



## East West Conflicted represented as Tradition Vs Modernity in Kamala Markandaya's "A Silence of Desire"

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### Narration

Indian fiction in English is now a century and a quarter old; the first novel being Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's "Rajmohan's Wife", which was Published in 1864. Since then, the Indian - English novel has made appreciable headway mainly through the unstinted hard work of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala. Anita Desai, Arun Joshi and many others. The Indian-English novel has certainly established its credentials in common-wealth literature in English and can stand in comparison with the common-wealth novel in English, whether it be Australian, Canadian, West Indian or African.

Owing to the close intercultural contact imposed on India by Great Britain. the British and the Indian writers have produced a considerable bulk of fiction that explores the seemingly infinite subject of cultural interaction, commonly known as the East-West dichotomy.

The East-West theme in fiction has been stimulating the creative imagination of the Indo-English writers since perhaps the time Sarath Kumar Chose wrote a romantic novel entitled

'The Prince of Destiny' in 1909. The novel is about the dilemma faced by an Indian Prince who has to choose between his love for an English girl and marriage to an Indian Prince. When Bhabani Bhattacharya published his 'A Dream in Hawaii' in 1978, it showed once again that the East-West theme had not yet exhausted its possibilities.

It is significant that post-1947 India experienced a spurt of fiction written by women: Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Attia Hossain. Anita Desai and Ruth Pravar Jhabvala are some of the important names who wrote this type of fiction. Kamala Markandaya occupies a special position among these. Influenced deeply by the English romantic tradition, she has come to terms with the inheritance of Indian writing in English by creating a new literary mythology. Equally strongly influenced by Gandhian thought like many of her immediate literary predecessors like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, Markandaya's novels too could be said to setting the record straight, at establishing a truer perspective than had so far existed on the nature of Indian Character and Society.

Kamala Markandaya's novels cover a wide range of themes. As she is an Indian-English novelist. her Indianness is



best seen in the themes of her novels. Poverty, hunger and starvation, the East-West encounter, cultural conflicts, freedom movement, dislocation of rural life as a result of industrialization, religious traditions etc. are the important and recurrent themes of her novels.

By the beginning of the eighties, Kamala Markandaya has published ten novels in a span of about twenty seven years of writing career averaging one novel in about three years. They are *Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1967), *The Coffin Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honey Comb* (1977) and *Pleasure City* (1982). In each one of the novels, there are two cultural worlds set on opposition to each other. These cultural worlds belong to two distinct races of Indians and Europeans, they cannot merge.

According to her, if the East and West have the attitude of compromise, they may understand each other. It is supposed that West has been self-consciously superior and the East has been inferior. She opines that undiluted East had always been too much for the West; and soulful East always came lap-dog fashion to the West, mutely asking to be not too little and not too much, but just right. Though individual relationship between the East and West is feasible, yet political forces may keep barriers in its way. The novels of Kamala Markandaya teach us that we should cling to our traditional values but at the same time, we must readily accept what is best in the Western Culture. In religion she (India) should be proud of her great legacy and her constant aim should be the attainment of purity, equipoise and

altruism represented by Swami in 'A Silence of Desire.'

Markandaya's third novel, *A Silence of Desire* was published in 1960. The title is a bit ambiguous and it is taken from a motto of Longfellow.

Three silences there are, the first of speech, the second of desire, the third of thought.<sup>1</sup> The theme of the novel is the clash between faith and reason, and it provides the immediacy of a contemporary problem in India; but the real achievement of the author lies in the projection of this theme through the awakening of a mind developing from thoughtless complacency to tremulous introspection.

There is a popular saying that 'Speech is silver, silence golden': but the whole purpose of that saying is reversed in this novel which clearly propounds the theory that silence becomes the cause of controversy and confusion at times when the real need for human beings is to "unburden their hearts". In this novel, Kamala Markandaya skilfully builds up a tense situation that materialism, Eastern tradition against Western progress. The novel shows that there still exists some lingering sentiment in Independent India for England and the spiritual India is more powerful than the mundane West.

