



# The Achievers Journal

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## **The Return of the Native: An Analysis of Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire***

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### **Abstract**

*Kamala Markandaya's A Silence of Desire presents in very clear and precise manner, the struggle of a wife caught in the coils of a stiffening domestic life that threatens subconsciously her very identity as a woman. At the same time it also depicts how her husband who had been taking her presence in his life for granted realizes the significance of her not just as a home maker but as a person too, as his companion and soul mate, and suffers the agony that his wife's emotional separation from him brings to him. Dandekar does all in his power to bring Sarojini back to his life, to open the doors of Sarojini's heart to him once again. He finally succeeds to the betterment of both of them. This paper aims to explore the various aspects of A Silence of Desire, and traces the journey of the protagonist Sarojini back to her husband, to her happy domestic life besides looking into how Dandekar, despite being a man, suffered the pangs of separation, and wins her back home.*

**Keywords** : Identity, attachment, psyche, mystic, marriage.

Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire* depicts the unconscious desire of a house-wife, Sarojini, to fight the loss of her essential self within her marital relationship. She protests unconsciously, but in a manner approved by the society, against her husband, and by extension against the whole society, for giving her a listless and mechanical life which her psyche perceives quite clearly as



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being responsible for her fast deteriorating self. Her husband, Dandekar, to whom her strange behaviour and defiance come as a big shock, neurotically reacts and goes through a phase of suffering and soul-searching. Since it all happens unconsciously neither of them has a clear understanding of the real motives for their behaviour. In the light of the knowledge of depth psychology I would like to integrate into the discussion here such aspects of the novel as Dandekar's jealousy, his rationality and its loss on being subjected to traumatic experiences, the strategies of his psyche to win Sarojini back, Sarojini's preference for a faith- healer over modern medicine and her deep attachment with the Swamy and discuss that the whole effort of Sarojini's psyche has been to voice her desire to protest against the imminent loss of her self and that of Dandekar to get back his peace and domestic harmony and then conclude that both the protagonists emerge wiser than before— she having made her point and he having recongized his “integral” but non-sexual “wholeness” with her.

Dandekar bases his life upon some certainties: “Three children, no debts, a steady job, a fair pile of savings that his wife methodically converted into gold-bangles, a necklace, ear-rings and brooches less for ornamentation than the security it represented.”<sup>1</sup> As a wife Sarojini is “good with the children, an excellent cook, an efficient manager of his household, a woman who still gave him pleasure after fifteen years of marriage .... She did most things placidly.... and from this calm proceeded the routine and regularity that met the neat and orderly needs of his nature” (7). He does not want a change in this routine even in the wildest of his dreams. Even a trivial change like his daughters' buying tiffin provokes him to roundly remonstrate with its wife. This secure



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world comes off at the seams once its main pivot, his wife, frequently absents herself from the house and lies about it. Dandekar's first feeling is a suspicion of her fidelity. Her lies and his discovery of a stranger's photograph in her trunk strengthen his suspicion. Still, it is strange that after fifteen years of shared living Dandekar should suspect her fidelity the first thing instead of considering other possibilities. There appears to be an element of abnormally intense jealousy in him which is often the case with people prone to neurotic reaction. His leniency towards his colleagues Joseph and Mahadevan who believe in free love and inherent unfaithfulness of women respectively shows him to be secretly entertaining similar thoughts. But they have undergone a thorough repression. He, therefore, readily projects his own feelings onto his wife. As Freud puts it, projected jealousy is:

Derived in both men and women either from their own actual unfaithfulness in real life or from impulses towards it which have succumbed to repression.<sup>2</sup>

The common experience is that marital fidelity is maintained only in the face of great temptations. Persons consciously denying to themselves these temptations, like Dandekar, will find it inevitable to use the unconscious mechanism of projecting their own impulses to unfaithfulness on to the other person to get relief from the pressure exerted by these temptations. Freud continues:

This strong motive can then make use of the perceptual material which betrays unconscious impulses of the same kind in the partner, and the subject can justify himself with the reflection that the other is probably not much better than he is himself.<sup>3</sup>



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The situation has not varied from the days of Othello and Desdemona. Dandekar's repressed unfaithfulness informs his moral errantry during his neurotic grapple with the difficulties imposed upon him by adverse circumstances. Dandekar feels so 'intensely jealous that he makes two attempts to trail Sarojini risking in the process his reputation and interests at the office. The desire to find out with whom she is carrying on an affair consumes him "like a fire" (68).

He succeeds the second time. To his dismay he finds Sarojini amidst a group of people and in the company of a Swamy to whom she confesses to be going to get cured of a painful growth in her womb by faith and prayer.

