
A Critical Analysis of Cultural Disintegration in Kamala Markandaya's Novel *A Silence of Desire*

Dr. Bipin Bihari Dash, Assistant Professor in English, Odisha University of Technology and Research ,OUTR, Bhubaneswar, Odisha(Formerly CET, Bhubaneswar)

Abstract

Culture is an umbrella term which encompasses the social behaviour and norms found in human societies as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts laws customs, capabilities and habits of the individuals in these groups. Human being acquires culture through the learning processes of enculturation and socialisation which is shown by the diversity of cultures across societies. A cultural norm codifies acceptable conduct in society; it serves as a guideline for behaviour, dress, language, and demeanour in a situation which serves as a template for expectations in a social group. Accepting only a monoculture in a social; group can bear risks, just as a single species can wither in the face of environmental change for lack of functional responses to the change. Cultural disintegration implies a circumstance at the extreme end of the acculturation process and thus is likely to have the most profound negative effects on individuals. The political subjection of Indians by the British for a long time and its unsettling residual influence on the commoners even after independence captured in fiction may be better understood in the light of concepts such as acculturation, xenocentrism, xenophilia, ethnocentrism and modernisation and westernisation. The present paper explores Kamala Markandaya's novel *A Silence of Desire* (1960) is a trajectory of culture in a modern and westernisation aura of an independent India.

Key Words Culture, Society, Westernisation, Disintegration, East-West

Kamala Markandaya the pseudonym of Kamala Purnaiya Taylor, one of the most talented women writers of Indian fiction in English, was born to a well-connected Brahman family. Her novel *A Silence of Desire* (1960), explores the theme of the clash between traditional values and modern beliefs, between faith and reason. The clash of East and West is very skilfully and brilliantly explored in *A Silence of Desire*. She has very keenly observed the East and West cultures so her depiction of both cultures is unbiased. She had undertaken several problems like social, political, national and international themes. The novel is a psychological melodrama of a middle class husband and wife relationship. The novel highlights the conflict between Western modernism and Indian spiritualism, between science and superstition, between faith and reason, and between a husband and a wife. *A Silence of Desire* is generated by a tragic vision that finds the contemporary life a fruitful seed-bed for conflict.

The novel *A Silence of Desire* gives a glimpse of the attitudes and behaviour of a microcosm of society in a nascent India of the 1950s. It is a fictional study of the social phenomenon in an urban Indian setting and of the effects of cultural disintegration under the impact of western ways of thought. The novel

and its title echo the inarticulate desire in the hearts of those helpless persons whose beliefs practices are looked down upon by their own me for a better prospect.

At the centre of this novel stands a small urban family. Dandekar, the head of this family works in a government office which is replica of a miniature India. He lives in two worlds – the traditional home and the rationalistic office and most often under the sway of the latter. Dandekar’s interaction with his wife Sarojini at home and other employees at the office reflects the constant friction of inherited values and aspects of acculturation in the Indian society. These interactions show a welter of conflicting emotional attitudes towards their cultural environment.

Sarojini, Dandekar’s wife, mother of two daughters and a son, lives a life of unaltered belief and faith in culture and tradition. She considers the *tulasi* is symbolic of the state of culture, “... it was a small, ever-green plant, crammed into the bright and decorative brass in which it languished, surviving without health, but with a sharp imperious smell that made you forget its looks – a smell that clung to your hands until you washed and scrubbed, and even after, could haunt you if you did not pray” (5). Dandekar challenges the significance of the *tulasi* a feeble plant in the courtyard, but an undying symbol of much religious value for Sarojini. Less under western influence and more afraid of Joseph’s ridicule, Dandekar disregards Sarojini’s worship of gods, lighting of lamps, her touching the eyelids delicately with finger tips, a lighting camphor to lift evil eyes etc. He finds it necessary to distinguish the worship of god from idolatry, to distinguish the *tulasi* from

god “a symbol of god whom one worshipped, and it was necessary that god should have symbols ... “(5) because of the xenophile Joseph to whom “ ... cows, snakes, plants, ranked as idols; paintings, prints and statues did not” (5).

Sarojini’s ‘religious tutelage’, however, is more earnest. The voice of native intelligence speaks through her in these words: “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” (87-88).

