, Annabel and Ellie to the margins. The obvious metaphor is the domination of the British Raj. At another level Caroline’s attempts at possession reveals the intercultural clash and the eternal clash between spiritualism and materialism. Caroline’s machiavellian instincts crushes the artistic independence and moral responsibility of Val, which is however luckily redeemed by his return to his roots to the Swami. As Parameswaran says about the Caroline–Val encounter and relationships—“She moulds him into a man, an artist and a lover after the images which she has in mind and in the process ruins him, depleting him of independence and spiritual strength”. (Parameswaran 72)

Markandaya studies the impact of change and modern ideas on a traditional ethos by exploring the social, cultural, political and spiritual aspects. In Valmiki’s case the alienation of a person in exile is mirrored in the insecurity, frustration and the identity crisis in the young man brought on by the vice like grip of lady Caroline on him and his art. His helpless anger, loneliness and despair at the attitude of superior disdain displayed by Caroline in London to him is reflected in his anguished cry to Anasuya. “She does not care for me, she cares only for what I can do and if I can do it well it is like one more diamond, she can put on the
In this novel, Markandaya’s achievement lies in her artistic juxtaposition of the sustaining values of life represented by Indian tradition and the soulless materialistic culture without the sense of enduring values. Markandaya’s continued interest in the theme of change and its effect on a traditional culture like India lends credence to her preoccupation with the problem of rootlessness faced by individuals is a changing society. Thus, we observe the delineation of rootlessness of different classes of Indian society in her fiction. Markandaya emphasizes on roots for the survival and defines the injury or loss of one’s roots as leading to a certain spiritual death. The two indispensable anchors for the rediscovery and affirmation of roots are the mythology and history of a race. Without a proper anchorage of one’s cultural tradition one cannot adequately realize one’s aesthetic energy. Removal from one’s cultural identity would render a person rootless as when Lady Caroline Bell (*Possession*) whisks Val away from his cultural roots, and transplants him in an alien soil, he finds his talents withering away. Val feels a sense of emptiness is spite of this apparent artistic and material success in London.

The novel is a metaphor for Indian spiritual values in conflict with western materialistic tendencies. The symbolic tussle for possession of the soul of India is expressive of the eternal craving of “power’ societies and empires” (*Possession* 217) to hold and dominate.

The tradition—modernity dichotomy, urban-rural divide and human relationships are explored against the backdrop of Indian family life in the novel *Two Virgins* (1973) by Kamala Markandaya using the format of the contrast novel. Here each sister represents opposing tendencies of the traditional and the modern
outlook. Lalitha the elder sister worships and craves the modern western way of life and all that it represents and Saroja the younger prefers the traditional values which gives her a sense of security being close to her roots. The novel may fall short of depicting a certain vision and philosophy and the clash of cultural values but nevertheless it explores the growing awareness about life, love, uncertainties and psychological changes in a pair of young girls at the threshold of life. The novel is interesting because it is a study of the clash of the younger generation with the values and traditions of the past against the backdrop of a still traditional Indian society — a glimpse of a society in transition. As Meena Shirwadkar comments: “The problem of the growth of a girl’s awareness, the change in her as she gets caught up in the swirling events around her and returns to the family fold and code of conduct but with her childhood innocence forever gone” (39). It is the story of Lalitha and Saroja, particularly of Lalitha the older with her intense desire to experience freedom, to break the chains of traditional village life. It is the story of her steps to widen her horizon, of her encounter with the film world of Mr. Gupta, and the shattering of her dreams. Saroja and Lalitha’s experiences in their journey from innocence to sophistication the movement of Lalitha from village to city are symbolic of changes – negative and positive which enlighten and enrich Saroja but which disillusion and belittle Lalitha. The adolescent girls initiation and growth is that of a society in its various stages of transition.

Relationships — inter and intra, form the core of sensitive writing. Women writers particularly excel in the delineation of human relationships. In a society where women are subject to a variety of relationships within the home and outside, where we encounter manifold images of the Indian woman—daughter, wife, mother and myriads of others, it is little wonder that Indian English novelists like
Markandaya depict them with the greatest sensitivity. To emphasize the relationship between the two sisters in a closely-knit Indian household, Markandaya uses the technique of presenting the story from the viewpoint of Saroja— the younger sister. Saroja looks at the world through the experiences of Lalitha --- the central character. In fact, “she matures through it.”(Rao and Menon 120) Sibling relationship of love, jealousy, and sharing in an Indian family are portrayed with vivid reality in this novel. Saroja’s growth from innocence to adulthood is largely through her sister’s experience. Lalitha’s experiences and her own encounter with Gupta’s assistant Devraj helps to educate her in the ways of city life which at the same time repels and disgusts her. The mother-daughter relationship an important facet of feminine kinship is recorded vividly in Amma’s relationship with her growing daughters — Lalitha and now Saroja. Once again, Saroja being the central consciousness traces the widening of her world through her relationship and awareness of her mother. From the comfort and security of her mother’s body as a little child, through the awareness of the mother as a person with desires and emotions to the mother as a protector who help her daughter to fight and face the world. All this Markandaya creates with genuine awareness. The emphasis on mother-children relation and the variety in the portrayed leads credence to the fact that the mother-principle is central to Indian myth, religion and tradition. The mother-child bond thus parallels the concept of mother Goddess devotee bond.