Dandekar is the central character in the novel *A Silence of Desire*. He is a senior clerk in the Government Office, leading a happy life with his wife Sarojini and three children. Suddenly he begins to doubt her fidelity. He follows her to a place where she is found sitting with a group of others, near a man. Dandekar's usual, placid wife is hurt by his accusations and after a quarrel, she at last tells him the truth. The man is a Swami, and she goes to him hoping to be



heal of a growth in her womb. Dandekar cannot bring himself to force his wife into having an operation which he is not sure will cure her; but he is sure that faith-healing will not work either. Thus he imposes silence on growing realisation of all that she means to him make his love for her deeper. At the same time he is so tortured by fears and frustration that he begins to turn to prostitutes, to his own disgust. The house and children are neglected as Dandekar takes to returning home late and Sarojini spends more and more time with the Swami. Gone is the happy peaceful atmosphere of the home, valued only in its loss. Dandekar meets the Swami to try and discover whether he is a fake or not – but he is not convinced either way. Worry and fear turn him into a sad introspective man. To matters worse, financial problems arise. Dandekar then falls ill, and the enforced rest serves the purpose of clarifying matters and calming his agitation. On his return to the office, he explains the situation to his boss. The upshot of this plea is that an enquiry into the Swami's activities is instituted. Public Opinion is divided as to whether he should stay being a true sage, or go, being a fake. Matters are deadlocked when suddenly the Swami himself solves the problem by leaving the town. He advises Sarojini to have the operation assuring her that she will be cured. Dandekar at last wins back some of the peace he had once so thoughtlessly enjoyed. His troubles have changed him. However, he realises now the precious nature of family harmony: and he feels guilty at having been the indirect cause of the Swami's departure, for he has left behind sick and destitute people who had depended on him for spiritual and material help.

In this novel, Markandaya makes us to observe two cultural worlds set on opposition to each other. These cultural worlds belong to two distinct races of Indians and Europeans, they cannot merge.

The influence of the British thought on the minds of Indians is aptly mentioned in the novel. The novelist's creative imagination works on the clash between faith and faith and reason, perhaps based on a personal awareness of its relevance in India today. Faith-healing goes back to the earliest days of world history, and outside India also, has won the sanction of diverse creeds. It was often associated, even in the West, with the divinity of kingship the "divine touch" that according to some included the power of healing, with the growth of science and reason kindred disciplines of psychology and psychiatry have turned their probing analytical skills on it.

The clash between faith and reason dramatises through Sarojini, the believer, and Dandekar, the rationalist, apparently united in a harmonious marriage but each a product of two different evolutions of thought.

The first point which brings to light the difference in the characters of Dandekar and Sarojini is their attitude to superstition and rituals. Dandekar, being a man of progressive ideas, has no faith in the superstitions of his ancestors as Sarojini has. She worships the Tulasi plant considering it as god and tends it with due reverence. But the idea of worshipping 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 goes one step forward and tries to educate his wife on this matter but in vain because her roots



are so deep in the Hindu culture and religion that she is not prepared to listen to anything which goes contrary to her faith.

There are no English characters involved in the action, but the author cannot frequent mention of the influence of British rule. Thus we are told that belief in reason as the guide of one's actions, is a result of British systems of thought. By implied contrast, Sarojini's faith is traditional and Indian changes in thinking are brought about by the changing climate of ideology all over the world.

Britain is not without its own believers in faith - healing, perhaps, just as India has long had its own systems of medical treatment. One wonders if the British had not ruled India, whether all Indians would have depended on faith-healing rather than hospitals!

It is perhaps because Rajarn, Sarojini's cousin, is so unsophisticated a character, that she is allowed to pinpoint the British so specifically when she says:

... you're worked for, been trained by the British you don't believe in anything much do you?

