THE ART OF SILENCE: SILENCE AS THEME AND METHOD IN THE WORKS OF ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

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susarak söze boğabilir insan
sanattır
ağız dolusu susuyorsa insan
işte öyle susmak
sözcüklere takılmış
bir çift kanattır

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It might seem paradoxical to analyze literature in terms of silence. Literature makes us know, see, hear, and feel through words, it expresses and communicates ideas; whereas silence is an absence of speech, noise or mention. Silence suggests muteness, stillness, oblivion, obscurity or secrecy. No matter how nullifying the term and its connotations might sound, one should remember that "silence is golden." Silence, in fact, is a commodity in literature, it has a language of its own. As anthropologist, James Hall claims "silent language is a translation from a series of complex, nonverbal, contexting communications into words" (xi). It isn't just that people "talk" to each other without the use of words, but that there is an entire universe of behavior that is unexplored, unexamined, and very much taken for granted. It functions outside conscious awareness and in juxtaposition to words. Hall says that people of European heritage live in a "word world" which they think is real, but just because they talk does not mean that the rest of what they communicate with their behavior is not equally important. Language molds thinking in subtle ways, but other systems of communication are equally important in "how the world is perceived, how the self is experienced, and how life is organized". Messages on the word level can mean one thing, but when communicated on another level can mean something totally different (xi-xii). The link between words and gestures is a cultural phenomenon and each cultural pattern is unique, that is, not universal. It is this difficulty that hinders cross-cultural communication and neccesitates man's getting out of his own cultural limits and acknowledging the presence of others.

Another determinant in communication has been gender. As much as articulateness has been associated with the Western cultures as opposed to the Eastern, quietness has been in the periphery of the feminine as opposed to the masculine. Forced

by the patriarchy into submissiveness, invisibility and inarticulateness women were denied entry into the mainstream of public life. In an effort to circumvent these obstructions, women have turned their silences into various forms of expression and in many cases have mastered it into art, literary expression being one of them.

In her study King Kok Cheung refers to feminist critics who have pointed out several common tendencies among women writers which result from their exclusion from dominant discourse:

The first of these is silence which is used both as a theme and as a method. When used as a theme silence reflects the obstacles to female expression like "household responsibilities, rejection by the literary establishment, a lack of models, imposed repression, and self-censorship" (4). When used as a method it employs various "strategies of reticence" such as "irony, hedging, coded language, and muted plots," all which "tell the forbidden and name the unspeakable" (4).

Second, many women writers distrust inherited language and reject to assert themselves as "the" voice of truth. They not only question received knowledge but accentuate their own fictionality. To undermine narrative authority they use devices as dream, fantasy, and unreliable point of view; they even project their anxiety as authors onto demented characters (4-5).

A skepticism about language and about textual authority has led women writers to a third recourse which is the use of open-endedness and multiplicity in their works. The writers do not insist on a single story line and the reader is free to construct the buried lives from the nuances in the text which is partly determined by the reader's own cultural constructs. Coding, verbal withholding or indirection, also encourage multiple readings (5). However, the silencing of women takes on peculiar resonance when we look at characters whose voicelessness is induced not only by gender but also by culture and race. In this context, we realize that silence can be induced by the family in an attempt to maintain dignity or secrecy; by the ethnic community in adherence to cultural etiquette; or by the dominant culture in an effort to prevent any voicing of minority experiences (3-5).

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-born Canadian citizen and a United States resident, is one of the many Asian American women who in their works deal with voicelessness in terms of gender, culture and race. In a study on Bharati Mukherjee's best known work

Jasmine, Pushpa Parekh analyzes the stages of silence and speech the central character goes through, relating it to the various gender roles (and names) assigned to her. In her traditionally feudalistic hometown of Punjab where "the power of speech is usurped by the dominant male figures," she is "the silent woman." She has no voice. Her future is "foretold" by the village astrologer, facts about her identity and existence are "told" by her mother and grandmother. When she marries Prakash she is "told to adopt the more modern values of a city woman." Her "preconditioned voice is trained by Prakash to argue and fight if she does not agree with him." He teaches her to want things , to ask for things which becomes possible only after a long process of learning. "She moves from the position of being told to the position of telling"(110-1).