The interactions at Dandekar’s office take place on a plane which reflects social reality of the country’s depressing economic state. The top man at the office Chari, an I. C. S man, is able to strike balance between perceptions and reactions about contemporary reality. Chari, a nationalist, a believer in Indian spirit, actively involved with the pre struggle and present strife, carries on busily independent the difficult balancing act of nation building from his office. However, even he comes to be swayed by ideas of irrationality associated with religious sentiments.

It is a generation which has been the British rule in India and it is a generation which holds the British responsible for their failure. The frustrated university graduates attribute all ills of the country including “rotting talent in humdrum office” to British rule. Narayan B. A. (Hons) from Madras does not enjoy working in the government office, believes he deserved better than a junior clerkship, but also knows ‘in frequent moments of truth’ that was what he would ever likely get. He holds a grudge against the British; Ghose is a Cambridge

graduate unwilling to bow down to English ways, these two men burn with pride and shame at the same time for the country.

The frustrated Narayan refuses to accept the benefits of British rule such as bridges and railways; he says these were also built in “Russia, China, Japan, where there were no British” (26). He strongly objects to the notion of coffee break as a gift of the British. “Do you think if the British hadn’t come we wouldn’t have thought of it? Do you think in the past people worked on and on right through the day until the British had arrived and told them to stop for a cup of tea?” (26). Narayan’s reaction to the debate on the subject is an instance of ethnocentrism adopted by people in the face of national denigration. Ghose is fiercely and painfully nationalistic ashamed about weaknesses in Indian life, impatient about bringing about changes in native culture and traditions anxious to be ‘modern’.

The three men on the lower rung in this government office – Dandekar, Sastri, and Joseph – hold diverse and conflicting viewpoints. These oscillate from Dandekar’s school tutoring on British benevolence to India to the attitude to women. Sastri shows unfailing faith in the integrity and character of women. He holds them in high esteem as *Pativratas* – the virtuous wives “who would follow the husband bare foot into jungles”. He likes Indian classical stories. Belief in “healing by faith, the performance of the impossible, the revelation of the divine, mystery and beatitude - *all* these coursed in his blood, a part of his inheritance from a country that looked inwards in its quest for light These things existed and he existed side by side without conflict” (113). He is one person whose faith in his native culture has not

been shaken and his belief unassailed by conflict. While the rest of them in the office question the swami’s genuineness. Sastri does not doubt him at all.

A practitioner of free love, the xenocentric Joseph’s notion of all women as harlots is distilled from western films which show wifely infidelity and cuckolding. According to him a wife should be locked in a charity girdle in her husband’s absence!

Disease and disability strike people at the lowest level of life, the only relief they get is from a soothing, philosophical outlook. The religious figure that he is, the Swami takes care of a large number of diseased persons in extremely disadvantaged economic conditions. The swami – a religious philanthropist who takes care of those ill fated, destitute and diseased whom modern medicine has failed to cure – becomes the point of convergence of all these conflicting attitudes. Dandekar’s wife Sarojini – stricken with a disease of the womb and afraid of western medicine, afraid of what came of it to her deceased aunt, afraid of Dandekar’s disapproval – goes to the swami secretly for relief and possible cure.

Kamala Markandaya writes that the ultra modern clinics are “fanatical on keeping the well well ... not so keen on patching up the sick”, and the government is anxious to get rid of “superstition and religion”. The swami provides much needed succor to the disabled, diseased, desperate, weak and helpless; women, sick and needy flock to him. It is from such the crutches are removed to limp and crawl. A familiar figure in Indian society and fiction and the butt of criticism, the Swami is a soul-seeker but not a recluse, who combines humanist

practices with his spirituality. When a fear stricken, desperate Sarojini visits the Swami he “sponged away those fears and memories, driven out her devils ...” that which neither the over worked government doctor to whom Sarojini is a figure out of the middle ages, nor a suspicious Dandekar are able to do.

The family’s missing prized possessions of gold and silver, and Sarojini’s secretive ways in the novel lead to the head on collision of attitudes in this small but representative world. Under Joseph’s influence, suspicious of his wife’s secretive ways, misconstruing her wifely inattention and her fears and the Swami’s moral and spiritual support to the likes of her, Dandekar reports about the activities of the Swami to his superiors.

