

Speech and Silence / Boon or Curse-A bird's eye-view on the early novels of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai

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Abstract

This study purports to enquire into the treatment of speech and silence and how far it affects marital bonds. Lack of communication or failure to apprehend the meanings as intended by another person also disrupts relationships. The need for speech/ silence is within us and it depends on how and where we make use of the particular aspect, which in turn results in success or failure.

Key words: speech, silence, submissiveness, marital bliss, communication, isolation

Speech (active) and silence (passive) are the two ways of responding to social situations. This depends on the respondent's mental ability, his interest in the particular subject, his attitude towards the person spoken to or about. Hence, he is committing himself to that person and to that thing. George Steiner in Aspects of Language and Translation opines that a respondent may eschew clarity and accomplish circularity in speech, "by offering alternatives to the thing spoken about, by deliberate concealment, misstatement, polysemy, falsehood or misinformation" (130).

Ludwig Wittgenstein in Philosophical Investigations says that "speech is a social game involving mutual intelligibility" (11). It is through the 'language games' that a relationship is continually amended and the activities like giving orders, describing objects, events, fabricating stories, asking, saying, narrating are accomplished. Therefore, in order to satisfy our daily needs, speech is essential. When two people meet, the more proficient participant commands authority over the situation.

Silence is meaningful and significant, forms an integral part because that which is concealed is more profound than that which is revealed, unanalyzed because it is unanalyzable. Silence is a moment in language.

In the Indian context, a woman is usually appreciated for her obedience, submissiveness, passivity, complicity and silence which leads to depressive moodiness and morbid sensitivity. These negative influences have destructive effects on women. Tradition, as well as society expects a girl to fulfill the needs of others rather than self-fulfillment; a woman has no identity of her own, only marriage, motherhood and family can make her a complete woman; and she is supposed to deny her feelings and emotions and to behave in a self-negating and responsible manner. Howsoever provoked, physically or mentally, she is expected to maintain silence, for according to the Indian tradition, silence is the hallmark of respectability. But, with the transition from tradition to modernity, women have begun to voice their feelings against the injustice done towards them.

For instance, Rukmini in Nectar in a Sieve is shattered when her dreams of having a grand wedding is unfulfilled. But, the traditional concept of woman is so ingrained in her that she accepts without a murmur the hut of her husband, and feels proud when she hears that it was Nathan who had built their house. Nathan's constant encouragement made her help him in his manual labour. The Nathan-Rukmani bond can be compared to Gerald-Elizabeth in Pearl S. Buck's Letter from Peking, wherein Gerald always says to his wife: "you have the genius of a homemaker" (8).

Markandaya brilliantly reveals how centuries of conditioning of the Hindu mind to suffer without protest becomes operative in times of misfortunes. Ira remains passive when she's sent to her house for her barrenness and remains mute when her husband has taken another woman. It is typical of the Indian woman to leave her disappointment unspoken. The death of Raja at the hands of the factory guard, Kuti's death by starvation, Nathan's faithlessness, and finally the eviction of her family from the land they tilled: all are accepted mutely. Passive acceptance is the Indian way of life and this acceptance and spirit of calm resignation is seen rather in the illiterate and superstitious rural India than in the more sophisticated cities. The novel achieves a vindication of the traditional spirit of acceptance which strengthens one in times of crises. However, this enables them to bear much more than would have been possible otherwise. Rukmani maintains silence of her visits to Kenny and does not know how to define her relationship with him. When their first boy is born, Rukmani longed to see Kenny. She knew silence seemed the best way because a torrential stream of words would not help.

When Rukmani discovers the grains that she has so carefully safeguarded for her family being robbed and that too by her own husband in order to prevent Kunthi from revealing his secret of having fathered her two sons, Rukmani feels weak, out of pain and anger. Rukmani gets rid of her sense of guilt in having kept her visits to Kenny a secret from Nathan. She can face him now squarely if the need comes. The skeleton in the cupboard has ceased to be menacing. That the discovery of Nathan's betrayal is a relief to Rukmani seems to be one of the little ironies of life. The inner turmoil of suppressing silence can be measured in her words: "it seemed to me that a

new peace came to us then, freed at last from the necessity for lies and concealment and deceit, with the fear of betrayal lifted from us . . . (57).

