

A SILENCE OF DESIRE

Kamala Markandaya

(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.

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 *tulasi* 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 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.

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

DANDEKAR (Cautious)

Character Dandekar is a middle-class man, a minor clerk, who is proud of his rational outlook on life and quick to criticise his wife's more traditional religious ideas. He lives a quiet, carefully measured life, never stepping over the line, financially or emotionally. He has no debts and he walks to work to save on bus fare so that he can buy gifts for his family every month. He is very cautious; if he thought of doing something, he would think about it for days, even weeks, before acting. Although placid in demeanour, he can be stubborn and short-tempered with people whom he considers 'backward.' He enjoys small pleasures in life but 'never paused to analyse them.' For example, after dinner, he sits in 'a lounge chair, with leg rests and long arms, called "the Bombay fornicator." After some initial outrage, he began to like the chair. It was a very comfortable chair, and he knew once he sat in it the next stage was bed.'

Activities The frugal Dandekar walks to and from his office, where he works as a minor clerk. After dinner, he likes to go out and sit in the courtyard to watch the sunset and smell the fresh air. He enjoys his well-cooked meals and chatting with his wife and children. At work, he interacts with colleagues, but he rarely shares anything with them.

Illustrative moments

Uncertain Certainty, predictability and repeated patterns are what Dandekar knows and values. But his happy, secure world begins to unravel when a series of conversations (with colleagues) brings up the topic of marital infidelity. Then, walking home one evening, doubts begin to dominate his thoughts. 'He thought of a well-cooked meal, his wife's welcome, the children...but tonight his thoughts were sombre...the certainties on which he had rested seemed to be sliding...enough to suggest that he had not built [his life] on rock...with an effort he tried to banish those thoughts...he tried to grasp it, place it, kill it. It was beyond him.' In this way, the author introduces the beginning of the end of his marriage. Once his defences have been breached by a little trickle of sexual jealousy, he cannot hold back the powerful flood of suspicion.

Open-minded When Dandekar visits the Swami, whom his wife has been seeing in hopes of curing her tumour and whom he considers to be a charlatan, he begins to change. In front of the holy man, who is serene and non-judgemental, Dandekar's anger and suspicions seem to drain out of him. The Swami suggests that Dandekar should order his wife to go to the hospital for an operation, but Dandekar says, 'I could, but you can't force people, can you? At least you shouldn't. They've got to make up their own minds.' When he says these words, Dandekar immediately realises that freedom of choice is precisely what he has not allowed his wife. That realisation begins his process of change.

Transformation Dandekar's transformation, which evolves throughout the novel, is complete in the final pages. Dandekar has forced the Swami to leave the area. Before leaving, the Swami has persuaded Sarojini (Dandekar's wife) to have an operation in the hospital, despite her fears. When Sarojini announces her decision to have the operation, Dandekar reflects: 'Her face was confident,

serene. He [the Swami] has achieved the impossible...sponged away all those fears and memories [her mother died on the operating table]...He's done what I couldn't do. I am humbled before this man, beholden to him.' The author adds, 'his [Dandekar's] feeling was touched with something like peace, like a homecoming.' This is the crux of the story, when the rule-ridden, unimaginative man opens his heart to accept a world beyond the rational mind.

SAROJINI (Firm)

Character Sarojini is the wife of Dandekar, the central character in this novel that probes the depths of marital disharmony and tolerance. In some ways, she is the 'everywoman,' the stereotypical Indian wife: a good cook, a loving mother, a modest wife and a pious believer. As Dandekar says to a friend, 'our women are not like western women, who flaunt themselves in front of men, before and after marriage.' In the author puts it, Sarojini gave 'pleasure to her husband after fifteen years of marriage, less from the warmth of her response than from her unflinching acquiescence to his demands.' Sarojini puts her faith not in science, as her husband resolutely does, but in religion and in a particular Swami whom she visits in order to cure a tumour on her womb. She is frightened of hospitals and will not go in for an operation. Instead, she visits a faith healer, but lies to her husband because she knows he will not approve and will even scold her. This crack in her otherwise virtuous character widens and reveals hidden depths of disharmony in her marriage.

