

**FAITH VERSUS SCIENCE: A STUDY OF KAMLA MAKANDAYA'S  
'A SILENCE OF DESIRE'**

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The post independence era of 1950s is the world of Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire* that brought with it the advent of scientific temper in the society of Indian culture. But the pace of acceptance was mild as India had just come out of the envelope of faith and false notion that kept the country under its clutches for thousands of years. Faith and science both came to the terms of each other as science in its formative years could not make definite impact due to the stronger influence of faith in the society. Therefore, a sense of co-existence occurred and harmony prevailed between faith and science which in turn reflected in the society, in the family and even within an individual of that period. Justified dealing of both the cultures by the novelist makes her achievement exclusive as without taking side she had given fair treatment to both the cultures in her fiction. As Ramesh Chadha marks:

Kamala Markandaya examines the strengths and weaknesses of both the cultures. In extolling the philosophical and religious attitude of the Indian people and their spiritual strength, she is not uncritical of their economical backwardness, their superstitious nature, their abject poverty, squalor, ignorance, illiteracy, fatalism and passive endurance, nor does she underestimate the contribution of the West.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in the whole story Markandaya sticks fast to her basic notions regarding Indian life placed in the perspective of western "progress." Invariably, one perceives an incessant conflict between Eastern tradition and Western progress. Religion and science too interact and at times work as antithetical forces.

The theme of clash between faith and science is presented through Sarojini and Dandekar, a middle-class couple. Dandekar is a typical Indian male who claims to be rational and scientific but what he perceives is coloured by his distorted idea of reality and science, his personal whims, likes and dislikes and his male chauvinism. He has a part — Eastern and a part — Western mind. He is trapped between two worlds, one 'scientific.' not fully born, and the other, traditional, not fully thrown away. The eastern part consists of his belief in traditions and faith, the sanctity of marriage and complete fidelity of wife. The western part consists of his scepticism about religion, his relation, scientific attitude. H.M. Williams calls him a "modern—minded" Indian official "with a fashionably modern contempt for superstitious, old, 'believing' India."<sup>2</sup>

Dandekar is a traditional husband who has one set of rules for himself and the other for the females especially for his wife. He criticizes everything that his wife, Sarojini does but cannot check himself from doing the same. For him, a wife means a constant prop to his household, with no personal demands.

Domestic harmony, however, is too fragile to be taken for granted for any length of time. So the married life of Sarojini and Dandekar is also not exempted from it. After passing fifteen years of blissful wedded life, Dandekar begins to suspect the fidelity of his wife, Sarojini. Initially, he thinks that Sarojini is morally wrong and has an affair with the Swami and hence he tries to check her from going to him. But later his wife confesses that she visits a Swami to cure a growth in her womb. She has so much faith in the Swami's power of healing that she refuses to go to the hospital for her treatment.

The first point which brings to light the conflict between faith and science is the difference in the characters of Dandekar and Sarojini by their attitude towards superstition and rituals. Dandekar, being a man of progressive ideas, has no faith in the superstitions of his ancestors, whereas Sarojini has strong faith in the deep-rooted traditional ideas of Indian life. She worships the *tulasi* plant considering it as God and worships it with due reverence. But the idea of worshipping a mere plant as God does not appeal to Dandekar's rational mind who, while conceding it as a symbol of God, refuses to pray to it and says, "one did not worship plants; but it was a symbol of God whom one worshipped and it was necessary that God should have symbols since no human had the power or temerity to visualize Him."<sup>3</sup> Taken together, both the *tulasi* plant and Sarojini represent faith and as such are on the opposite pole from Dandekar who ostensibly represents reason but which is all tinted and twisted with his male ego and muddle-headedness. Thus, the husband and the wife, with their irreconcilable temperaments and approaches rather than becoming complementary, become antagonistic to each other. Commenting on the conflicting nature of the character of Dandekar, Edwin Thumboo remarks:

She (Sarojini) is consistently, deeply orthodox in her faith, convinced of its total beneficence. On the other hand, Dandekar, exposed to modern ideas, particularly those which question or reject the older notions and practices of religion, is caught between the residual power of that world and a newly acquired one which has yet to achieve full confidence. Herein lies his dilemma. That he feels powerless explains his continuing anger and frustration.<sup>4</sup>