With Prakash's death Jasmine starts a journey from India to the United States. In the enormity of her experiences she becomes the "speaking person" and starts telling her story. The narration is interrupted when raped by Half-Face, she murders him and slashes her tongue with the same knife she killed the assaulter with. This self-punishment becomes a symbolic act of sentencing herself to silence. It is in Lillian Gordon's home for illegal immigrants that she regains her voice. But being an illegal immigrant herself, it is again in this house that "she must by choice become voiceless, invisible, and indistinguishable" (112) until she masters the American way of talking and walking. Her next stop, the Vadhera household, pulls her back into the traditional, patriarchal Indian family structure that reminds her of her widowhood and the Indian norms related to women's behavior, silence being one of them. Choosing "independence and self-reliance," Jasmine leaves the Vadhera household and finds a job as nanny with the American Hayes family where she is treated as an equal, encouraged to speak and want, and is very happy for a while. When she has to leave New York and the Hayes', she goes to Iowa where she meets Bud and starts a new phase during which we witness "a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture" (114). But the point that has to be emphasized here is that while immersing into the dominant culture, Jasmine, or Jane as Bud calls her, does not "assimilate," she becomes a "complex blend of the 'silent woman,' 'the speaking person,' and the 'teller of tales'" (115). Of these changing personas, the tale-teller is the result of a new need -- the need to share her memories of the past, to talk about and keep alive the part of her that is Indian. "As 'the teller of tales' she frames her 'silence' and her 'speaking' with a historical reality and substantiates them with personal significance. In evaluating her past and present and anticipating her future, she confronts the complexity and multiplicity of her identity as an immigrant woman" (115).

In a similar fashion Chinese American writer Amy Tan uses silence as the overruling motif in her novels The Joy Luck Club and The Kitchen God's Wife. In these narratives the most outstanding aspect is the differences in discourse between the mothers and their daughters. The mothers while trying to preserve the values of China are trying to find their ways in a cultural and linguistic labyrinth. They use coded language and nonverbal gestures more often than their daughters who have been Americanized in their thoughts and the expression of those thoughts. The mothers still have their secrets and believe that hiding one's thoughts and feelings is the norm, as opposed to their daughters who had to learn to express and assert themselves openly. The Joy Luck Club, begins in San Francisco where the four mothers meet for the first time. Looking at the three women, the fourth senses that "they also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English"(6). As the stories of these four women unfold, the unspeakable tragedies, repressed desires and secrets are revealed one by one till the daughters become the carriers of these codes which are in fact keys to their mothers' inner lives and their pasts.

The common point of departure in the mothers' narratives is a comparison of their lives and their daughters' and a discontent arising from their daughters' incapability of keeping silent and/or their inefficiency in decoding the silences around them. Lindo Jong complains that she couldn't teach her daughter about the Chinese character, "how not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities"(289). Ying St. Clair is even more bitter:

> For all these years I kept my mouth closed so selfish desires would not fall out. And because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me. ... All these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me. ... And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others. (64)

The silence Ying St. Clair has employed all these years is a reflection of the selflessness and invisibility she has assumed and turned into an act of sacrifice which is no longer appreciated. This point calls our attention to two opposing aspects of silence which can be discerned in the statements made by Winnie on two different occasions in The Kitchen God's Wife :

> I have kept her secrets. She has kept mine. And we have a kind of loyalty that has no word in this country. (73)

> It is the same pain I have had for many years. It comes from keeping everything inside, waiting until it is too late. I think my mother gave me this fault, the same kind of pain. (88)

The Kitchen God's Wife is a novel based on a series of secrets and storytelling that results from the disclosure of those secrets. Winnie is an immigrant who has settled in the States with her husband Jimmy who has died some years ago. She lives close to her daughter Pearl who is married with two daughters of her own. Winnie and Pearl have a typically problematic mother-daughter relationship that is laden with untold truths, misunderstandings and concealed love, and to avoid further complications they remain reticent. For example Pearl does not tell her mother that she has multiple sclerosis because at first she does not want to hear her theories about the illness, its causes, how she should have prevented it. She does not want to be constantly reminded of her illness. After some time goes by it becomes even harder to tell her mother. Apart from her illness, she now lives with a constant dread that her mother will find out one day.

Winnie, on the other hand has an even greater secret than her daughter's. Back in China she was married to a man called Wen Fu who turned out to be an evil, psychopathic person, had children from him who died one by one, met Jimmy whom she fell in love with, escaped from the husband several times and was tracked down each time, until she cheated him into divorce with the help of her friend Helen, and escaped to the United States to meet Jimmy. But the day before her escape her husband found her in hiding and raped her. So Pearl is not Jimmy's but Wen Fu's daughter.

The unfolding of these two secrets is initiated by Helen, whom Winnie passes off as her sister and sponsors her passage to the States. Helen goes to Winnie and Pearl separately and announces that she has a brain tumour and cannot die with so many secrets on her chest and threatens them with disclosing their secrets if they do not do it themselves. This threat serves as an excuse for Winnie to get rid of the pain that "comes from keeping everything inside."