Records of inquires and interviews about the swami show “the simple satisfied and sophisticated for ever disgruntled; he (Chari sic) wondered bleakly which was the truer sophistication” (203) investigation about the Swami becomes a venture “into those uncharitable seas of human problem for which “none less than God could feel concern”, Ghose feels that the instance of Swami could not be “dismissed as a small town happening.” He is determined to save the town - India from ridicule of the world, from becoming its laughing stock. He tends “to transform an impersonal bearable suffering into a crucifying personal responsibility” (201). Though Charle’s heart “spoke one way and head the other, and sometimes the two changed places” (204) under the influence of Ghose, an indecisive Chari orders the eviction of the Swami from the town.

Thus, mistrust, disbelief, lack of regard and respect of those in positions of power

prevail over the native support frame works for the lowliest and suffering. Unwilling to cause disturbance in the community, the Swami leaves the place. In spite of being the cause of the Swami’s eviction, Dandekar says that the Swami would not be touched by this; “it will make no difference to him – his reality is not ours, to him his surroundings do not matter” (199).

A silence of Desire offers a critique of modern Indian attitudes towards culture using health care – especially of the weaker sex, diseases that afflict them and the poor and modern medicine which cannot take care of all – as a pretext. Native medicine and healing systems are neglected and negated while the inadequacy of modern medicine, medical treatment and hospitals run by the government is glaring. One wonders if this physical reality is less or more painful than the social and cultural conditions which put native resilience under strain. The undernourished cultural values, symbols and practices in the Hindu environment believed in and practiced by the common people, looked at without faith and with suspicion by the westernised Indians are presented here. Cultural symbols, beliefs and practices are looked down upon by educated Indians. It is an under nourished culture and an uneasy relationship lingering at the social and cultural levels that the novel shows.

Cultural beliefs and practices stand at the centre of the conflict between acculturated Indians and its simple common folk – Sarojini and Swami on the other. Indian religious beliefs, rooted in philosophy and all practices and observances are contested and debated. Indian culture, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, rituals, ceremonies etc. however, appear to be stifled under the subtle weight of

acculturation. The scales, precariously poised between the two viewpoints, often are forced to tilt to the side of apparent reason and rationale which out do simple faith common practice. Political freedom gained has not relieved the load of shame of educated polity – in terms of their religion, practices, beliefs and outlook. The acculturated, power wielding minority of Indians adversely affect the lives of a number of poverty,-stricken and disease-ridden suffering men and women, depriving them of the soothing, calming affects of native religion and philosophy leaving in their hearts a silence of desire.

In *A Silence of Desire* Kamala Markandaya investigates the world of spirit with the same passion as she had explored the world of flesh and senses in her first novel. Here the clash between spiritual faith and scientific reason is intertwined with the archetypal conflict between traditions (East) and modernity (West). This conflict is dramatized through the interplay of central characters, Dandekar and Sarojini, who share the recognizable marital bliss without really having any interaction at other levels—for instance, intellectual and spiritual. Their family happiness is devastated when Dandekar suspects Sarojini of harbouring a secret, probably an extramarital affair. Minor happenings confirm his suspicion leading to altercation and allegation of faithlessness. Hurt and insulted, Sarojini tells him the truth:

She has been visiting a swami hoping to be healed of a malignant growth in her womb. Lacking belief in faith-healing, Dandekar wishes for his wife to seek medical help but he

does not want to enforce his will on her in respect for her religious beliefs. Tormented by her suffering and his own helplessness, he goes through an emotional and psychological crisis. Dandekar's self-torment is heightened, in part, by his own divided psyche: his "part-western mind fought against alleviations which his part-eastern mind occasionally hinted might be wise" (*A Silence of Desire* 117).

Markandaya's fictional canvas thus portrays certain social conventions and attitudes that discriminate against women. Sarojini's crisis ensues from her blind faith as well as in communication. Markandaya's novels present women who prove them to be as flexible and ingenious as the earth. The positive attitude of these women is an outcome of their inner strength which can withstand social oppression. *A Silence of Desire* offers the hope of a new comprehension of self, integration the modern and traditional for a better future. The good old days return with the fusion of two opposing ideas. This novel is an instance of cultural disintegration and the fusion of ideas.

References

- Dhawan, R .K. *Anatomy of silence in A silence of Desire: Indian women Novelists*. Prestige Books: Delhi.
- Hammond, Peter B. ed. *Cultural and Social Anthropology Selected Readings*. London : Collier Macmillan Ltd, A964.
- Kamala Markanday, *A Silence of Desire*. London: Puttnam & Co., 1960.
- Srinivas, M. N. *Social Change in Modern India*. New Delhi : Orient Longman, 1984.