



KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *A SILENCE OF DESIRE*: A DISCOURSE OF INDISPENSABLE REALIZATION

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ABSTRACT:

A Silence of Desire portrays the life around religious faith which is the platform of age old Indian philosophical idea against the dubiousness imparted by Westernization. Dandekar, the male protagonist, is the "modernist," whereas his wife; Sarojini is the "Traditional." The confrontation between two sets of ideas; between their two sets of viewing the world is amply picturized by the novelist Kamala Markandaya. A Silence of Desire is the world of diverse attitudes marked and influenced by the Western philosophy over Eastern ideology; between faith and reason, between tradition and modernity, between resistance and submission. The present paper aims at studying the novel A Silence of Desire, which revolves round the confrontation between myth and reality, religion and science, faith and reason and Eastern ideas and values vis-a-vis Western pragmatism. Markandaya writes with the conviction of one who knows profusely the conflict between faith and reason. The description of the conflicting attitudes of Dandekar and Sarojini is a testimony to an inherent conflict between tradition and modernity. Sarojini is consistently, deeply orthodox in her faith, convinced of its total beneficence. On the contrary, Dandekar exposed to modern ideas is caught between the residual power of his cultural inheritance and a newly acquired one which has yet to achieve full credence.

Keywords : *faith, reason, tradition, modernity, cultural inheritance.*

INTRODUCTION :

Kamala Markandaya is one of the best contemporary Indian novelists. Her novels are remarkable for their range of experience. Though Markandaya labelled herself as an Indian known for writing about cultural clash between Indian urban and rural societies, her contribution in the portrayal of East -West sensibility is highly appreciated in the West also. In comparison to her contemporary women writers, Kamala Markandaya seems to be more reflective of the feminine sensibility in modern India. The strength of her novels lies in the delicate analysis of the relationships of persons. She belonged to the pioneering group of Indian women writers due to her polished literary style.

Kamala Markandaya was born Kamala Purnaiya in a Brahmin family in a South Indian city of Mysore in 1924. She took on the name Markandaya as her literary pseudonym.

Primarily a housewife, Kamla Markandaya was well conscious of the gender differences

after she entered journalism. The core focus area in her novels is India, afflicted with confusion, economic disparity, abrupt social and political changes and violence; though she makes an effective presentation of East and West in her works, it gives one a feeling that the writer is trying to interpret the East to the West.

A Silence of Desire encompasses the substance of tradition and modernity through the relationship between husband and wife. It is the story of Dandekar and his wife Sarojini, who represents diverse views of life: one drawing deeply from the past, another emerging from the new and contemporary.

Dandekar, a senior clerk in the service of government of India, is married to Sarojini. They are leading a very contented life with three children. Sarojini is a traditional housewife. On the contrary, Dandekar has modern outlook. One evening after returning from his office, Dandekar finds his wife absent. She returns

later and offers some lame excuses for her absence. Though he appears convinced at that moment he grows suspicious. One day he follows her and finds out to his utter dismay that she goes out to visit Swamy. Sarojini later express that she has a tumour in her womb and she goes to Swamy for faith healing. When forced by Dandekar to visit a hospital, she says that she has lost faith in hospital as her mother and grandmother had died while undergoing a similar kind of operation. Dandekar fails to prevent his wife from going to Swamy. He even goes to Swamy and request him to stop Sarojini from visiting. But Swami refuses to do so. Dandekar faces financial turbulence and loses peace and interest in life. He starts visiting prostitutes. By the advice of his colleagues he puts his problems before his boss, Chari, who in turn orders Ghose to make an enquiry about the genuineness of Swamy. Ghose, the modern-age officer recommends Swamy's expulsion from the town as he is a fake one. In the meantime, however Swamy himself leaves the town. Sarojini returns to Dandekar and agrees to undergo an operation. After the successful operation, Dandekar is back to his normal and happy life once again.

Sarojini in *A Silence of Desire* is a religious woman who fights against the male force and the world of rationalism at large, while fulfilling her duty as a wife and a mother. The novel deals more explicitly with the problems of marriage. Here again we get a word picture of the traditional Indian wife in Sarojini:

A good wife ...good with children, an excellent cook, an efficient manager of his household, a woman who still gave him pleasure after fifteen years of marriage, less from the warmth of her response than from her unflinching acquiescence to his demand. (*A Silence of Desire*:7)

For Dandekar, everything is all right as long as his wife is there in the house, cooks for him, manages his household and gives him physical

pleasure. But in return he is completely blind to her problems and feelings. Dandekar's family life suffers because he builds up the edifice of love on a weak foundation – that of physical love based more on acquiescence of his demands than on spontaneous response. He forgets the basic fact that a woman is a human being before she could become a wife, a mother, or a housekeeper. And she has a soul above and over her husband, her children, or the house. But Dandekar is conscious only of her physical existence.