Sarojini is a more correct estimate when she 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.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the pull between East and West in schools of thought is dramatised. The traditional Indian attitude to illness and its cure, whether through faith or treatment, is put in perspective when she

says that in this country. "the body had long taken second place", due to harshness of circumstance, climate and religion. For people have been taught

... to turn the eye inward and find there the core of being.<sup>4</sup>

From the innermost core of the spirit should come the faith that will cure, the faith that usixi to constitute the spirit.' strength of the cowry. But according to Sarojini and Rajam, the West has withered this faith, blighting it with the talk of ignorance and superstition. Therefore Sarojini jealously treasures it in "silence".

The other side of the coin is presented by Ghose, the man with the Cambridge Degree, who considers the Swami an "out-and-out imposter", who uses incense to create an atmosphere,

... to get people on that dangerous edge where one tap from you and they topple over into your power.<sup>5</sup>

In between the extremes of Sarojini and Ghose are Dandekar and Sastri. Sastri will never be rash. Dandekar is equally circumspect, conditioned not to pass judgement: he believes in

... things that were beyond reason, and there were things to which in common prudence he never offered testament either of belief or disbelief.<sup>6</sup>

The conflict between the faith of Sarojini and the reason of Dandekar does not Swami without telling her husband who has no faith in such things. But when Dandekar begins to suspect her character because of her stealthy movements, she makes a clean breast of her visits to the Swami, adding that the



main reason of her not disclosing them to him was her fear that he might stop her from going to the Swami.

Kamala Markandaya has tried to strike a balance between faith and reason by making Dandekar realize the power of the Swami which has left an indelible impression on his mind. Dandekar wishes that the Swami were back when he learns from Sarojini that

... he (Swami) had no attachment 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.

Again Sarojini's acquiescence to go to the hospital is not a complete negation of faith and an acceptance of reason. Even behind the act of reason there lurks her unshakable faith. For it is not the advantages of the treatment in the hospital which make her go there, but it is her predominant faith in the Swami and his advice which make her opt for it. When Dandekar assumes Sarojini that she will be cured without the presence of the Swami, she remarks,

"I know", she answered. "He said, I would be, and not to hold back when the time came. I'm not afraid now of knives or doctors, or what they may do. All will be well. He said so"<sup>8</sup>

Although the Swami is not able to cure the growth in Sarojini's womb, yet he is successful in preparing her mentally 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."

And so much faith has Sarojini in the Swami that she might have gone to death itself, had it been his desire. Hence, it cannot be concluded that her departure to the hospital is the victory of reason over faith, though it cannot be completely ruled out.

The power of faith is also quite apparent in the transformation of Dandekar from a sceptic to a man feeling spiritually elevated. As a matter of fact, the Swami has brought much more transformation in Dandekar than he has in Sarojini because towards him the latter had already some inclination. But to transform a man who is completely antagonistic to the Swami and his teachings and who considers him fake and cheat -- this is the evidence of the Swami's genuine powers. This becomes much more evident when the Swami leaves the UM. By his departure the Swami brings a change in Dandekar's attitude which puts his relationship with his wife on a spiritual level, Dandekar confesses this fact to Chari, his boss, when he contends,

My wife is part of me now -- I didn't realize it in all the years it has been happening, but I know now that without her I'm not whole.

This conflict between Dandekar's body and spirit is a part of the conflict between eastern backwardness and western progress. Markandaya throws more light on this aspect through the dialogue between Dandekar and Wilson. There are places where Dandekar appears to have some of his roots still in the traditional ideas and as such believes in stars and horoscopes. But Wilson being an English man is unable to understand how man's life can be interpreted in terms of stars.



"Stars? Horoscopes?" he sarcastically asks Dandekar.. "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, who feels insulted by this remark, retorts that the universe is to be taken as a whole in which each part influences the other and therefore nothing exists by itself - implying thereby that as the distant moon can create rise and fall in the ocean, so the stars can also determine the destiny of human beings.