The tension between Sarojini's faith and Dandekar's reason further aggravates when Sarojini frequently visits a Swami for her treatment without informing her cynic husband. But when she finds that her husband trails her stealthily for he develops an unjustifiable suspicion about her fidelity she felt humiliated and decided not to remain silent anymore and state her reason for meeting the Swami daily. Meenakshi Mukherjee praises Sarojini's strength: "From an ordinary passive wife she becomes a woman with a will of her own, a will that happens to be different from her husband's."<sup>5</sup> Sarojini also discloses that the prime reason for not telling her husband was that he might stop her from visiting the Swami. She further remarks:

Because you would have stopped me going to be healed ... you would have sent me to a hospital instead. Called me superstitious, a fool, because I have beliefs that you cannot share. You would not let me be – No! You would have reasoned with me until I lost my faith because faith and reason do not go together, and without faith I shall not be cured.<sup>6</sup>

Sarojini believes that Dandekar with his western notions and his talk of ignorance and superstition cannot understand healing by faith. He does not know that there are some inexplicable things which lie beyond man's logical realm and prefers his wife to have her womb tumour cured by some efficient doctor at a well-equipped modern clinic. She is quite certain that he cannot tolerate any nonsense about healing by faith. Being stamped as a superstitious, Sarojini fails to convince her husband about the power of faith-healing. Pestered by her husband's agnostic nature Sarojini adds:

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. To you the tulasi is a plant that grows in earth like the rest – an ordinary common plant. And mine is a disease to be cured and you have sent me to hospital and I would have died there.<sup>7</sup>

After knowing Sarojini's unflinching belief in faith-healing and the magical powers of the Swami, Dandekar becomes exasperated. His Western scientific rationalism gets rattled for a moment. Edwin Thumboo rightly observes:

*A Silence of Desire* is built around issues relating to tradition and change, faith and scepticism attached to a modern, mainly Western-derived attitude. Dandekar's expectations of what life is and ought to be are revised by the experience he undergoes in the novel. He is to a degree Westernised. But there are values, beliefs and attitudes, especially in matters of faith, which are immemorial and which refuse to be cast aside in the process of change – Sarojini's faith, for instance. The theme is introduced as a domestic problem but develops into a consideration of how faith and the acting out of that faith are met. The action it generates provides the central images of the changes occurring in the society.<sup>8</sup>

However, Dandekar is not ready to put Sarojini in the hands of a faith-healer. He opines that his wife must go to the hospital and get herself operated. But Sarojini does not want to get herself operated for she fears that she might also die on the operation bed like her mother and grandmother. Dandekar does not want to reason things out with her fearing that she may lose her faith in him nor does he want to compel her to go to the hospital, for her cure is not guaranteed. This explains Dandekar's ambivalence that is caught between two worlds—the scientific and the traditional. Explaining the conflicting nature of faith and reason, Edwin Thumboo observes:

In matters of belief there are no absolutes, no overriding consensus to provide a basis for arbitration. Moreover, at the point of fundamental transitions in society other factors complicate. Those very forces responsible for new attitudes – 'reason', 'scientism', that reliance on cause and effect – are themselves less confident than they appear because those who recently learnt to exercise them cannot ignore the disturbing residues of tradition itself. Whatever its label, rationalism sits uneasily on new shoulders, remains in the grip of doubt, is never consistent or robust enough.<sup>9</sup>

Kamala Markandaya tries to strike a balance between faith and reason by making Dandekar realize the spiritual power of the Swami which has left an indelible impression on his mind. C. Paul Varghese rightly observes:

This conflict between the husband and the wife is treated in the novel as part of a conflict between science and superstition. The novelist in presenting the conflict does not make an outright condemnation of superstition or faith healing Swami. She attempts to strike a balance between science and superstition.<sup>10</sup>

Dandekar decides to go to the Swami not under the influence of any spiritual requirement but to wean away his wife from the Swami. When he enters the Swami's ashram he undergoes a divine experience. He becomes awestruck when he discovers that it is not only his wife who the Swami has as his disciple but there are many other men and women who are going through all sort of physical and psychological disorders and problems and thus, volunteered their patronage to the Swami.