Mutual understanding is lacking in the domestic life of Dandekar and Sarojini. Sarojini has developed an ulcer in her uterus and suffers from a serious ailment; yet she does not confide in her husband about it. Sarojini, on the other hand, has no idea of what is right and what is wrong; natural feeling or her feminist superstitious faith in religion on the one hand, belief in the authority of her husband on the other, have altogether bewildered her. Quite against the will of her husband, she continues to go to the faith- healer. Finally, though she consents to get medical treatment, it is because of the instruction from the Swamy. However, till the end she proves herself to be an independent figure confronting the male authority.

Family is man's basic need and a very important fragment of society. And man is a social animal who lives in the microcosm and not in a cosmos. Within its structural fold it contains the two important kin bonds - filial and matrimonial. These primary ties are universally esteemed and cherished. Nevertheless, these fundamental relationships strengthen or weaken under the multi-dimensional pressures and tensions of human life and the in-built personality traits of the individuals concerned.

As Robert A. Baron opines:

Sometimes their relationships develop into the most positive ties and sometimes they degenerate into cumbersome bonds. There are

certain personality attributes and situational influences that help increase interpersonal harmony between very dissimilar individuals to tolerate and sometimes to like one another. (Baron:199)

The marital disharmony brings to the light the difference in the characters of Dandekar and Sarojini in their attitude to superstitions and rituals. Dandekar, being a man of progressive ideas, has no faith in superstitions of his ancestors as Sarojini has. She worships the tulasi plant considering it as God and nurses it with due reverence. But the concept of worshipping a mere plant as a God does not appeal to Dandekar's rational mind who, while conceding it as a symbol of God, refuses to pray to it. He tries to convince his wife about the futility of worshipping a plant but she neglects his idea. Her roots with Hindu culture and religion are so affixed that she is not going to accept which goes contrary to her faith.

Trust and confidence are the backbone of the sensitive relationship of the husband and wife. But the bond of Sarojini-Dandekar lacks this essential prerequisite. Sarojini's religious and traditional ideas are quite different with Dandekar's modern outlook and westernized thinking. She is unable to do anything that goes against to his ideas. She is conscious that her way of treating her disease will be surely disapproved by her husband. So, she hides her ailment to avoid undergoing an operation. This fear on Sarojini does not testify the presence of a mutual satisfying relationship. Dandekar never denies that Sarojini is a devoted wife. Nevertheless, her mysterious behaviour gives chance to him to find fault with her. The acts like hiding the photograph of the Swamy in her daughter's old exercise-book, secretly going to visit the Swamy in her best clothes, paying tribute to the Swamy out of her little treasures and consequently neglects her home and the like arouse Dandekar's suspicion and let him to

be torn between absolute faith and devouring betrayal. As a result, now they don't have their evening chit chat with joy and ease:

The rest of the evening he spent passing between violent trust and extreme mistrust. It gave an uneven edge to the conversation, their relationship, which tired not only him but, he could see, also Sarojini. Nevertheless, doggedly, he stayed up until the usual hour, intending while he hung on somehow to question her tactfully about the photograph... It struck in his throat, and he had by now acknowledged that he could not get it out. (A Silence of Desire:46)

Dandekar is not ready to put Sarojini in the hands of a faith-healer. Like Sastri, his colleague, Dandekar is of the opinion that his wife must go to hospital and get herself operated. But she outrightly rejects his stand because of her own faith on Swami. Dandekar does not want to reason things out with her fearing that she may lose her faith in Swami, nor does he want to compel her to go to the hospital, for her cure is not assured. This explains Dandekar's contradiction who is torn between two worlds- the scientific and the traditional. Markandaya has tried to strike a balance between faith and reason by making Dandekar realise the power of the Swamy which has left an indelible impression on his mind. Dandekar wishes that Swamy were back when he learns from his wife that "he (Swamy) had no attachments to keep him in this or that place...it was the people that formed an attachment to him though it was against all his teaching." (A Silence of Desire:216)

Although the Swamy is not able to cure the growth in Sarojini's womb, yet he is successful in preparing her mentality to undergo the operation and assuring her of its success. "faith healing," says Margaret P. Joseph, "depends, it seems more on the faith of the sick person than on the power of the healer." (Joseph:87)

