



A Narratological Study of Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins*: Interpreting Narratives through Saroja's Focalized View

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Article Info

Received: 14 Jun 2023,

Received in revised form: 12 Jul 2023,

Accepted: 21 Jul 2023,

Available online: 29 Jul 2023

Keywords— *Kamala Markandaya, Two Virgins, Narrative Voice, Narrative, narratology, heterodiegetic, homodiegetic.*

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Abstract

This study endeavours to examine Kamala Markandaya's Two Virgins (1973) through the approach of narratology and analyse focalization in the novel to understand the narrative of 'two virgins'. The novel is noted for its nonconforming narrative as it challenges the patriarchy through its subject while providing insights about the ethical code for women. Two Virgins subsides the notion of patriarchal narrative which celebrates the idea of women as the embodiment of chastity and virtue. The study presents Markandaya's manoeuvre of narration as she used Saroja's perspective to narrate the story of two sisters which attracted extensive contemplation from the reader as well as critics. Through this narratological study of narrator and focalization the reader will understand how the story is constructed and affect us. This study will provide a method to analyse focalization in any fiction through the narratology which navigates the reader to decode the meaning of narrative.

I. INTRODUCTION

This study analyses *Two Virgins* (1973) from the approach of narratology and focuses on the analysis of focalization in the novel. This study is of dual nature as it first explains the concept of narratology and then uses it as a model to analyse the novel. Before delving into the narratological analysis of the select novel, it is imperative to understand the integral terms and concept associated with it. This study follows Gerard Genette's concept as he propounded a method for the analysis of narrative in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*.

Two Virgins is narrative of Lalitha and Saroja, two sisters at their puberty with contrasting mode of characters and their adolescence awakening. The narrative of the novel demonstrates the new face of degradation, which is the result neither of hunger nor of poverty rather the outcome of a fashion of the modern society which claims to be advanced. The novel is a portrayal of two girls with identity crises, clash of cultural values, and traditional vs.

modernized values in rural vs. urban scenarios. The novel gained immense attention from the readers and critics because of its non-conforming narrative and the title as well. The novel challenges the patriarchy through its subject matter and discusses sex taboos of that time (1950's). The novel is a narrative of two sisters yet it is narrated through the perspective of Saroja and acumens the ethical code provided for the women.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study applies the framework of narratology to comprehend the narrative structure of *Two Virgins* where the theory acts as a tool to interpret the novel. The method of close reading is opted for the analysis of the novel as well as secondary sources. It involves research on the novels and application of narratology in fiction which further assist in analyses of the novel from the perspective of narratology.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kamala Markandaya is researched variously from thematic aspect, feminist approach and from the approach of interdisciplinary aspects such as Eco criticism and Eco feminism. (Harrex, 1971) opines that Markandaya's understanding of women's sensibility and the representation of women's attitudes in the social, political, and spiritual crisis makes her a different and unique novelist from her contemporaries.

(Mishra and Agrwal, 2014) discuss identity of women in Kamala Markandaya's novels and reasons that the women have to face not only the apathy and arrogance of men but also their own weaknesses and external circumstances. The researchers has analysed the novels from the feminist perspective.

(Rajput and Ahmed, 2020) deals with characterisation technique in *Two Virgins* and deduces that Lalitha is a flat character whereas Saroja emerges to be a round character. The researcher analysed the novel through the ethical code of society.

(Tyagi and Kumari, 2021) explores the portrayal of rural society and depicts the realistic picture of Rural India in *Two Virgins* and construe the effect of rural and city life in the characters of Lalitha and Saroja..

(Guanghui, 2021) discusses focalization in the fictional world while focusing on the issue of who sees and who speaks in the novel. The researcher sheds light on the evolution of focalization in the post classical narratology.

(Lutas, 2019) discuss the significance of disembodied narrative voice and focalization in engaging the readers' imaginations and narrative competencies.

IV. CONCEPT AND TERMINOLOGIES

This section of the paper deals with the concept and terminologies of narratology which is further analyzed in the novel. Gerard Genette, a major narratologist propounded a method for the analysis of narrative discourse in his book, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980) opines that narratology is a method of analysis and the reason of such analysis is to recognise the usual features of any narrative. The theory is further explained by Peter Berry, a well-known literary theorist, states, 'Narratology is the study of narrative, narrative structures and the ways that these affect our perception' (Berry, 2020.) Narratology comprises of events, characters, time, characterization, levels and voices and speech representation. Among all these elements and characteristics, this study focuses on narration and focalization in the novel.

