



The Rhetoric of Silence and Female Resistance: An Analysis of Select Narratives

Dr Liji Varghese

Associate Professor, Department of English, All Saints' College, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

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Abstract

The study of women characters in Indian English literature offers a rich tapestry of significations and interpretations. It is interesting to analyse how female resistance as a theme is portrayed in this genre. The present paper tries to locate how silence becomes a seminal form of female resistance in Indian English literature. An attempt has been made to look at texts written in different time periods to scrutinise how silence becomes a recurring motif while registering the idea of dissent. A close reading of the selected narratives reveals how silence becomes a crucial concept in generating counter discourses that foreground the idea of female resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

While silence has often been deemed as a passive act in traditional narratives, it acquires a different signification when it assumes the role of resistance. Silence, once dismissed as the least effective of acts becomes a potent weapon of resistance when it is wielded deliberately. It is mostly associated with feminine resistance as patriarchal discourse has often denied voice and agency to women. The present paper tries to analyse select narratives in Indian Literature in English that explore how the variations of silence are navigated in the quotidian lives of women who are oppressed by the patriarchal regime. The paper tries to study how these women who are denied voice narrate their stories through the rhetoric of silence.

Women characters depicted in narratives like Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" (1942), Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983) trace the trajectory of the theme of silence as resistance in Indian English literature.

The present paper will focus specifically on Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* (2024) as a collection of narratives that highlight how silence becomes a crucial criterion in the idea of resistance. The narratives selected for analysis depict women characters who navigate a shared matrix of religious, economic and class identities that deeply influence their worldviews. Their identities are moulded by religious and cultural signifiers that are deeply entrenched in their thought patterns and value judgments. Concomitantly, their reactions to patriarchal subjugation veers away from the expected norms of resistance and often take up alternate channels of expression, of which, silence can be deemed as a very potent choice. The present paper attempts to critically examine how the rhetoric of silence adopted by women becomes a seminal channel of resistance vis-à-vis the religious and cultural ethos in which they are depicted.

When one examines the rubric of Indian English literature, one comes across several instances

where women characters actively engage in the strategic use of silence to demonstrate their protest against dominant ideologies that deny them voice. The paper will focus on Muslim women characters in Indian English literature and how silence as resistance becomes a common thematic thread that connects these diverse narratives. Using critical insights culled from gender studies, cultural studies and postcolonial feminist theory, the paper attempts to trace the tangent of similar representations in Indian English literature.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The present paper tries to situate itself in the intersection between feminist theory and postcolonial elements as the primary focus is on Muslim women characters depicted in Indian English literature. While French feminists like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray had talked about how silence becomes a vital concept in resisting patriarchy, the paper does not look at the semiotics of the feminine language. Instead, it concentrates on how silence becomes a practical option for these women characters who have to function within the restrictive parameters set by the societal structure in which they find themselves.

Postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have analysed how silence becomes a seminal idea in female resistance. While Spivak (1988) equates silence as a form of expression for the subaltern, Mohanty (1988) analyses how silence is often seen as an act of voiceless submission. Both these theorists have argued that silence often becomes the only viable form of resistance in a dominant discourse where speech becomes a distortion of the intended signification. Mohanty argues that the Western perspective of viewing silence as meek submission does not really provide an accurate picture and she questions the hierarchies inherent in such depictions. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan (1993) combines critical insights from gender studies and postcolonial theory to navigate how the ideal of woman is constructed in patriarchal communities. Feminism, like any other ideology, is culture specific and the present paper tries to

use this core idea in supporting its primary argument.

The paper also tries to apply concepts from culture studies to foreground how societal significations shape gender dynamics. Judith Butler's (1990) idea of gender performativity is essential to understand why specific acts become necessary in the practice and propagation of gender. Butler interprets silence as non-performance, which can further be linked to a resistance against normative categories. Sara Ahmed (2017) also frames silence as a way to assert one's non-conformist stance. She analyses silence as an act of non-compliance and defines it as a "killjoy practice" that rejects the possibility of patriarchal happiness scripts. These critical insights have been used to provide a structural framework to the analysis done in this paper.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of the Work

The paper tries to trace how Muslim women in select Indian English narratives express the idea of resistance through the trope of silence. The paper has tried to be representative of the various decades in Indian English literature by selecting seminal texts. While the selection is not comprehensive, it does include narratives that highlight how the idea of silence becomes relevant in the depiction of dissent. While none of the narratives look at the idea of radical protest, it projects how silence is a form of agency.

3.2 Analysis of the Work

The paper follows the methods of close reading and textual analysis to bring out the nuances of meaning. The narratives are analysed to identify the common theme of silence as resistance and thematic similarities are identified in the narratives selected for study. The female characters in the narratives have been closely studied to scrutinise how the idea of silence becomes a permeating presence in the lives of women. Critical insights have been used to provide an in-depth analysis of the characters and their motives.

3.3 Limitations of the Work

While the paper tries to be as comprehensive as possible, given the extensive scope of the area

selected for study, it does acknowledge that many important works that could have been included in the analysis have been left out due to the constraints imposed by the structure of a research paper. There are crucial texts in Indian English Literature that can further accentuate the validity of the primary argument presented in the paper. However, these narratives couldn't be taken for analysis and the researcher acknowledges this limitation.