Dandekar, torn between the two ambivalent attitudes, conceded reverence but the difference was a fine point as due to a symbol and its actuality. More disturbing to him is a fact that Sarojini is bound up in a socio-cultural beliefs that imply reposing faith in a Swamy for her cure. When he meets her cousin Rajam he screams out: “what makes you so gullible.....as to believe these hearsay stories, these cures that have happened always to someone else.” (A Silence of Desire:114) That Rajam herself was cured by the Swamy comes as a shock to him. Yet he will brook no chance and would prefer Sarojini to be medically treated. As Sarojini says: “I do not expect you to understand- you with your western notions, your superior talk of ignorance and superstition when all it means is that you don’t know what lies beyond reason and you prefer not to find out.” (A Silence of Desire:119)

A Silence of desire is built around spiritual faith which is the intrinsic ingredient of Indian life and scepticism which is a fall-out of Westernization. The novel has a host of characters with varying attitudes and consequently they are symbols of cultural stage. If Sarojini is a positive image of traditional Indian life, Dandekar is a character born out of the cross currents of Eastern and Western cultures. He is in the twilight zone where both cultures come to meet. The Western part in him finds its voice through his scepticism about religion and his belief in scientific system. Other characters like Joseph believe in free love. Mahadevan believes that no marriage is safe unless the wife is cloistered during her husband’s absences. Ghose represents the new rising modern India shedding its medievalism and ushering in the progressive world. The transition is dramatized in the novel by a contrast between Wilson and Dandekar, Dandekar and Rajan:

Stars? Horoscopes: Wilson turned abruptly. His words fell cold

and cutting as an axe.

Do you really think all that glory was created in order that some

measly little priest can mumble in your ear how many brats your wife

is going to have? Dandekar was equally outraged. (A Silence of Desire:28)

Dandekar is confounded to find Sarojini before the Swamy in a room surrounded by people. His tension is partly relieved because his belief in his wife’s conduct is reaffirmed. He whispers “If only you had told mewhy could you not told me?” (A Silence of Desire:37) She replies that he would have called her superstitious, a fool and then reasoned with her until she lost all faith. She is quite right in adding that his western notion cannot explain what lies beyond reason. The Swamy stands as a figure opposed to Dandekar’s materialism and desire for possession. The character of Swamy presents the alternative to the modern materialistic way of life, that is, a traditional set of values. Dandekar’s identity as a rational being seems to dissolve in the face of Sarojini’s resistance, mythical and superstitious credulity. He learns that he could never be whole when a part of her is missing. Uma Parmeswaran succinctly states, “Swami’s seemingly enigmatic answers as stylistically and contextually consistent with Hindu mysticism and so argue that Swami moves away because he knows one, that he has only the power to give comfort but not cure, and so should not feed false hopes to followers, and two, that attachment is as corrupting as compulsion, for himself as much as for his followers.” (Parmeswaran:103)

The Swamy and the dwarf, by their statements and silences, lead Dandekar to this indispensable realization.

CONCLUSION :

To be brief and exact *A Silence of Desire* reflects the subconscious desires of a housewife who fight against odds of life under the constraints of an inherited age-old culture. On the other hand, Dandekar stands testimony to so called 'modern' Westernized outlook who reacts neurotically at the deteriorated but unshakable faith of his wife. The detailed, indepth illustration of the story brings home a few significant points which reveal deeper meaning. First, Markandaya has given a candid, truthful picture of the modern Indian life without any personal prejudice. Sarojini is the symbol of a spiritual India whereas Dandekar is shown as a representative of a wider group of people living in modern Indian society. No country can afford to insulate itself against the prevailing currents of ideas. Because of its interaction with the Western world, Indian society has shed many of its traditional traits and has accepted the newer ideas. Dandekar is the product of this contemporary tradition. Dandekar's dilemma is the predicament of contemporary Indian whose roots are in his own soil but he also responds to the rationalist modern scientific concepts that engulf the whole universe. In short Dandekar is a creation of cultural dualism. He vacillates between doubt and faith. His modern self forces him to explain the role of Swamy rationally. He is transported into a new world where the serenity of traditional concepts escalates into the tranquillity of modern age.

To sum up, religion and science are fundamentally incompatible. The gist is the clash between faith and reason, and it provides the immediacy of a contemporary problem in India; but the real achievement of the novelist lies in the projection of this argument through the awakening of a mind developing from thoughtless smugness to timorous contemplation. Markandaya delve deeply into the psyche of her characters and also herald a new concept of morality and equality.

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