It is very instructive to examine Sarojini's reasons for going to the faith-healer and not to a medical doctor. She had had a rigid religious tutelage and consequently she has not kept up with the changing times. Upon developing the growth she expects to meet the same fate as her mother and grandmother who suffered from the same disease, underwent an operation but did not survive. She has little faith in medicine. These are the verbalized reasons. However, the important reasons lie in her unconscious. Fifteen years of married life has made it clear to her that the rest of her life is going to be as dull and drab as it has always been. Her life becomes so mechanical and routine that we find her attending to her household chores with a predictable regularity which Dandekar has grown to like so much. She does not betray her emotions at all. Her repressed anger, accumulated over the years, against the person responsible for the meaninglessness of her life assumes a negative identity symbolically put in the novel as the tumour. She knows all too well Dandekar's Western frame of mind and scientific attitude. By going to the Swamy, which she knows will be



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disapproved of by him, she unconsciously protests against him in a manner that is sanctioned by tradition and achieves the desired effect. In her unconscious the Swamy plays the lover and the father at the same time as we shall see next.

Once she starts meetings the Swamy, regularly complications develop. It soon becomes impossible to wrench herself free from the magnetic pull of the Swamy. This point calls for 'some theoretical enquiry. In offering to heal, all these mystics follow a familiar but complex method discussed at length by Sudhir Kakar in his book *Shamans Mystics and Doctors*. They know that only lonely, neglected and distraught people seek their help. Therefore, the first thing they see to is that an enhancement of the "individual," as against the all- embracing community and the isolation of the individualistic society, is assured; Then they annex this newly developed self to themselves which results in a relatively greater childlikeness in the followers. The event becomes a symbolic, enactment of a similar experience in childhood. Sudhir Kakar, strongly echoing Freud, puts it succinctly:

"The whole transformation process has its roots in, and is a replication of, psychic events in that early period of childhood when the child, in the face of the many narcissistic hurts and disappointments that the ending of infancy brought in its wake, sought to recapture his early feelings of "greatness" through a new route, where he, projected his greatness into the idealized image of a parent and then partook of it himself by setting up a configuration in the psyche: "you are great but I am a part of you."<sup>4</sup>



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The unconscious substitution of the guru in place of the father requires afresh the mechanisms of idealization and identification. The follower achieves a “psychological symbiosis” with the Master through these processes. Idealization of the analyst and identification with him do happen at certain stages of psychoanalysis too. The difference is that they are strategic and temporary in psychoanalysis whereas in mystical cults they are strategic and are meant to be permanent. The idealization and internalization of the guru is usually sought to be cemented by such strategic methods as meditating upon the guru’s face which indeed Sarojini does. The result of all this is that the ailing follower replaces his feelings of dependence, insignificance, inertness, limitation and circumscription with the guru’s dependability, omnipotence, energy and all-pervasive presence in the unconscious.<sup>5</sup> It sets in motion the follower’s healing transformation similar to what is obtained in psychoanalysis.

The Swamy of *A Silence of Desire* follows a similar method and Sarojini is completely taken in. Markandaya does not go into the healing rituals at the Swamy’s place, but enough evidence is offered to strengthen our theoretical perspective:

She was sitting, cross-legged, on the man’s [the Swamy’s] right. His hand was on her bowed head, and he was murmuring to her, his voice sometimes falling to a whisper, a soft stream of indistinguishable words. In a rough circle about them sat a small group of men and women, listening- so engrossed that no one turned as he [Dandekar] burst in. Not one had even stirred; they were simply unaware of his presence (79-80)



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It is therefore not surprising that Sarojini should feel better every time she goes there. She is aware that the pain is there but it does not touch her in the Swamy's presence. What the Swamy actually ministers to is not the alleviation of the pain her body experiences but the pain her psyche experiences — the pain born of a sense of neglect and worthlessness. Her neurotic need for love and self- importance are amply attended to by him. It produces a temporary euphoria which neutralizes the physical pain for the time being, Before Sarojini knows it, the Swamy's image is internalized and going to him becomes something of an addiction. She lacks the necessary intellectual resources to discriminate between the needs of her body and the needs of her psyche. She therefore develops the false belief that "without faith I shall not be healed" (87), As is evident, the Swamy's method works only in the treatment of imaginary illnesses. Rajam, the garrulous cousin of Sarojini, has in fact been cured by the Swamy of her terrible pains which the doctors have diagnosed as imaginary.

While Sarojini is happy in her pain, Dandekar goes through a period of acute mental torture. The certainties of his life appear to be crumbling down. He finds "the pattern of his life being twisted out of shape" (77). The cumulative effect of it is that he grows "withdrawn, questioning, introspective" (98).