With the advance of industrialization, the villagers are evicted from the land, which has been their soul, which has been their only means of livelihood, and all they are capable of is to remain passive. Nathan advises Rukmani to "bend like the grass"(28) so that she would not break. This image can be said to be the key idea of the novel. It suggests acceptance and resilience as solutions to their problems. Kenny, who represents the modern thought tries to instill knowledge into the villagers: that they must cry out if they want help: "It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succor the drowning man if he does not clamor for his life?" (113). Kenny feels that it is the impregnable tradition that had conditioned the mind into a spiritless acceptance of injustice. Speech, as well as silence, can have its desired effect only when availed at the appropriate time, in the appropriate manner. While Rukmani represents the truth about the Hindu attitude of life, Mira in Some Inner Fury stands as a sharp contrast with Rukmini in revealing their attitudes to life.

Kamala Markandaya in her novels employs the pause which is an inevitable aspect of communication and exposes what occurs in the mind of the character. In the pause, the characters hide, judge, redefine or hesitate momentarily to receive needed confirmation. Mira in Some Inner Fury, who has fallen in love with Kit's friend Richard, tries to conceal her feelings but her face betrays her thoughts and she has to come out with the truth. While speech acts as the mirror of the soul and provides with the history of life, it can also help to conceal one's thoughts.

Mira's inner fury is communicated more effectively when her mother dissuades her from accompanying Kit and Richard to the swimming pool. The mother's decision and authority is firm, Mira's resentment and antagonism against the mother is almost tangibly communicated. Mira's mother's silence is more powerful than her words. There are two forms of silences, one is when no word is spoken; the other when a torrent of language is employed. Harold Pinter is of the opinion that speech may be viewed as a "stratagem to cover nakedness."

Communication is not merely an exchange of words: the tone, the accompanying gestures, the pauses in between, the significant look--all such things help convey the real meaning intended. Sometimes a person may say something but mean exactly the opposite. Sometimes a person may convey the idea suggestively through a different name or word.

At times intense love tends to hurt people. When Premala whom Govind loves truly is to be Kit's wife, all that he can do is hurt her through arrogant words. When Premala suggests that the little children (street urchins) should be fed, all the senior members rally against her. Govind asks Premala whether her real motive in feeding the poor children is to exact gratitude from them or to get cheap popularity. The others are shocked with disbelief for Govind has been the gentlest with her. Later, he tells Mira, "I must love her, to want to hurt her so much" (56). Govind would

have liked to have her as his wife, for he once remarked, "No man could have a better" (48). It is Govind's silent desire for her that makes him use arrogant words.

A Silence of Desire takes its title from a motto of H.W. Longfellow: Three silences there are: the first of speech, the second of desire, the third of thought. Dandekar and Sarojini, the central characters, are ensnared in the silence of desire, each one maintaining silence, for fear of marital disharmony. Carlyle in Sartor Resartus observes that "silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together (133). Dandekar broods in silence over the inadequacy of religious beliefs and the boon of new science. Sarojini worships the Tulasi plant, which to Dandekar is a mere plant. The worship of a photo springs doubts in his mind. Instead of demanding an explanation from Sarojini, he keeps silent about it, which destroys his peace of mind. Markandaya portrays how silence has become a crucial factor in wrecking their domestic serenity and marital bliss. It is his inability to voice his thoughts and feelings that result in "violent trust and extreme mistrust" (33).

Sex is an extremely sensitive and personal subject, hints, code words and symbolic acts are used to express the sexual desire which can be misread, misinterpreted or simply missed. In Dandekar's sudden upsurge of love, he wants to possess Sarojini and lays his head in her lap to be comforted. But Sarojini, though she understands his longing, merely states, "Not tonight" (35), which rouses suspicion in his already suspicious mind. It is the lack of communication which makes him feel rejected.