The relationship of individuals to society and the ways in which this is echoed in the family has always interested Markandaya. Because it is from the individual that one transcends to the social reality. She is intensely aware of her and her character’s identity as a woman and applies herself closely to feminine problems. She investigates the actual, social and emotional bonds that shackle
women by presenting her in the real world. Consciousness all the time of the secondary role of women in Indian society, specially in the decade when her novel *Two Virgins* was set. The exploitation of the beautiful, impressionable Lalitha is complete when she goes to the city with the unscrupulous Mr. Gupta to pursue her dreams of becoming an actress and widening her horizon. She ends up victimized – as a rape victim with an unwanted pregnancy. The nature of women’s condition and Lalitha’s fate is tellingly narrated through the bat-butterfly images:

> the bats were after the butterflies, which were dying, whose day was over. They fluttered their wings feebly, were seized were finished

> .......... It was tragic to see, but the bats were happy, it was their hour. (*Virgins* 156)

This novel is different from the earlier novels like *Nectar In A Sieve* and *A Silence Of Desire* because of its frank treatment of social reality emphasizing on issues such as sexual licence. She treats situations and emotions in the naturalistic tradition, without covering them with ideological issues. The novel marks an important development in Markandaya’s portrayal of the “liberated heroine” According to Diana Trilling – “She, the liberated heroine is a fictional creature whose first concern is the exploration and realization of female selfhood” (Trilling 510)

Lalitha in the pursuit of her self tries to shake off the shackles of tradition in the form of the bindings in her family and the dictates of her village society. This is seen in her wayward behaviour and liberated approach to the morals particularly sexual relations. The city and stardom represent for her the agencies, which help her attain selfhood. However Markandaya conscious of the truth of the Indian situation realistically portrays the exploitation and disillusionment and the subsequent hardening resolve of Lalitha through the image of the “Colam” pattern.
The image of the dove which she draws to welcome Mr. Gupta got blurred when the man, uncaring and unaware shuffled his feet Later Lalitha repairs the damage but the pattern changes and the dove becomes an eagle. The incident is symbolic of the drastic, tragic changes that are predestined in Lalitha’s life, predicting the changed pattern in her life, which will change Lalitha’s outlook from placid acceptance to angry rebellion.

The sexual and emotional awakening of the two young girls are described realistically and sensitivity in this novel. The divergent nature of the two girls help Markandaya present contrasting pictures of virginity and sexual permissiveness in Indian society. Both the girls have their natural urges, erotic dreams and awakenings common to youth. But while Lalitha defies social norms and moral codes in pursuit of herself, Saroja curbs her natural desires and remains faithful to moral codes subscribed by the conservative society. By using the typical contrasting models of the two sisters, Markandaya brings out the conflict between traditionalism and modernism based on a “feminist rationale”. (Geetha 135) In this novel, Markandaya explores the feminist reality, vis-à-vis Indian society and shows consequences of two contrasting approaches both of which are true, of the past, present and future in a transitional society like ours.

Though certain critics like Margaret P.Joseph consider Two Virgins as one of Markandaya’s weakest novels for its tedious description of rural life and stereotyped contrasts, critics like the Uma Parameshwaran considers it successful as it “taps the treasure house of basic human experience, especially the ever popular one of adolescence in a series of well worded, well-organized vignettes.”(Parameshwaran 121) Then as the famous critic Shiv K.Kumar remarks, this novel depicts the changing Indian ethos and reveals Markandaya’s “acute
awareness of a gradual shift in values that has been taking place” (Kumar 204) in post independent India at the same time it gives us an insight into the concept of cultural continuity in the midst of political, economic and social upheavals.

The highpoint of the novel is the sensitive account of the dilemma of the Indian woman against the backdrop of a transitional society. In the conflict between her given image and her desired one Markandaya projects the double pulls that the Indian woman is subject to “between tradition and modernity, between Indian and western ways of living and values, between her dignity as a human being and her duty as a daughter, wife and mother, between her desire for autonomy and her need for nurture.” (Krishnaswamy 354)

Characterisation being the strongest aspect of the novel, Lalitha and Saroja the two spirited young girls whose roots are entrenched deep in their village life appeal to us real young girls governed by the urges and passions of growing youth. Both of them react differently to the temptations of the world in which they live.

Lalitha’s tragedy is her violation of the codes of traditional society and she is a doomed woman because she gives free rein to “the primeval urge of a woman to be nothing but a woman.” (Bhattacharya 274) As their mother tells Saroja, that Lalitha has paid the penalty for wandering outside the code of conduct. It is noteworthy however, that Lalitha is not defeated, she owns responsibility to her deed and decides to carve out a new life for herself outside the confiners of her traditional village life – “She couldn’t face going back to the village, it stifled her, her talents, her ambition” (Virgins 236)

In the character of Saroja, Markandaya shows a synthesis of eastern and western values, between the old and the new, the inevitability of change and the
truth of tradition Saroja bicycles to school, loves Miss Mendoza’s English school, relishes Chingleput’s company but she wouldn’t cross the barriers of convention. She desires to respond to Devraj’s silent invitations like the “iron fillings” that “jumped up like little frenzied men and glued to a mechanized rod…….” (Virgins 243). However she quells such desires from a mature conviction and goes back to the place where she belonged and which represented the values she respected.

