

Alienation and Rootlessness in Two Virgins by Kamala Markandaya

Umesh Sharma

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Professor, K.R. (P.G.) College, Mathura
(U.P.) Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar
University, Agra, Uttar Pradesh.
Email: drumeshsharma99@gmail.com

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Address for correspondence:

Umesh Sharma
Professor, K.R. (P.G.) College, Mathura
(U.P.) Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar
University, Agra, Uttar Pradesh.
Email: drumeshsharma99@gmail.com

Abstract

Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* is a profound exploration of the psychological and cultural tensions experienced in post-independence India. Through the contrasting lives of two sisters, Lalitha and Saroja, the novel presents a poignant study of alienation and rootlessness. While Saroja remains grounded in her rural environment, Lalitha's journey into the urban world of cinema exposes her to exploitation, identity loss, and emotional displacement. This paper examines how alienation operates at personal, social, and cultural levels, reflecting the broader transformation of Indian society. The study highlights how modern aspirations, when detached from cultural roots, lead to fragmentation and existential dislocation.

Keywords: Alienation, Rootlessness, Urbanization, Identity Crisis, Tradition vs Modernity, Feminine Experience, Displacement, Indian Society.

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya, one of the most prominent Indian English novelists, often explores themes of cultural conflict, identity, and human struggle. *Two Virgins* (1973) is a subtle yet powerful narrative that portrays the transition of Indian society from tradition to modernity. The novel revolves around two sisters—Saroja, the narrator, and Lalitha—whose lives diverge dramatically due to their differing responses to change.

Alienation and rootlessness are central themes of the novel. These themes are not merely personal but are deeply connected with the socio-cultural shifts in India. The movement from village to city, the lure of cinema, and the erosion of traditional values create a sense of dislocation, particularly for Lalitha. As Markandaya writes, “*Nothing is ever as it seems, and the world outside is not the one we imagine.*” This statement encapsulates the illusion and subsequent alienation that Lalitha experiences.

Concept of Alienation and Rootlessness

Alienation refers to a sense of estrangement from oneself, society, or one's environment. Rootlessness, on the other hand, suggests a loss of belonging and identity. In *Two Virgins*, both concepts are intertwined and primarily embodied in Lalitha's character. The novel portrays how rapid modernization disrupts traditional structures, leaving individuals caught between two worlds. Lalitha's desire to escape her village life leads her into an unfamiliar urban environment where she loses her sense of self. Saroja, in contrast, remains rooted in her village, representing stability and continuity. Through this contrast, Markandaya effectively highlights the psychological cost of uprooting oneself.

Rural Stability vs Urban Displacement

The village in *Two Virgins* symbolizes harmony, simplicity, and rootedness. Saroja describes her life as peaceful and secure, deeply connected with nature and community. The village offers identity and belonging. In contrast, the city represents chaos, illusion, and moral ambiguity. Lalitha's attraction to the city is fueled by dreams of glamour and success. However, this dream quickly turns into a nightmare. Her inner fragmentation and silence reflect deep psychological alienation:

“*There were things she could not speak of.*”

(Markandaya 2010, p. 109)

As Saroja observes, “*She had gone beyond our reach, into a world that was no longer ours.*” This line reflects Lalitha's physical and emotional alienation from her roots. The urban environment strips Lalitha of her innocence and identity. She becomes a victim of circumstances she neither fully understands nor controls.

Lalitha: The Embodiment of Alienation

Lalitha's journey is central to the theme of alienation. Initially portrayed as ambitious and curious, she is drawn to the promises of the film industry. However, her aspirations are not supported by awareness or guidance. Her relationship with the film producer symbolizes exploitation and betrayal. She is reduced to an object, losing her autonomy and dignity. This leads to a deep sense of isolation and despair. Lalitha's alienation is both external and internal. Externally, she is cut off from her family and village. Internally, she struggles with guilt, shame, and confusion. Markandaya poignantly captures this when she writes, “*She was no longer the Lalitha we had known.*” This transformation signifies the loss of identity and the emergence of rootlessness.

Lalitha's longing for a different life is reflected in her fascination with the outside world:

"She was always looking beyond... as though something lay waiting for her."

(Markandaya 2010, p. 18)

The arrival of the film agent introduces the external force that accelerates Lalitha's alienation. Her decision to leave the village is not merely a physical movement but a symbolic severing of roots. Saroja recalls with unease: *"It was as if she had already left us, though she still sat among us."* This line captures the emotional estrangement that defines alienation. Lalitha no longer belongs to the world she inhabits, yet she has not fully entered the new one.

Psychological Dimensions of Alienation

Alienation in *Two Virgins* is not merely social but deeply psychological. Lalitha experiences a breakdown of selfhood as she navigates an unfamiliar world. Her initial excitement gradually turns into fear and disillusionment. She becomes trapped in a situation where she has no control, leading to emotional numbness. Saroja's narration adds depth to this psychological exploration. As an observer, she tries to understand Lalitha's transformation but struggles to reconcile it with her own stable worldview. The contrast between the sisters highlights the internal conflict between desire and reality, aspiration and limitation. Her gradual emotional distancing from the village is captured through Saroja's observation:

"It was as if she no longer belonged wholly to us."

(Markandaya 2010, p. 27)

Lalitha's fascination with the outside world marks the beginning of her alienation. Drawn by the glamour of cinema, she begins to detach herself emotionally from her surroundings. Saroja observes this subtle transformation: *"She would sit for hours, staring beyond the fields, as though the horizon held something meant only for her."* This longing signifies the first step toward rootlessness—a psychological distancing that precedes physical departure. Lalitha's imagination, fueled by illusion, creates a divide between her and the life she once shared with her sister.

