

CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIAN SPIRITUALISM AND WESTERN MODERNISM: A STUDY OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *A SILENCE OF DESIRE*

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Kamala Markandaya is one of the senior most Indian novelists writing in English. Her novels are remarkable for their wide range of themes. Broadly her novels are based on four major issues -- east-west encounter, conflict between tradition and modernity, colonial and post-colonial ethos and progress versus present situation. She writes about poverty and hunger, struggle for freedom, social evils, reforms, protests, intercultural understanding, man-woman relationship, effects of progress & development on villages and the emergence of New India etc. she wrote eleven novels and all of them are fine specimens of her literary genius. The present paper is an attempt to explore the theme of clash between science and religion or reason & faith in Markandaya's *A silence of desire*.

Nectar in a Sieve was Markandaya's first novel. It was published in 1954. The critics hailed it as an epic of Indian rural life. One year after this her second novel *Some Inner Fury* came out in 1955. It deals with the westernized upper class society. The third novel of Markandaya was published in 1960 and the title is *A Silence of Desire*. The focus is now on a middle class family in a small town. The main concern in this novel is the clash between the East and the West- tradition and progress, superstition and science, faith and reason. The novel revolves around the tension between the husband and wife created on account of communication gap and domestic disharmony. Kamala Markandaya is the first woman writer to deal with the subtle and sensitive problems that exist between man and woman on account of misunderstanding and lack of dialogue. The delicate complications in husband-wife relationship caused due to various factors is her prime focus in the present novel, the issue which was later explored in detail by other women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshapande, Anta Nair and Chitra Banerjee, etc.

Dandekar is a middle class clerk in a government office. He is happily married to Sarojini who is an ideal wife and a devoted mother of three children. He is highly influenced by the modern westernized idea of his colleagues and friends in the office. Dandekar's family is quite happy. Life is easy and comfortable but there comes a time when the peace and harmony of their family is disturbed on account of the ill health of Sarojini. She develops a growth in her womb and suffers a lot. Dandekar does not give sufficient time to his wife who, on other hand, starts visiting a swami's ashram for the cure of her ailment through spiritual power. She does not believe in

medicine science and is apprehensive of surgery. She does not disclose the fact of visiting swami even to her husband.

Dandekar becomes suspicious about his wife's loyalty towards him. His peace of mind is disturbed and their marital life is shattered. When Dandekar comes to know of his wife's health problem, he forces her to undergo a surgery after which she is cured completely. Sarojini has firm faith in the healing power of spiritualism whereas Dandekar believes only in medical science.

Kamala Markandaya presents Sarojini as a perfect traditional woman who is dedicated to her husband, her children and her home. She is a good wife "good with children, an excellent cook, and 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"¹. She is a typical Indian wife who is self-sacrificing and deeply religious. She has no faith in medical science and believes firmly in prayer and spiritual powers. The conflict between eastern values and western notions is quite apparent. Dandekar has a logical and rational mind which is highly impressed with western convictions. However, Sarojini is stronger than her husband. She agrees to go for the operation not because she realizes the superiority of science but because Swami has assured her that she will be alright. She boldly tells Dandekar:

"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"².

The role of swami in the present novel is very significant. He is sincere and works for the betterment of society. He is a sort of counselor who helps people overcome the difficulties of their lives with faith and spiritual healing. Meenakshi Mukherjee opines that the Swami functions not as an individual who lives his own life but as a public figure—a fulfillment of certain needs of society. He satisfies the needs of the people who want an object of faith. And the insistence finally appears to be not on the spiritual but on the social function of the swami. Usha Bande thinks that the delineation of Swami's character in the novel is very fine. The writer does not make him a dubious character, but she does not give him under importance even. She comments:

"The swami appears only on two or three occasions but he is the palpable presence all through the novel. He is a mysterious figure—silent, awe-inspiring and surrounded by his followers.....even a skeptic like Dandekar whose approach is hostile in the beginning is muted and mesmerized in his presence.....suffice to say that the swami in *A Silence of Desire* is not the central figure. He was brought in as a symbol of faith and he leaves after fulfilling his task"³. Markandaya's creative imagination works on the clash between oriental faith and western reason and offers the hope of reconciliation of the traditional and modern for a better future. Peace and harmony can be achieved in personal & social life when there is a happy fusion of the two ways of thinking. The lack of union of traditional ideas and rational scientific approach leads to dispute

and despair as it is dramatized through the story of Sarojini and Dandekar. Markandaya had been living in London for a long time and developed her literary potential there, yet India, its culture and its people had a greater influence upon her. She presents the assault of western skeptical views on the oriental faith of Sarojini in a forceful manner. Dandekar, her westernized husband asks her to give up her faith in the spiritual powers of the Swamy, but she stays strong and stable and ultimately leads him to realize the healing power of faith. Markandaya highlights the importance of modern science as well because the novel ends on the note of resolution. Sarojini agrees to undergo the operation. Markandaya suggests that silence or lack of communication between husband & wife leads to only family problems. She reveals how men and women torment themselves by silence on many occasions when they actually require unburdening their hearts by giving vent to their feelings. In the novel, the power of religion and faith on the Indian mind and the need to be open in marital relations comes under focus. It is mutual trust that should be developed and sustained.

REFERENCES

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