This novel Two Virgins, though a lesser known work of Kamala Markandaya in comparison to the classic Nectar in A Sieve is significant as a sensitive study of Indian feminism vis-à-vis the clash between rural and urban ways in a changing society. The awakening and growth of the two sisters is a metaphor— for the transition of Indian womanhood from the archetypal mould set by the traditional ideal to the complexities of an urbanized, modern reality. The conflicting attitudes of women to this would-be-change, their desires, trepidation, and joys regarding this transformation in their lives are projected beautifully in this work. Lalitha and Saroja crave for freedom from their restricted rural existence. The lively Lalitha particularly chafe against the constrictions of village life and escapes from it. Her victimization and degradation in the so-called urbanized/civilized film world of Mr. Gupta form the climax of the story. Femininity in this case is degraded and defiled. Lalitha cries out in frustrated despair, when she is forced to abort her illegitimate child to avoid a scandal: “You’d think there was some other way, wouldn’t you… But there isn’t, no way at all.” (Virgins 233) Lalitha’s anguished pronouncement emphasizes Markandaya’s awareness of the ambivalent position of Indian women, poised between traditional expectations and changing tendencies.

Markandaya’s vision stretches beyond the confines of feminine conflicts within the predominantly patriarchal domains of the Indian situation. She
stretches her gaze to the wider perspective of complex issues of freedom and responsibility and exploration of the essence of human experience in particular cultural contexts. The sum of her artistic vision has its roots deep in the Indian tradition, broadened by her personal encounters with the wider global changing realities. Throughout her creative works, she projects this very vision in terms of a balance of opposing ideas into a synthesising whole. Her women protagonists rediscover the truth of life and project the vision of their creator through various stages of acceptance, protest and self-discovery.

Kamala Markandaya’s themes are not unique for these have been dealt in myriad ways by her contemporaries, peers and predecessors. She treats the theme of tragic waste, the despair of unfulfilled desires popular with European and American novelists of recent decades.

She however brings home these themes to India and the very familiar situation known to all of us. With her unique capacity of minute observation and social documentation she portrays the contemporary Indian scene—of confusion and conflict, of tradition and modernity and most of all an India racked by rapid and drastic social, cultural and political changes.

Shiv K. Kumar’s pronouncement that the quality, which distinguishes Markandaya “is her acute awareness of a gradual shift in values that has been taking place in this subcontinent during the past two decades or so.” (Kumar 204) This observation is significant from the point of view of her awareness of both rapid and gradual changes that are overtaking the Indian scene. At the time when Markandaya was writing Indian society was poised between the old and new, between traditional values, and modern tendencies. She was also aware that the future would be one of tremendous upheaval and the new would totally overcome
the old. The traditional would be entirely swamped by the modern. Her creation of
the overwhelming strength of the character of modern Caroline (Possession) whose
power threatens to swamp Valmiki is indicative of this. Markandaya's opinion on
the change that has become inevitable in modern life which has created so much of
transformation in attitudes, values, customs and tradition in Indian society is
positive. She feels that changes should make people look outward and that Indians
should learn to gaze out of their narrow sequestered lives. Holding on blindly to
false and harmful issues in the name of tradition is meaningless. Novels like Two
Virgins holds up a mirror to both aspects in a faithful manner.

On the other hand, when she talks about tradition she stresses on
those aspects that have sustaining values and decries the negative effect of the
soulless materialistic culture without enduring values. This she symbolizes in the
form of malignant tumour, a harmful growth that eats away or inflicts the vitals of a
culture with enduring valves. Lalitha's (Two Virgins) encounter with the
materialistic culture destroys her by tearing her away from the enduring values of
the tradition in which she has been nurtured. Markandaya believes rootlessness and
alienation infecting modern Indian life is the outcome of the destruction of
traditional Indian values and the decay of myriad relationships which for centuries
had sustained Indian life.

What of woman's role and position in Markandaya's scheme of
things? The Markandaya women like Rukmani and Sarojini are shown as having
indomitable powers of resilience and faith. They confront the reality of their lives;
take strong decisions and bold steps to sustain themselves and their families. Her
women assert their individuality; yet take up their eternal roles—as daughters,
mothers and wives. Unlike other writers, Markandaya asserts that happiness and
fulfillment is attainable only when one returns to the fold, to one’s roots, not in running away. Markandaya believes in a balance, particularly in case of woman, between preservation of her identity and fulfilling her commitment to her home, family and society. It is with this belief that we find that Kamala Markandaya creating women of strength and substance in situations and stories that are strongly women- centric. She believes in the power of women to change society and the feminine principle eternally soaring high.
Works cited