Feminine Experience and Exploitation

Alienation in the novel is closely linked with gender. Lalitha's experience is shaped by her vulnerability as a young woman in a patriarchal society. The film industry, which initially appears as a space of opportunity, becomes a site of exploitation. Lalitha is manipulated and abandoned, reflecting the harsh realities faced by women who step outside traditional boundaries. Her alienation is intensified by societal judgment. Upon her return, she is unable to reintegrate into her community, further deepening her sense of rootlessness. Markandaya subtly critiques a society that both restricts and punishes women, leaving them with limited choices. When Lalitha leaves, the sense of separation becomes more intense:

"She had passed beyond our reach into another world."

(Markandaya 2010, p. 41)

In the city, Lalitha's dreams begin to unravel. The film world, which once appeared dazzling, reveals its exploitative nature. Her encounter with the producer exposes the harsh reality behind the illusion. The narrative suggests this disillusionment through Saroja's later reflection: *"The brightness she had gone in search of had dimmed, leaving shadows in its wake."* Lalitha's experience is marked by betrayal and loss of agency, reducing her to a passive figure in a world that objectifies her. This loss of control deepens her alienation, as she becomes disconnected not only from her family but also from her own sense of self.

Symbolism of Cinema and Illusion

Cinema in *Two Virgins* serves as a powerful symbol of illusion. It represents the false promises of modernity and the deceptive nature of urban life. Lalitha's fascination with cinema reflects her desire to transcend her circumstances. However, this illusion blinds her to the dangers that lie ahead. The contrast between the glamorous image of cinema and its harsh reality underscores the theme of alienation. Lalitha's dreams are shattered, leaving her disillusioned and displaced. As the narrative suggests, *"The glitter was only on the surface; beneath it lay darkness."* This metaphor captures the essence of her experience. The illusion of cinema and its hidden dangers are subtly exposed:

"The brightness that drew her was not all light."

(Markandaya 2010, p. 63)

The motif of illusion versus reality runs throughout the novel, reinforcing the theme of alienation. Lalitha's belief in the promise of cinema is gradually dismantled. At one point, the narrative suggests: *"What had seemed like a door to another life had closed behind her, leaving her shut out from both."* This metaphor encapsulates her rootlessness—she is excluded from the new world she sought and cannot return unchanged to the old one.

Saroja: The Voice of Rootedness

Saroja, as the narrator, represents stability and rootedness. Her perspective provides a counterbalance to Lalitha's alienation. She remains connected to her environment and values, embodying a sense of continuity. Through her, Markandaya emphasizes the importance of cultural roots and self-awareness. However, Saroja is not unaffected. She experiences a form of indirect alienation as she struggles to comprehend her sister's choices and fate. Her narrative reflects a quiet resilience, suggesting that rootedness does not imply stagnation but rather a grounded sense of identity. Saroja's realization of a changed reality marks the thematic closure:

"Nothing could ever be the same again."

(Markandaya 2010, p. 118)

Through Saroja's compassionate yet limited understanding, the novel maintains a deeply human perspective. The narrative does not judge Lalitha but seeks to comprehend her. In doing so, it reveals the vulnerability of individuals caught between worlds. As Saroja quietly concludes in her reflections: *"We could not bring her back, not as she had*

been, and perhaps not at all.” This line captures the essence of rootlessness—the impossibility of returning to an original state once one has been fundamentally altered.

Post-Independence Context and Social Change

The themes of alienation and rootlessness in *Two Virgins* must be understood within the context of post-independence India. The country was undergoing rapid social and economic transformation.

Urbanization, industrialization, and exposure to Western culture created new opportunities but also new challenges. Traditional values were being questioned, leading to a sense of uncertainty. Lalitha’s story reflects this transitional phase. Her alienation is not just personal but representative of a society in flux. Markandaya captures this tension with sensitivity, highlighting both the possibilities and pitfalls of change.

Alienation in the novel also signifies a moral crisis. Lalitha’s journey involves a departure from traditional norms, leading to ethical ambiguity. The loss of cultural anchors results in confusion and instability. Lalitha’s inability to reconcile her aspirations with reality leads to her downfall. This moral dimension adds depth to the theme of alienation, suggesting that rootlessness is not merely physical but also ethical and spiritual.

Conclusion

Two Virgins is a deeply moving exploration of alienation and rootlessness in a changing society. Through the contrasting experiences of Lalitha and Saroja, Kamala Markandaya highlights the psychological, social, and cultural consequences of displacement. Lalitha’s tragic journey serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of uncritical acceptance of modernity. Her alienation reflects the loss of identity and belonging that can occur when individuals are uprooted from their cultural context. Saroja’s rootedness, on the other hand, emphasizes the value of stability and self-awareness. Together, the sisters represent two paths in a transitional society. In the end, alienation in *Two Virgins* is not merely a condition imposed by external circumstances but a deeply internalized experience. It is the loss of connection—to place, to people, and to oneself. Markandaya’s sensitive portrayal ensures that Lalitha’s story resonates beyond its immediate context, offering a timeless insight into the human cost of displacement and the fragile nature of identity in a changing world.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that true progress lies in balancing tradition and modernity, rather than abandoning one for the other. Alienation and rootlessness, as depicted in *Two Virgins*, remain relevant in today’s globalized world, making the novel a timeless reflection on human experience.

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Conflicts of interest

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