Winnie begins telling her story from her childhood, from the time she was abandoned by her mother. Her mother's disappearance is a riddle. While some family

members told Winnie her mother was dead and hung funeral banners on doors, others told her she left for another man and disgraced her family. Each story created new questions in her head and she could not relate the conflicting facts to each other.

> So then I looked at what I knew about my mother, both good things and bad. I tried to think of all the reasons why her life went one way or the other. And this is what I think happened . . . (100)

And she starts telling her story. Rejecting the memory and the authoritarian narrative of the family, Winnie constructs a "countermemory" and creates her own version of reality of what she thought happened to her mother.

> Now I no longer know which story is the truth, what was the reason why she left. They are all the same, all true, all false. (109)

The instability of truth and history is further shown when Winnie continues her narration of the story of her life, this time through Helen. Throughout the book, Winnie and Helen never agree on one version of reality, on one story line. Their opposing perspectives are constantly juxtaposed. All their lives they have contradicted each other, but shared secrets and hardships have kept them together and have created a strong bond between them. Maybe it is the uncertainty of truth that binds them.

When Helen makes sure that the mother and daughter have told their secrets to each other, she in turn confides a secret to Pearl - she does not have a tumour. She made it up so that she could bring Winnie and Pearl closer to each other and this was her way of thanking Winnie for being such a good friend all those years. But this is not the end of secrets. Winnie and Helen have decided to go to China to buy water from the magic springs that cures anything, and they will take Pearl along. Winnie claims they are going there to cure Helen's tumour, but she is actually going for Pearl. Helen is pretending to be Winnie's excuse for going, and Pearl has to pretend that she is going for Helen but actually she should go for her mother's sake. In China they will both pretend that Helen was cured by the magic springs, the same one that can cure Pearl. This will be Helen and Pearl's secret which Helen proudly calls a "good secret" to which Pearl agrees, not quite knowing what she is agreeing to but knows that "it feels right" (409):

> I am laughing, confused, caught in an endless circle of lies. Or perhaps they are not lies, but their own form of loyalty, a devotion

> beyond anything that can ever be spoken, anything that I will ever understand. (409)

The advantages and the disadvantages of secrets and silences are categorized in King-Kok Cheung's study as "undesirable silences" and "enabling silences" (20). The undesirable silences are what she takes to be "the speechlessness induced by shame and guilt, the oppressive or protective withholding of words in the family, or the glaring oversight in official history" (20); whereas the enabling silences are constructive, articulate and knowing, and appear in the forms of "textual ellipses, nonverbal gestures and authorial hesitations" (4). Enabling silences demand "utmost vigilance from writers and readers alike and are the very antitheses of passivity" (20). In fact this is the premise traditional Japanese and Chinese literature builds on - a "subtle art of silence," a perfected use of "suggestiveness and allusiveness" (8).

A good example to undesirable silence is Chinese American Maxine Hong Kingston's story "No Name Woman" which is about the narrator's aunt who was forgotten as if she had never been born. Silence was shed over her name and her memory was obscured. Just as the narrator/daughter enters adolescence, her mother tells her the story of her aunt: All the male members including the aunt's young husband sail for America and a couple of years later the aunt gets pregnant. Though everyone is aware of her growing figure "nobody says anything, they do not discuss it" until the night the baby was to be born. That night the villagers who had also been watching the swelling body, raid the house and plunder it. After they are gone, the aunt gives birth in the pigsty. The next morning when the household goes for water they find her and the baby drowned in the family well.

This coded narration is a warning to the daughter not to humiliate her family in a similar way: "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities" (227). The mother also evades giving details about the incident which the daughter/narrator constructs through her fantasy, and as hinted earlier "establishes her own reality". She resembles her mother's secrecy to the attitudes of the Chinese who "confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways - always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable" (227). Trying to name her no name aunt is exactly what the narrator/daughter attempts to do in the story. Just like Winnie in she creates fiction by imagining where and under what

conditions her aunt met her child's father, whether she loved him or not, how she groomed herself in the mirror for him, etc.

