

Sarojini (in Markandaya's novel *The Silence of Desire*) 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 unfailing 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.