Dandekar's silence generates cold irritation, Sarojini doesn't clarify her absence from home although Dandekar suspects her of an illegitimate affair. Markandaya here explains the disadvantages of the practice of unwise and unhealthy silence. The nature of the silence metamorphoses from contemplation to doubt. Dandekar is portrayed as a victim of indecision, totally failing to concretize his vague thoughts based on reason and science, heavily weighed down by an undefinable silence. His illness may be the inevitable consequence of strained silence. The lost Joy of the household is restored, when the swami is sent away, but all this is once again taken through evocative silence rather than eloquent speech.

Both Sarojini and Dandekar yearn for domestic peace and marital bliss, though they have opted for different routes. Sarojini hides her goings to the Swamy to maintain peace in the family, Dandekar conceals his feelings to double check her. V.B. Gulati in Structure in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya remonstrates that Sarojini's futile attempts to guard the secrets of her visits to the Swami and Dandekar's nerving himself to break the barrier of silence after his suspicions about his wife's fidelity are aroused, substantiate the title of the novel (255). Madhusudan Prasad expresses his view in Perspectives on Kamala Markandaya that the silence of desire imposed upon Sarojini and Dandekar may be "expressive of her ingrained preoccupation with cross-cultural values—western values on the one hand and Indian cultural heritage on the other" (XVI).

Silence is infinite. It is a non-verbal mode of communication, neither bound to nor fragmented by time. Silence is a perfect medium for the multiplicity of human responses antithetic to place, time and clarity. Historically writers have rejected speech and employed silence to release tension and to emphasize the significance of particular words. Silence can be perceived in many ways. Sarojini keeps quiet about her condition lest she should be forced to go to the hospital. Shantha Krishnaswamy in Glimpses of Women in India says that "the Swami communicates more by his silence than by words" (195). As Margret P. Joseph in Kamala Markandava says of the Swami: His is the silence--not of desire, fear or anger, but of a powerful personality, capable of inspiring thought in others without having recourse to speech. (37)

Dandekar maintains silence for it dawns on him that the Swami could do what he couldn't, and is glad to have his wife back so that the family serenity remains undisturbed.

If the medium of language is inadequate, one makes use of gestures. When Caroline in Possession expresses her interest to take Valmiki, a simpleton in whom she sees a great artist to America, Valmiki speaks out his desires; of his seeking blessings from the Swami before taking leave. Caroline tells Anasuya to remind him that she is his guardian now and he is to do as she says. Hearing this, Valmiki scornfully retorts that what she has paid for the family is only a compensation "for the loss of a labourer" (22). Finally, Caroline has to give in to his obstinacy and he gives a winning smile.

Finding Valmiki hopeless, Caroline gets the Tamilian cook to counterfeit a letter as is written by the swami that "his dearest wish was to hear he was working hard on his painting, and that he was always near, in spirit, to him" (61). This forged letter has a magnetic effect on Val. Soon he begins painting and holding exhibitions. Purely British, Caroline has the art of silencing and having the people under her thumb. When Caroline realizes the intimacy between Val and Ellie, the refugee, she packs her off too as she did with the cook. When Val develops an intimate relationship with Annabel, Caroline reveals that Ellie has committed suicide with the child in her womb, which ruins Val-Annabel relationship. It has "been worked with a cool mathematical skill" (207) maintaining silence when she should and speaking out when opportunity determines.

A Handful of Rice is a third person narrative in which the omniscient narrator closely follows the thought process of the protagonist Ravi, the criminal turned respectable. Communication takes place not only to the words one hears, but also hears between the lines. The respondent listens with the third ear and tries to grasp the other's mind. Ravi understands Jayamma's inner sexual urge and rapes her and as long as it is concealed, problems never arise. Markandaya in The Coffer Dams portrays her characters, Helen and Clinton, who live their separate lives failing to speak out as well as understand the partner. It is from Mackendrick that Clinton gets to know that his wife understands the tribal language.