The East and West element creates another type of conflict - conflict between the tradition and modernity. Quite a few Ind.-English novels focus the reader's attention on this unavoidable conflict. Most of Kamala Markandaya's novels deal with the theme of tradition and modernity. Tradition means certain customs, habits, tastes, beliefs and opinions which have been prevalent in the country for a long time even though out-dated, anachronistic, and irrelevant in the contemporary period. On the other hand, modernity implies a gradual change in the attitudes, ideas and beliefs of the people brought about by the impersonal forces of urbanization, science and technology. In *A Silence of Desire*, Markandaya portrays these two sets of attitudes and ideas, the resultant tension and the inevitable resolution. It deals with this theme through the conflict between Dandekar and Sarojini.

East stands for traditionalism and West stands for modernism. The domestic life of the couple in this novel, Sarojini and Dandekar assumes a certain regularity and they pass their happy days. But their happiness is limited to

discussions about domestic chores and office gossip, without filtering deep down to the level of sharing ideas and problems related to religion and belief. Sarojini is highly credulous and religious, she worships her 'Tulasi' and Gods regularly. She is a clear representation of the traditionalism of East. But her husband is a bit agnostic and rational. Sarojini is clearly traditional and superstitious, while Dandekar is modern and questioning.

The smooth life for the couple goes on until Dandekar finds out about Sarojini's visits to the Swami. He inspects her and accuses his wife of infidelity. Then she discloses her problem of a tumour. Dandekar takes his wife to the doctor who advises an abdominal operation for which Sarojini is not prepared. She hopes to get cured with the help of the Swami's miraculous power.

The two opposite approaches to life - western pragmatism and eastern faith arehand and the doctor and the Swami on the other.

If incompatibility due to cultural disparities and East-West confrontations is a common enough reason for marital discord, the novel, *A Silence of Desire* deserves special attention as it portrays tensions in married life even in the absence of these familiar grounds for discord. Here Sarojini and Dandekar, the wife and the husband clash on the grounds of faith and rational thinking.

Domestic harmony, however, is too fragile to be taken for granted for any length of time. Theirs is, in essence, a traditional marriage - it runs smoothly- so long as the husband is in control. But the problem arises, with a sudden inexplicable growth in Sarojini's womb. Sarojini like Rajam her cousin, sticks to





her faith. The Swami teaches her to relegate the body to a second place and

... to turn the eye inward and find there the core of being.<sup>12</sup>

She is not surprised that Dandekar does not understand her way of thinking.

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.<sup>13</sup>

The clash between the believer and the non-believer takes on the East-West colouring too. Dandekar is accused by Rajam of not believing in anything, having been trained by the British. Ghose, the colleague in the office, having a Cambridge degree, considers the Swami an out-and-out imposter, manipulating people's religious mania."

He also tells Dandekar that the women seeking, help from the faith - healer are women with womb trouble

... women in fact already bordering on hysteria.<sup>15</sup>

yet Sarojini is anything but hysterical. Though she worries about the outcome of the operation, she is calm and asserts repeatedly that she is in God's hands. The tension inherent between conflicting modes of thought, the author herself being a product of both, is seen in Dandekar's part western and pan eastern mind and not in Sarojini who suffers no anxieties on this score. Anchored, like Rukmini, in the Indian way of life, she believes in suffering patiently, to cleanse or spiritualize oneself. Once again we see

the difference in the eastern and western attitudes toward human suffering.

The ending of the novel, though not credible, is a happy one. The Swami advises her to get herself operated, assuring her she will get cured. What is striking is the fact that the Indian women at least, the majority of the ordinary women like Sarojini seek consolation for their physical and material woes in the promises of spiritual guides. The emphasis on fate, on karma, that god, will is inevitable, that men and women are moulded by him, that miracles can occur through faith and prayer all these characteristic beliefs to the Indian are made explicit through Sarojini and Dandekar. The West blights this faith with pompous talk of superstition and lack of education.

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