This conflict between Dandekar's body and spirit is a part of the conflict between Eastern backwardness and Western progress. It is true that Dandekar is not completely a traditional man for we have seen his opposition to Sarojini's reposing faith in the Swami and her belief in getting cured by blessings rather than by surgical operation. But there are incidents in the novel where Dandekar appears to have some of his roots still in the traditional ideas and as such believes in stars and horoscopes. Markandaya throws more light on this aspect through a hot discussion between Dandekar and Wilson, an English man who 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?"<sup>11</sup> Insulted by this remark Dandekar justifies his belief in astrology by mentioning that each part of the universe is influenced by each other and nothing exists by itself. If the moon can create high tide and low tide in the sea so can the stars do to the destiny of human beings.

Beyond any doubt Dandekar is not exclusively a traditional character as he does not accept the idea of his wife being cured by the blessings of the Swami. But on some occasions he displays in his attitude the orthodox views and the traditional roots to which he belongs. Despite his inclining personality toward science and reason he has strong faith and belief in the miracles of stars and controlling of horoscopes.

Actually, Dandekar who always claims to be western and modern in his outlook is a half conventional and half contemporary within. When it comes to Indian marriage system he holds "conformist views on marriage."<sup>12</sup> His indecisive nature is revealed when he unwaveringly opposes the allegation of disloyalty among Indian wives. He even firmly supports the Hindu culture and strongly speaks in favour of the Indian tradition. While defending the Indian culture, he holds up his point about the purity of Indian marriages. His reaction to the views of Sastri, Joseph and Mahadevan about Indian women and Indian marriages presents Dandekar as a core conformist. Sastri holds the belief that "wives were faithful, virtuous creatures, prepared like their classical sisters to follow their husbands barefoot into the jungle."<sup>13</sup> Joseph, subscribing to the changing times, believes in free love, but Mahadevan, a bachelor, believing in the traditional concept, is of the opinion that "no marriage was safe, unless in her husband's absence, a wife was locked in a chastity girdle."<sup>14</sup> He is disturbed by the changing times and considers the prevalence of divorce to be an evidence of the immorality and infidelity among wives. After hearing such views Dandekar protests wildly that "our women are not like that ... They don't flaunt themselves in front of men, either before marriage or after. They are brought up differently."<sup>15</sup> By remonstrating against the accusation of infidelity among Indian wives, he strongly comes on the side of Hindu culture and tradition. Even when Dandekar manages to shift the Swami to some other place, Sarojini never blames him. On the other hand, she takes the Swami's departure stoically. The life of Sarojini amply proves what Dandekar has pointed out in his discussion with Mahadevan, his colleague, that a real Hindu wife, far from thinking of divorce, does not dream of staying away from her husband even for a moment howsoever ill-natured and cruel he might be. One can notice here an inconsistency in Dandekar's attitude. He wants change when it satisfies his male ego, such as his belief in science.

The prevalent socio-cultural forces of that era are excellently displayed through the characters and the lives of Sarojini, Dandekar, the Swami, Chari and Sastri. She attempts to stress the need for a happy union between these ideals. Sarojini may have been operated and cured in the hospital but she still holds deep belief in the Swami and his healing powers. Dandekar may have underestimated the Swami and his spiritual powers yet he could not help

himself and gets influenced by the preaching of the Swami. Therefore, in the world of *A Silence of Desire*, Marakandaya without being partial has cautiously balanced both the world of faith and reason while expressing their importance and individual existence. She does not attempt to praise the one pointlessly in order to prove the other void. She brings both the world together and tries to maintain a line of understanding between them. In this context, the apt words of Anita Mahajan deserve to be mentioned:

Sarojini may have been cured in the hospital but continues to retain her faith in the Swami's healing power. Dandekar may have laughed at the Swami but could not help being influenced by him. Thus, the novelist presents a world where science has its own place but only coexistent with human faith.<sup>16</sup>

Markandaya is fully aware of the inescapable demands of modernization. She, as a woman with historical consciousness, feels that change is quite inevitable. Since the entire world is rapidly changing in response to various requirements and necessities arising out of modern science and technology every society ought to wake up from its slumbering state and try to fit into the stream of meaningful modern life.

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