Activities Sarojini spends most of the day doing housework, getting the children off to school, supervising unreliable servants and cooking the evening meal. Every day, she worships the *tulsi* plant in the courtyard. Secretly, she visits a faith healer in a nearby village.

Illustrative moments

Anxious Sarojini, despite her calm exterior, her flawless performance as a wife and mother is disturbed by deep fears. She won't have an operation to remove a tumour on her womb because her mother died during an operation. When her secret trips to a Swami to get cured are discovered by her husband, they have their first argument (at least in the novel). He says he doesn't understand why she won't go to the hospital and she replies, 'But I do not expect you to understand...you with your western notions, your superior talk of ignorance and superstition. Mine is a disease to be cured, so you would have sent me to a hospital and I would have died there.'

Firm Again, despite her acquiescence and passivity toward her husband, Sarojini is her own person. She has firmly held beliefs and will stand up against her husband to defend them. This quality is illustrated in the scene mentioned above, when they argue about her visits to the faith healer. When she tells him what she has been doing, he is stunned. 'He reached for her blindly, in an unreasoned primitive need for something to hold on to, but she drew back. "So now you know," she said harshly. "For a month now you've been snooping and sniffing at my heels...I've watched you. I'm not blind. You listened to every poisonous word of every petty clerk in your office and you believed it." He denied it and she continued, "Believed every word. You've come to me—thrust yourself on me night after night because, God forgive you, you couldn't think of any reason for my refusal except a vicious one." ' Sarojini may be a conventional Indian wife, but she is also a strong individual.

SWAMY (Perceptive)

Character Swamy is a Hindu priest with healing powers. Indeed, 'swamy,' or 'swami', means 'god' and is often used as a synonym for a 'holy man'. As such, this fictional Swamy is a vessel into which the other characters pour their hopes and anxieties. For Sarojini, the distraught wife who thought she was infertile but discovered she has a tumour preventing conception, Swamy holds the key to her future happiness. To her husband, Dandekar, Swamy is an unwanted presence, someone who has influence over his wife, is probably a charlatan and possibly a sexual molester. However, as Dandekar discovers, Swamy is a kind man who devotes his life to helping others. Whether or not he can read the minds of others and induce physical healing through supernatural agencies is left open for speculation by the author, but there is no doubt that his personality and teachings have a profound effect on people, including both Sarojini and Dandekar.

Activities Swamy does not feature often in the novel, being more a symbolic than an actual presence. When we do see him, he is usually in prayer or meeting with disciples and others who seek his help. At other times, he does practical things, tending a herbal garden, chopping wood, fetching water and cooking his food. However, it is words, and not his actions, that define him.

Illustrative moments

Ordinary Although people attribute supernatural powers to Swamy, he himself claims none and, in fact, lives a simple, ordinary life. This 'everyday' quality of his character is revealed on Dandekar's first visit to Swamy in his village. Dandekar finds him sitting on the ground, speaking to a group of villagers. The crowd disperses, and Dandekar watches them until he hears a great 'thwack' and looks up. A man has climbed high up on a palm tree and is cutting fronds, which are used to make roofs for village huts. When the man slithered down, Dandekar asked someone if that was the Swamy. Yes, came the answer, and Dandekar realises that the man he thought of as dishonest and dangerous was as ordinary as any man in the village. It is Swamy's ordinariness, his closeness to everyone around him, that enables him to have insight into their troubles.

Perceptive On his final visit to Swamy's village, Dandekar goes in order to retrieve the gold ornaments that his wife has given him (as some sort of payment or sign of her respect for him). The two men talk and Dandekar asks that Swamy return the ornaments. When Swamy observes that Dandekar's possessions mean a great deal to him, Dandekar wants to say they do not, but instead he explains that he is not rich and cannot afford to give away such expensive ornaments. 'One is not rich until one has nothing to give away,' Swamy replies. 'But you take,' Dandekar counters. 'My wife gives and gives and you do not stop her.' 'If I were to compel her not to give, I would also be able to compel her to give. That is the other face of the same coin.' 'Even so, I want you to make her stop,' Dandekar says. Swamy looks at him and says slowly, 'Compulsion is the beginning of corruption...It is the eating away of the spirit of whoever does it and whoever has it done to him.' In other words, Dandekar should stop trying to control his wife; he should let her make her own decisions. That is the path to domestic harmony.