Focalization

This study follows the framework of narratology propounded by Gerard Genette and his concept of focalization. He describes focalization in his book and states that focalization serves to clear the confusion between what he calls "*mood and voice*, a confusion between the questions *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* And the very different question *who the narrator is?* – Or, more simply, the question *who sees?* And the question *who speaks?*" (Genette, 1982). To make it more precise, Gerald Prince, in his *Dictionary of Narratology*, defines focalization as "the viewpoint or the perspective, which is to say the point of view from which the story is told" (Prince, 2003). Genette discusses three types of focalization: external, where the narrator says less than what the characters know, internal where the narrator says what a specific character knows, and zero focalization where the narrator knows everything and narrate accordingly (Genette, 1983).

Analysis of Focalization in *Two Virgins*

The analysis of *Two Virgins* from the approach of narratology begins with determining the narrator of the novel as it is one of the important features of narratology and the role of narrator is vital in understanding the narrative. Narrator is the product of author's vision and creativity and discerns the narrative of Lalitha and Saroja, two sisters having contrasting modes of thoughts and character filled with love, loneliness, frustrations, identity crises, and moral values. The novel becomes a satire for the patriarchal society by narrating the story of two adolescent girls and their choices and struggles with society, and their own family which leads to the life altering situation and breaking sex taboos of the time. Krishna Rao opines that the 'female characters of the novel are wavering between modern and traditional values. It is an attempt at a socially realistic novel relevant to the changing socio-cultural scene of post-independence India' (Rao and Menon, 2017).

The novel starts with zero focalization by unnamed narrator where the character of Chingleput is introduced as well as the setting of the novel is informed to the reader.

Chingleput ran the only sweet shop in the village. It was static, even moribund, during the monsoon, but in the ten months' dry season it became mobile, trundled around on the little cart Chingleput has decked out himself. No one knew his name, least of Chingleput (Markandaya, 01)

The passage is narrated from the omniscient point of view and the character is introduced. The passage depicts the setting of the novel and the reason behind the name of Chingleput as he was orphan and no one knew his name so

they named him after the name of railway station where they saw him first.

Focalization changes when Markandaya select Saroja's perspective to narrate the novel. Saroja becomes the internal focalizer as per Genette's criteria because she is a character in the story. Her selection of narrator deciphers the characteristics of the text as through the perspective of narrator, reader recognizes the narrative structure of the novel. The story progresses with portrayal of their adolescence and awakening in contrasting mode of modern westernized values and traditional values. Through Saroja's consciousness the reader witnesses the beauty of Lalitha and her status in the patriarchal society,

Lalitha had status. She had no husband yet, but everyone could when she did she would have more than her fair proportion. There was no lack of emissaries. The young men's mothers sent them, and the women came and spoke to Amma and pinched Lalitha's cheek, and Lalitha was demure, pressed her delicate feet together and cast down her eyes to show off her lashes, which were long and lustrous. (Markandaya, 8)

The paragraph pronounces the status of Lalitha and personifies her beautiful eyelashes. It is narrated through the focalization of Saroja as she explains that Lalitha acquires all the praises and attention from the men and their mothers because she is beautiful and she never misses a chance to showcase her beautiful eyelashes. Internal focalization helps the reader to exemplify Saroja as demonstrative of the patriarchal structure which demonstrates the importance of beauty of women in society.

"she liked Amma's body, which was plump and soft and as comforting as a cushion, especially when you had one of those miserable spells. Appa's body was hard. Saroja could feel the bones through his shirt when he hoisted her on to his shoulders." (Markandaya, 8).

Through the description of physical attributes of the characters in the novel, it is discernible it is narrated from the focalized view of Saroja. The narration delineates Amma's appearance as feminine, and Appa's appearance as masculine as the text indicates that although the narrator of this passage is unknown but it is narrated through the perspective of Saroja. Many textual indicators designate that the novel is narrated through Saroja's perspective as she was curious and longed to understand the anatomy of female body and its characteristics while depicting Amma's body as suitable and comforting for her.

In another way, though, it disturbed her, made her thighs flutter and her inner moist; she longed to know what it was like for Amma, who was

constructed like her, same openings only larger, Maikkam's wife told her, because of the babies pushing out, not to mention what was pushed in. (Markandaya, 17)

The passage is narrated from Saroja's viewpoint however Lalitha is a more prominent character as she experiences more from life and is accessible to the utmost diverse circumstances yet her responses are narrated through the consciousness of Saroja.