When Bashiam, is maimed during the construction of the dam, Helen accuses Clinton of being the cause of he accident. Here, Markandaya resorts to the technique of interior monologue that is

never expressed in words, but it stands out clearly the moment one reads these lines: "I did not wish to destroy," he said. 'If you are sure,' she replied. And he could not answer that," that Clinton is both a bourgeois builder and a jealous husband.

True lovers know each other's thoughts. When a man or woman is really in love, he/she can sense exactly how to please and satisfy the other. It makes sense for marriage partners to teach one another how best to get along with each other. Helen and Clinton remain apart, not by will alone, but by an irresistible process of drift, one particular occasion makes the loss of even the last possibility of communication: 'A high price,' he said, . . . 'will have to be paid. 'A high price has been paid' she answered. I do not know her, said Clinton, . . . I do not know this woman, who is my wife. (176) The relation between Helen and Clinton remains strained due to their lack of communication.

In speech, one not only hears what is spoken, but is able to grasp what remains unsaid. At times, what remains unspoken can be misinterpreted. In speech, the respondent is at liberty to avoid clarity and accomplish circularity. He can deliberately conceal his talk and use an alternative to the thing spoken about.

When spouses don't tell each other how they feel, it's as if there is an elephant in the room that never gets talked about. Dr. Radcliffe and his wife Marjorie Radcliffe in The Nowhere Man hardly care to understand each other, he is deeply immersed in his profession and patients, she, on the other hand, wants a social life. They have entirely different tastes and cannot understand each other. Most often they give an "oh" for an answer or maintain silence, both of which show disinterestedness.

The most important tool we have in sustaining a relationship is communication. A nice marriage is where there are no conflicts, but a good marriage is one in which problems are faced, discussed and dealt with. The Radcliffe-Marjorie couple stands in comparison to Deven and Sarla in In Custody. Deven knows that, like him, his wife too has been defeated, like her, he is a victim. Although each understands the secret truth about the other, it does not "bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments" (68).

Bawajiraj in The Golden Honeycomb who is married to Shanta Devi, has more intimate relations with his mistress Mohini, in whom he confides everything and with whom he is happy to share anything. Shanta Devi jealously wonders what any couple can find to talk about, after so many years of living together.

In Desai's novels, silence connotes isolation and separateness. Shanta Devi's unprotesting acceptance of her husband's illicit relationship can be compared to Nanda Kaul's in Fire on the Mountain. Nanda is aware of her husband's life-long affair with Miss David. She has been a silent spectator to all his movements, but refuses to make any comments. Her external silence is the severest curse to her mental peace, for, even after his death, even after so many years, his

love for Miss David rankles. Nanda is one of the few survivals of the aristocratic society who cannot bear personal insults. The love between the Vice-chancellor and Miss David is aesthetic, they carry on the affair within the social norms, and the game of badminton is a kind of love making in the sense that there is participation for them, emotional as well as physical.

Nanda Kaul weaves a story of her happy childhood, of her happy married life which act like tranquillizers, necessary for her to continue the act of living in the abandoned state. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication: "they helped her sleep at night, they were tranquillizers, pills" (145). As Tennessee William's in his Twenty-Seven Wagons full of cotton and other plays puts it: "There are no lies but the lies that are stuffed in the mouth by the hard knuckled hand of need, the cold iron fist of necessity" (71).

Speech is interrelational and manipulative. Non participation in the speech act does not mean non participation in the social act. A person chooses to remain silent or avoid silence either to control or to be controlled. In Bye Bye-Blackbird, Mr. Roscommon James remains silent and passively accepts the role of a servant, he is controlled and dominated over by his wife.

Maya in Cry. The Peacock is projected as a helpless suffering martyr, a childless woman, gripped by the misfortune of her pet's death, threatened by the albino astrologer's prophecy of an early death of one of the spouses, but the gap of communication between Maya and Gautama leaves her lonely to brood over the morbid thoughts.

