

## ***A Silence of Desire* (1960)**

**Story** Many critics consider *A Silence of Desire* to be the best novel by Kamala Markandaya. Certainly its characters are vividly realised and its themes convincing. In many ways it resembles the novels of R K Narayan in its gentle but probing exploration of human frailties and cultural ideals. It is largely the story of a middle-class Indian couple, Dandekar and his wife, Sarojini. They have three happy children, no debts, plenty of savings. So far so good. Then Sarojini goes missing, begins to act strange and tells her husband lies. Dandekar, inevitably, suspects an extra-marital affair. It turns out she has a growth on her womb and has sought the assistance of a spiritual healer (Swami). Dandekar immediately suspects Swami is a charlatan and argues that she should not fall for his 'snake charmer' tactics. He is even more suspicious and angry when he discovers that Sarojini has given the Swami most of her jewellery. Dandekar, giving her a lecture on science vs mysticism, urges her to have a regular hospital operation to remove the tumour. Slowly the marriage begins to disintegrate. Dandekar has the Swami investigated, which forces him to move away to avoid controversy. Sarojini has a successful operation, but then Dandekar comes to accept that her faith has healed her. In a complete turn-around, he wants to make contact with the Swami but finds that he is gone and that his house is filled with desperate people, cripples and worse, who need his attention. Dandekar feels guilty that he forced the Swami to leave his 'business'. Someone in the house offers to return Sarojini's jewellery, but Dandekar refuses, a symbolic act of support for the faith healing that he had earlier rejected as superstition.

### **Characters**

**Dandekar** Dandekar is a westernised, or at least secularised, Indian who is proud that he sticks to the rules and undemanding norms of modern, middle-class urban life. He is a minor clerk and a successful head of a happy family, but he is full of self-righteousness that he has brought up his children to recognise the difference between superstition and theology. He can be stubborn but shows enough humility to realise that he must change his viewpoint at the end of the novel.

**Sarojini** Sarojini, his wife, is a devout Hindu, a caring mother of three, a good cook and an efficient household manager. She is, however, baffled by his lack of spirituality (as he is by her 'superstition'). As the novel develops, she draws away from him and finds her own voice.

**Swami** Swami is the faith healer whom Sarojini visits in the hope of curing her tumour. He is not the charlatan that Dandekar believes him to be. In fact, he is a sincere man, a good listener and devotes his life to helping others with problems.

### **Themes**

**Spirituality vs rationality** The overt theme running through this novel is the contrast between spirituality and rationality. The wife (not surprisingly) represents the spiritual and the husband the rational. She stays at home with children; he goes out into the world to an office. She is a mother; he is a clerk. Their difference is highlighted in the very first scene of the book, in which the author describes a *tulsi* plant, associated with Visnu, that Sarojini worships every day. 'It was a small evergreen plant, crammed into bright and decorative brass, in which it languished, surviving without health, but with a sharp, imperious smell—a smell that clung to your hands...and could haunt you if you did not pray. Dandekar did not pray to it. It was a plant. One did not worship plants.' This initial gap widens when Sarojini goes to a faith healer, rather than a hospital as recommended by Dandekar. Toward the end, Sarojini gains her confidence and expresses herself with firm words: 'You with your Western notions, your superior talk of ignorance and superstition ...you don't know what lies beyond reason and you prefer not to find out.'

**Tolerance** This somewhat unoriginal theme (described above) is skilfully dramatised through the more subtle portrait of a marriage. Dandekar, the husband, holds all the trump cards until his male-ego and jealousy, as well as her lies, begin to erode their happy union. As the drama unfolds, we come to see that his intolerance toward her 'superstition' has caused the tragedy of a near-divorce. By not accepting her choice of faith healing he has forced her to lie, which poisons their relationship. In the final pages of the novel, Dandekar goes back to see the Swami to apologise for driving him out

of the area. He is gone, and Dandekar is left to contemplate his life. He comes to accept that the Swami and faith healing and his wife's beliefs are forces for good, not necessarily scientifically efficient but emotionally curative.