Why don't you find out? Said Lalitha. She had pebbles collected from Ranga's River, shaped like lingam, smooth as anything. She showed Saroja how, got to moaning working herself on the stone, and quite shameless, showing her thighs and crotch and even her little wick. But Saroja ran off, she didn't want to try, she was frightened to in case the pebbles got lodged, got in the way of babies which were more important than anything else a woman must have. (Markandaya, 18)

The passage presents Lalitha's knowledge about her body and its pleasures which is unclear to Saroja. However, she understands the repercussion of it in a patriarchal society as according to her motherhood is most important to women and only ascribed to females. Her voice when she utters 'which were more important than anything else a woman must have' is narrated through her perspective but it is the influence of Aunt Alamelu and Amma.

Markandaya employs zero and internal focalization to create familiarity and compassion which helps the reader to understand the characteristic of narrative. Lalitha's life is narrated through focalization of Saroja as she describes her feminine look and beauty, and the significance of being beautiful.

Through zero focalization, the narrator describes Aunt Alamelu as someone who has no importance in the society because she has lost her husband and bears no child to look after her because of which she had no status in the society. Although she is older than Appa still she never crosses her brother-in-law's threshold because he is a man and considered superior in the society. No one pays attention to her words and advices and she is insulted by Appa often for her remarks on Lalitha and women in general, and the irony is she is accustomed to all the insults.

Through internal focalization the reader knows about the visit of Mr Gupta, a filmmaker. He sees Lalitha while dancing in school premises and is impressed by her charm and proposes to cast her in a documentary. The offer is accepted by Lalitha's parents specially her father but Alamelu sees it in a derogatory way and doubts the intention. She questions Lalitha's relationship with him which infuriates her and she puts question on her thought.

it's you that's shameless, said aunt Alamelu grimly, you're throwing yourself at him, you're so full of this film star nonsense you can't see you're only making yourself cheap to him, even if he says you're wonderful. Lies, lies! Cried Lalitha. She pulled herself together and said, loftily, I'm an artist, you have no conception of artistic affinity, which is what lies between us, and you can see only evil in the most beautiful things (Markandaya, 79).

Here the focalization is from Alamelu as she questions Lalitha but slowly shifts to Lalitha when she replies in the same tone. The passage reflects the society where a woman is judged not only by men but also by the women as she is interrogated for her behaviour whereas Mr Gupta receives a clean chit from everyone.

H.M. Williams opines about the character of Saroja and writes, she is more vibrant, young, candid, and practical and is happy to have a beautiful sister as well as watches her flourishing. Preya, while describing Markandaya's characterization writes, 'Saroja's vision and language informs all the experiences to the readers as she is one of the handpicked and most beautiful constructions of Markandaya' (Preya, 154). The novel revolves around her innocence, knowledge, love, jealousy, and above all, her love for the village life, aunt Alamelu, buffalo, her bicycle, and even the monsoon.

If you were married and got pregnant everyone was pleased except those unfortunate women who were barren. There were title ceremonies to call down blessings on you and when the baby was born everyone came around smiling bringing little presents...if you weren't married and became pregnant the picture was quite different, it was altogether grim. You hushed it up as best as you could and your baby, if ever it got born, had no future at all. (Markandaya, 154)

The passage is narrated through Saroja and describes the incident when Lalitha is criticized for becoming pregnant out of wedlock since she is not chaste anymore and loses her virginity, so she has no place in society. This dialogue also depicts the perspective of Saroja as she highlights the dual standards of society, where only women is questioned for not adhering to societal norms, and an unborn child has to face the repercussion. The family expects Lalitha to abort the child since she is unmarried and the society will not accept her because Mr Gupta denies to take the responsibility for his child.

The novel follows the criteria of variable focalization as most of the novel is narrated from the perspective of Saroja yet the perspective of Lalitha, Alamelu, Appa, Amma is

apparent. The variable focalization is through the frequent use of change in the narrator's perspective in the passage.