Through the channel of communication, the spouses get to know each other, but the problem with Desai's characters is that they never communicate, instead they brood over the problem by themselves which forces them to commit suicide. Earl H. Bell in Social Foundation of Human Behavior opines that lack of communication or pseudo communication is explained as a "failure to apprehend the meanings of a communication of another Fervor as intended" (288). Maya fails to communicate with Gautama and that results in her failure and insanity.

In Voices in the City, Monisha does not wish to communicate, nor does she seek any positive relationship with her husband. Instead of human company she seeks solace in silence and darkness and finds an outlet in diary writing. The "dark spaces between the stars" which sadden Maya, comfort the parched soul of Monisha.

For Monisha, as also for Nirode, touch and communication imply humiliation. Nirode is certain that one can retain one's sanity by being secretive and closing all communication. To Monisha he exhorts, "Never tell them your secrets" (132). Communication appears to him painful and humiliating as to Monisha. In the first few pages of the novel, we learn that Nirode has opted for a life of "shadows, silence and stillness" (8). That certainly is not the healthy yearning for inner silence. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in Basic Writings opines that silent hours give us time for self-communication which can lead to the analysis of the self: In these silent hours of self-communion we strive to free ourselves from the suffocating routine, from the masks and

mummeries of existence, cleanse our thoughts, and create within ourselves a clean heart and a single mind. (57)

The element of love is absent in the life of both Nirode and Monisha. Nirode creates for himself dead silence which does not echo with the spirit's voice. According to J. Krishnamurthy, the absence of noise is not silence. It is a higher virtue which requires the sound foundation of love. To put it in J. Krishnamurthy's own words: If you have not laid the foundation which is love, which is virtue, which is goodness, which is beauty, which is real compassion in the depth of your whole being, if you have not done that, your silence is only the ending of noise. Beyond Violence. (39)

Though everyone thinks that Monisha lacks the element of love, it is not totally absent in her. When Nirode is ill she nurses him: She cuts his overgrown hair and feels immensely touched as it happens to be the first human act that he has ever done. She has cut her brother's hair with a feeling of attachment, love and involvement. This act reminds one of Som Bhaskar in Arun Joshi's The Last Labyrinth who paints his mother's nails when she is on the death bed, considering it as the only offering of love to her.

Bim in Clear Light of Day takes to soliloquy. The urge to talk alone takes place when one is alone or when one feels lonely in a crowd. One wants to talk to others, but there remains a barrier which prevents one from talking. In some cases, the long years of living alone, has led people to this state. Bim is lonely always, except when Tara visits her once a while. Bim's mental alertness is revealed in her decision not to enter into a marriage with a person like Dr. Biswas when she hears his remark: 'Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others.' (97) as she knows she is being misjudged.

From her childhood itself, Sita was taught to maintain silence, though her mind was full of doubts regarding her family. Sita thought Rekha was an ardent devotee of the father, but soon after his death, Rekha tells, "Come, . . . we can go now" (98) signifying she had desperately waited and planned for this moment of release from the old man's love

The father himself was not aware of his power, but when the people thrust upon him his "miracle cures," he did not protest. The father's desire to leave behind him, after his death a name for himself is suggested by the word "footprints" According to N.R. Shastri, in his article on "Where Shall We Go This Summer?", Anita Desai's "fictional philosophy seems to crystallize in this novel, . . . consequently, the novel seems to acquire a new idiom in that the death/suicide syndrome of her earlier fiction gives place to a sober, balanced acceptance of life" (83). Acceptance or maintaining silence does not mean that these qualities are in no way related to an absence of emotions or even of sensitivity. Acceptance comes only after the characters have felt deeply about the events which they eventually accept. The best way to make up for the existing differences is to speak frankly to one's partner. We should not shut our lips to those to whom we have opened our heart. Speech/silence can itself turn out to be either a boon or a curse depending

on the circumstances and one's responses. Thomas Hardy in Far from the Madding Crowd has given an impressive account of silence: Silence has sometimes a remarkable power of showing itself as the disembodied soul of feeling wandering without its carcass, (sic) and it is then more impressive than speech. In the same way, to say a little is often to tell more than to say a great deal. (144)

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