While voicing the narratives of the mother and daughter alternately Kingston uses a double-voiced discourse: One is the language of the emigrant mother whose discourse is marked by codes, insinuations, indirections, and ellipses. The second is the language of the first American generation, in this case the narrator/daughter/Kingston, who tries to fill in the gaps and get to the bottom of the story: she is telling the untold and making the unseen visible. On the other hand, Kingston shows the relativity of truth and history by juxtaposing the mother's perspective and the daughter's. The mother's story is the dominant story, the "official" version, whereas the daughter's story is the "muted" story, the underlying story which explores the causes and effects in a bicultural and bilingual context. She has written this story to be forgiven for having participated in her aunt's punishment by joining in the silence and for not having written her story earlier.

Japanese American Valerie Matsumoto's story "Two Deserts" is about Emiko Oyama who lives in a desert with her husband and daughter and is utterly lonely. The story begins with a moving van pulling up at the neighboring house which has been empty ever since their good friends the Ishikawas moved to another town. The new neighbors are American; Mattie Barnes who moved there upon her doctor's advice that the climate was better for her lungs, and her husband Roy Barnes who had recently retired. The women become friends immediately and start spending time together until Mattie's health fails her and she has to stay in bed for awhile. This gives Roy a chance to visit Emiko quite often, more than she cares for. During his visits Roy uses every chance to get intimate to which Emiko reacts with various strategies of reticence. Each time she hears a personal note in his voice she mentions Mattie; a coded discourse which signifies that she does not consider Roy apart from Mattie; "She was groping for the language to make him understand, to make him leave her in peace, but he was bent on not understanding, not seeing, not leaving until he got what he wanted" (234). These are gender induced silences and reactions which are not peculiar to Asian American women writers. It is only after Roy mentions a trip to Tokyo and a certain geisha girl he met there that the issue of race gets incorporated into that of gender. He also starts calling her "Emily" which he thinks is a prettier and more American name. While Emiko is trying to ward Roy off, a scorpion emerges from under a rock, scuttling toward Emiko's daughter:

> She brought down the shovel hard with one quick breath, all her rage shooting down the thick handle into the heavy crushing iron. She wielded the shovel like a samurai in battle, swinging it down with all her force, battering her enemy to dust. Once had been enough but she struck again and again, until her anger was spent... (235)

Answering her unsuspecting daughter's question as to what happened, while wiping her brow on her arm "like a farmer, or a warrior," she answers, "I killed a scorpion. ...I don't like to kill anything, but sometimes you have to"(235). The nonverbal gesture of killing the scorpion which expresses all the anger Emiko collected in her, scares Roy Barnes who recoils from "the pitiless knowledge in her eyes. He saw her clearly now but it was too late" (235). Then Emiko turns to him and says: "You'll have to leave now Mr. Barnes. I'm going to fix lunch" (235). This is the first time Emiko explicitly expresses herself. She has finally found the language; a verbal language to be substituted with the nonverbal one which gives her power against the dominant culture/gender.

Bharati Mukherjee's "A Wife's Story" begins while the character Panna is watching David Mamet's play Glengarry Glen Ross and is furious with the sexist and racist references the play makes. She wants "to stand up, scream, make an awful scene," but she doesn't; "expensive girls' schools in Luasanne and Bombay have trained me to behave well. My manners are exquisite, my feelings are delicate, my gestures refined, my moods undetectable" (237). In short our heroine has been trained to endure, to conceal, to please, and all in decorum. Nevertheless, marriage after school, childbirth, loss of the child and deciding to resume her studies in New York, has led her to modify her silences and seek an identity other than well-bred wife and mother. When the man sitting next to her in the theatre stares at her she puts him in his place with a voice that "has the effortless meanness of well-bred displaced Third World Women, though (her) rhetoric has been learned elsewhere" (237). After the play, walking on Broadway, her friend, Imre breaks into a dance to uplift her spirit and she hugs him in return; "My husband would never dance or hug a woman on Broadway. Nor would my brothers" (238). The implications of these incidents that display her having freed herself from cultural inhibitions are that she has adapted to a foreign culture without forsaking her ethnic identity (she continues to wear her sari). But when her husband comes to New York to visit her, it becomes apparent that there is more to the conflict between her two identities. We witness the difficulties she experiences while trying to switch back to her

traditional role as submissive wife. Though she still loves her husband and cares for him she cannot help but notice the diffculties of "remembering the inherited notions of marital duty" (241), especially after having lived in a city like New York which is the epitome of individuality and survival.

When she introduces her husband to her bohemian friend Imre, she tries to cover up their differences and act as a mediator between them while experiencing a mixture of "guilt, shame, loyalty" (242). But deep down she detests trying to please them and force them to like each other; "I long to be ungracious, not ingratiate myself with both men" (242). During their various sightseeing tours, since Panna is the one who has command over the language, much to her husband's distress, she has to interact with people, especially men who make passes at her, and each time her husband asks her what the men said, she hedges either by mistranslating or saying nothing, and the rationale behind this is "I don't want trouble" (245).