Men are like that, Aunt Alamelu said. That is why creation has been entrusted to women. Saroja liked the thought, it made her feel good, but Lalitha sniffed and said creation was given to men too, which stopped Aunt Alamelu dead in her tracks, stopped her from going on cockily about nestling and nests, which she had been about to do. Saroja knew because she often listened to Aunt to oblique her. Lalitha would not unless it was something she was interested. She was too impatient that life is too short. She told Saroja she could not think of life like that. It seemed to her more like a shining ribbon yard of it coming abundantly off a heavenly blue spool. (Markandaya, 34)

This passage is an instance of how the narrator constructs gender characteristics, where Aunt Alamelu states that females are assigned to the creation. The particular statement also marks the difference in the change of perspective as the paragraph starts with Alamelu and later shifts to Saroja, and Lalitha, narrating their points of view.

Saroja gets the empowerment to live without surrendering herself to unworthy desires. Ultimately, she is more contented than Lalitha because she has the power to say no to city life and her desires as she understands the repercussions of going beyond society's norms. This ability is evident through the lines,

He lay down beside her and started to caress her. She allowed him to, she discovered she had no sense of shame in revealing, in yielding the shyest, most guarded recesses of her body to him. Each caress was like a passing flame. The sensation were exquisite, were mounting, she could not bear them but she wanted more, she begged him to pierce her entirely and give her peace. I will, he cried, and lunged. Lalitha appeared. She was naked, her belly was enormous but she didn't seem to mind. Her eyes were shining, rain-wet, diamonds hung on the lashes. It's so lovely, she said, there's nothing like it when they spill their seed. Saroja burst into tears. She twisted herself way from Devraj, his sucking, clinging, spilling body. You're killing me, he cried. You're killing my baby, Saroja shouted at him. She woke. She was alone in the room. There was an almond- milk moisture between her legs, her flesh was swollen and quivering. (Markandaya, 175)

Although Saroja dreamt of an intimate relationship with Devraj where she wants to explore her sexuality and there's no shame while being naked in front of Devraj, she

wants to feel all the sensations that a young girl wants to feel in her adolescence. Through Lalitha's appearance as a pregnant lady who has to undergo an abortion because of society and her parents, she understands that if she does anything beyond social norms, she too has to face the repercussion, and she is not ready for that. Markandaya discusses the suppression of Saroja's desires by herself and writes a set of rules for them to sustain in the patriarchal society. This incident set an example for many women to be more aware of their desires, lead a life as society expects them to be, and not fall into the traps of physical needs but instead function as individuals. (Karkun, 8)

Markandaya starts her novel with zero focalization by describing Chingleput's life as a boy and his struggle to have a shop of his own and ends with zero focalization his action concerning Saroja, where the narrator says, "He clasped her. His organ was hard, was nuzzling her body. Don't be afraid, I'm a man, I can't help it, said Chingleput." (Markandaya, 193). This dialogue also explains the situation where Saroja is initially fond of him and listens to him carefully, whereas, at the end of the novel, she does not feel safe with him and leaves without saying anything.

P. Geetha calls Markandaya a true feminist and writes about *Two Virgins*,

Markandaya breaks away from tradition in treating the theme of sex in *Two Virgins*, and this has aroused some adverse criticism. This novel, devoted to set before us the view of the life of a sexual, moral, and cultural deviate, is feminist in every sense of the term. Kamala Markandaya here allows herself much more freedom to describe social reality for its own sake, and ideological issues tended to be played down by her here. The portrayal of contrasting sister heroines is very much in the moralistic tradition of female writing. (Geetha, 24).

Two Virgins is critically acclaimed for its subject matter and characterization as the novel deals with the sex taboos of that time and consists of gay boy and an illicit affair of Lalitha and Mr. Gupta. Lalitha is not considered a virgin by the characters, i.e., Amma, Aunt Alamelu, and others, because she becomes pregnant out of wedlock.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the narratological approach the narratives of *Two Virgins* provide the profound understanding of the two adolescent girls which becomes the saga of every girl in her teens who wants to explore their body without the judgment of society. The narrative reinforces the notion of patriarchal narratives which celebrate the idea of women as

the embodiment of chastity and virtue. The analysis sheds light on Saroja's thoughts on sexuality and the repercussion of exploring it without getting married. The belief that morality and chastity are women's characteristics also marks the construction of gender in Markandaya's novel. Though the novel focuses on Lalitha's miseries in male chauvinist society, the impact of Mr Gupta and Miss Mendoza's thinking about life and their westernized values is decisive on her life. The narration from the perspective of Saroja and her growing suspicion and criticism for the society and its norms is discernible through the analysis. The novel attempts to probe into the psychological states of two young girls and their awakening as Markandaya represents psychological and the physical characteristics of women which is still relevant in the modern times.

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