His exposure to Western thinking has rendered him particularly unsuitable to uncritically participate in the world of Sarojini. We find him at that point of turning away from religion which Freud thinks "is bound to occur with fatal inevitability of a process of growth."<sup>6</sup> Dandekar is, for example, careful to point out that the tulasi plant which his wife worships with great devotion is



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merely “a plant; one did not worship plants” (5). His disregard for rituals is symbolic of the re-enactment of the overcoming of childhood neurosis which of necessity everybody suffers in the process of taming the unruly instinctual demands. Religion is by extension “the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children.”<sup>7</sup> This much desirable psychic progression of Dandekar is suddenly disrupted by the onslaught of great anxiety caused by his wife the relationship with whom becomes strained and hence the chief source of pain for him. Attempting to work out solutions at the infantile level to problems requiring adult rationality is quite in keeping with the logic of neurosis. He unconsciously believes that his wife, whose love and acquiescence he has taken so much for granted, has deserted him for good and he experiences acute anxiety and pain just like an infant who equates the loss of perception of its mother with the loss of the mother herself and becomes anxious about it.<sup>8</sup> With the passage of a few months Dandekar realises that his wife can be with him and yet not give him the assurance which she formerly used to give. This, as in the case of an infant becomes for him “a new and much more enduring danger and determinant of anxiety.”<sup>9</sup> His anxiety makes him do things which earlier he would not think of doing even in dreams. Knowing well that he is financially strained he becomes exaggeratedly generous, purposelessly talks aloud, risks his social reputation by visiting houses of ill-fame and commits such blunders in his work that almost have him sacked. His rationality deserts him and he sees nothing wrong in worshipping the Tulsi himself!

He feels so drained of thought that it requires his kindly colleague Shastri to advise him to initiate some steps to set things right. His genuine efforts to talk some sense into Sarojini’s head and his





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pitiable pleadings with the Swamy to dissuade her from seeing him end up in a fiasco as they are bound to, for reasons we have already considered. In addition, in the Swamy's presence, he feels so detached from himself and attracted to the Swamy that he is moved to donate money to the Swamy's fund. The Swamy seems to touch an atavistic chord in him as he surely does in others including the fierce Deputy District Magistrate, Ghose. Nothing seems to matter in the Swamy's presence.

The realities of life are, however, different. One cannot afford to lose sight of them for long. Dandekar finds it now impossible to reconcile these two worlds. He feels as though he is fighting "something invisible" (170). Questions siege his mind allowing it no respite to find answers.

'Questions, questions, questions,' Dandekar's knuckles dug into his forehead. 'They crowd into my brain and it's like you [Sastri] said, I don't know the answers. I suppose it's because I've never had to think much about anything, until now, but I don't seem able to think straight, do anything. All I know is I can't go on like this (171).

He is indeed unable to go any further. Nature itself takes care of it. He comes down with severe shingles and, is bedridden for fourteen days. The illness serves several purposes simultaneously although Dandekar appears to regard it as mere inconvenience. Firstly, as the doctor rightly diagnoses; it provides a relatively safer outlet for the anxiety that has been brewing in his unconscious for the past few months. Secondly, it becomes a device employed by his unconscious to hold Sarojini down to him. After all no woman, however irresponsible, will leave her husband



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to suffer and go away for a selfish reason. But here the strategy fails. While not neglecting her duties as a wife Sarojini nevertheless continues to visit the Swamy. Thirdly, it allows him some breathing space to make some key discoveries about himself and his relation with Sarojini. The “heat and pain and those stabbing, lucid moments” of the two weeks of his illness sensitise him to, the suffering of Sarojini and sober him. Her body does not arouse him sexually any more. He now looks at her “from another aspect of love” (191) and sees “the flesh flower pale and beautiful tinder the thin blue cotton she wore without desire” (191). He wants her back now “not merely because he desired her,” but because of “a spiritual ingrowing which made it impossible for him to be whole so long as any part of her was missing” (191). Markandaya subtly conveys the changed perspective of Dandekar through the image of a night storm which is followed by a gentle drizzle in the morning.

Dandekar pins all his hopes on his boss, Chari. Although Chari does not assure him of anything he nevertheless assigns the task of enquiring into the Swamy’s activities to his deputy, Ghose, and when that yields only limited results he takes up the matter himself. He does not order the Swamy to quit the place but his efforts do not really go waste. The Swamy is clever enough to see that his position as a spiritual guide and faith-healer has become controversial. He therefore thinks it wise to quietly leave the place. For Sarojini this proves to be traumatic. She feels so distraught and dazed at the Swamy’s disappearance that for a split second Dandekar feels that if it is within his power to bring him back he would do it. Disconsolate as she is with the loss she at the same time realises, unconsciously again that she still matters a great deal to her husband. Otherwise why



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would he suffer so much on account of her? She is therefore restored, body and soul, to Dandekar — to the world of hard facts, her “honeymoon” with irrationality being over and her “desire” being fulfilled. Her desire to- voice her protest had something revolutionary about it. It was her last ditch effort to save herself from falling into self-preservatory negativism issuing directly from psychological repression unleashed by the social institution of family, She undergoes the required surgery and is eventually cured of the ailment.

Dando regains a semblance of happiness by shedding the physical nature of his desire and with the distinct realization that his wife is an essential and indispensable part of his world, that it will not be in his interest to take her for granted and-finally that henceforth his relation, with her should be on the basis of love and equality.

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