The night before he leaves, Panna is very affectionate to her husband who had earlier tried to convince her to go back to India with him, to no avail; "Tonight I should make up to him for my years away, ...to my degree I'll never use in India. I want to pretend to him that nothing has changed" (246). But things have changed a great deal. She has experienced freedom and a sense of accomplishment, and realized the presence of a female identity hidden inside her, waiting to be set free. She might not be able to use it, as with her degree, but it is comforting to know it is there:

> In the mirror that hangs on the bathroom door, I watch my naked body turn, the breasts, the thigh glow. The body's beauty amazes. I stand here shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am free, afloat, watching somebody else. (246)

The story is open-ended by the very fact that it does not give a definite idea whether Panna will return to India or not; she is either reconciled to the idea of going back, happy at least to have experienced self-fulfillment for a while, or she has decided to stay and use her degree in the States. But this reading of uncertainty can also be opposed by the sense of exhilaration expressed in the concluding sentence - the certainty, the confidence of having gained free passage.

Silence is pervasive in all cultures, but when analyzed in an Eastern context it gains special significance. To this cultural diversion, gender gives an additional

dimension. The above mentioned writers have been trying to express a compound difficulty - the difficulty of "breaking silences" imposed by gender, culture and race, and what they have come up with is a recognition of the beauty of a self with all its ramifications.

Janie Mirikitani's poem "Breaking Silence" is a fitting final statement that expresses in various ways the silence imposed on Asian Americans, and, in this particular context, women. The strength of women is a process that goes parallel with breaking the silences around and within themselves, thus allowing the self to be seen and the voice to be heard:

BREAKING SILENCE

For my mother's testimony
before Commission on Wartime Relocation and
Internment of Japanese Civilians

There are miracles that happen
she said.
From the silences
in the glass caves of our ears,
from the crippled tongue,
from the mute, wet eyelash,
testimonies waiting like winter.
We were told
that silence was better
golden like our skin,
useful like
go quietly,
easier like
don't make waves,
expedient like
horsetails and deserts.

"Mr. Commissioner . . .
. . . U.S. Army Signal Corps confiscated
our property . . . it was subjected to vandalism
and ravage. All improvements we had made
before our incarceration was stolen
or destroyed . . .
I was coerced into signing documents giving you authority to take . . . "

. . . to take . . . to take.

My mother
soft like tallow,
words peeling from her
like slivers
of yellow flame,
her testimony
a vat of boiling water
surging through the coldest
bluest vein.

She, when the land labored
with flowers, their scent
flowing into her pores,
had molded her earth
like a woman
with soft breasted slopes
yielding silent mornings
and purple noisy birthings,
yellow hay
and tomatoes throbbing
like the sea.
And then
all was hushed for announcements:
"Take only what you can carry . . ."
We were made to believe
our faces betrayed us.
Our bodies were loud
with yellow
screaming flesh
needing to be silenced
behind barbed wire.

"Mr Commissioner . . . .
it seems we were singled out
from others who were under suspicion.
Our neighbors were of German and Italian
descent, some of whom were not citizens . . .
It seems we were singled out . . ."

She had worn her sweat

like lemon leaves
shining on the rough edges of work,
removed the mirrors
from her rooms
so she would not be tempted
by vanity.
Her dreams honed the blade of her plow.
The land,
the building of food was
noisy as the opening of irises.
The sounds of work
bolted in barracks . . .
silenced.

Mr. Commissioner . . .
So when you tell me I must limit testimony
to 5 minutes, when you tell me my time is up,
I tell you this:
Pride has kept my lips
pinned by nails
my rage coffined.
But I exhume my past to
claim this time.
My youth is buried in Rohwer,
Obachan's ghost visits Amache Gate
My niece hauntsTule Lake.
Words are better than tears,
So I spill them.
I kill this, the silence...

There are miracles that happen,
she said,
and everything is made visible.
We see the cracks and fissures in our soil:
We speak of suicides and intimacies,
of longings lush like wet furrows,
of oceans bearing us toward imagined riches,
of burning humiliations and
crimes by the government.
Of self hate and of love that breaks
through silences.

We are lightning and justice.

Our souls become transparent like glass
revealing tears for war-dead sons
red ashes of Hiroshima
jagged wounds from barbed wire
We must recognize ourselves at last
We are a rainforest of color
and noise.
We hear everything.
We are unafraid.

Our language is beautiful.

JANICE MIRIKITANI

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