IV. TRACING THE IDEA OF SILENCE IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Perhaps, one of the earliest narratives in Indian English literature that discuss the idea of silence as protest is Ismat Chughtai's short story, "The Quilt". Originally published in Urdu as "Lihaaf" (1942), it garnered a lot of vitriolic commentary as it discussed the taboo topics of lesbianism and abuse. Chughtai effectively foregrounds silence as a trope that the oppressed woman can wield to her advantage (Fatima, 2021, p. 78). Begum Jaan, the suppressed wife of the story, remains immured behind the veneer of respectability. As the lady of the house, she is not allowed to rant about her husband's preference for young boys and takes refuge in her silence. The silence, which is oppressive at first, later grows into a force that allows her to explore her sexuality with her masseuse, Rabbu. The eponymous quilt becomes synonymous with liberation as it guards and sustains the silence of sexual freedom. It symbolises "the unveiling of silences surrounding taboo topics" (Rathore and Jayalakshmi, 2025, p. 248).

Silence, in a heteropatriarchal society is deemed as an acceptable feminine trait and is actively cultivated as a desirable quality. Begum Jaan cannot protest against her husband's indifference as the code of silence has been inculcated in her by the society. It is when she uses silence to explore her desires that she uses its potential to empower herself sexually. Though there are whispers, they are engulfed by the silence that Begum maintains. The silence of Begum Jaan becomes the only viable way in which she can register her dissent against the patriarchal constraints that keep her trapped in her husband's household. "Through her portrayal of non-normative identity and lesbian

sexual desire Chughtai transformed zenana into an influential space within Begum's household. The narrator Begum exists within a space exclusively allotted to women which later becomes a symbol of resistance to the heteropatriarchal structure" (Rathore and Jayalakshmi, 2025, p. 248).

The theme of women being confined to live out their silent lives in purdah is closely echoed in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). Unlike Chughtai's story, women characters in Hosain's novel are depicted as living out their lives in silence as they believe that they do not possess the power to resist. However, Hosain delineates how silence foments the seeds of resistance and how women express their dissent through the choices that they make. Laila, the protagonist is a young woman who has to navigate the tumultuous territory of personal choices in a societal structure that denies her the freedom to live her life in her own terms. The novel highlights how women endure the restrictions placed on their social and personal lives in silence. However, this silence is not debilitating as it empowers women to make bold choices that are borne out of contemplation.

Hosain extends this argument by foregrounding the silences in nationalist ideology vis-à-vis the Muslim women. Laila is governed by the choices that her uncle makes for her and remains non-committal to the nationalist struggle at first. Later, as she experiences the trauma of partition, her narrative asserts itself in the midst of the dominant narrative. Hosain deftly ties together the strands of the personal and political thereby emphasising the woman's prerogative to narrate "her-story" through her silences as opposed to the dominant cacophony of "his-story." Arunima Dey opines that "Hosain uses the motif of home to give voice to personal, alternative histories of partition, thereby highlighting the significance of personal space where one can locate the effects of national history specifically on the lives of women" (2016, p. 48-49).

Salman Rushdie is yet another writer who has explored the notion of how the personal becomes the political. In his novels like *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), he focuses on the female narratives that showcase a close connection between the personal and the

political. In these works, Rushdie has portrayed how silence often becomes a trope for feminine resistance. Reverend Mother, a character in *Midnight's Children* undergoes a period of silence in order to challenge her husband. In this case, the silence becomes a potent tool by which Reverend Mother reprimands her husband's authority. When her husband, Aadam Aziz tries to impose his command, Reverend Mother successfully subverts this patriarchal hegemony by creating a wall of silence around her. When he tries to silence her "voice", she takes him quite literally and the subsequent silence becomes a daunting weapon. Nicole Thiara opines that Reverend Mother's silence "constitutes a parodic obedience towards her husband's command and makes a mockery of the self-effacing subservience a good wife is supposed to display" (2009, p. 64). Here, Rushdie subverts the stereotypical portraiture of the timid and acquiescent wife by depicting how Reverend Mother cleverly deployed such a role to suit her purpose. Her silence, in this context, transforms into a formidable strategy in the face of patriarchal coercion. As an extension of the Mother India image, Reverend Mother is a character who has great symbolic relevance. Therefore, in highlighting silence as her weapon of choice, Rushdie is connoting the "silences" that adopt greater significance in the context of national history.

Similarly, in *Shame*, Rushdie develops this argument as he foregrounds how silence becomes a cogent indicator of one's power. Rani, a character in *Shame* emerges as a potent symbol of resistance through her disquieting silence. In a patriarchal world, her words and actions are curtailed by the likes and dislikes of her husband, Iskander, who is also a powerful politician. Yet, Rani reclaims her agency and topples the patriarchal hegemony through her puissant silence. Her majestic silence carries more weight than the frivolous words voiced by Iskander. She knits her shawls of silence that unravel the debauchery of her husband. Her shawls become a potent counter discourse that critiques the patriarchal stereotype of women's mute suffering. She erases the tag of victimhood placed on her and reclaims her agency.

Rani's shawls are her legacy to her daughter, to the future generation and to all women. Her

steely resolve demonstrates the tenacity of a woman who invalidates the imposed parameters of her existence. Grant points out that Rani plays a "sibylline role" (1997, p. 65) in the narrative because of the insightful way in which she embroiders her shawls. Rani's silence can be compared to the subaltern as her silence is her voice (Spivak 1988). Though she is denied the right to verbally criticise her husband's deeds, her shawls form an alternate form of "speech", thereby liberating her repressed story. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan outlines the power inherent in silence by commenting that, "Silence as withheld communication produces mystery and enigma; it expresses displeasure, it retains secrets; it demonstrates self-discipline or resistance" (1993, p. 87).

V. SILENCE AS A RECURRING MOTIF IN MUSHTAQ'S *HEART LAMP*

The trope of silence as resistance remains relevant in contemporary Indian literature in English as well. Banu Mushtaq is one among the new voices in Indian English literature who has effectively depicted the nuances of silence. Mushtaq shot to fame after her short story collection, *Heart Lamp* won the International Man Booker Prize in 2025. Her writings are characterised by a raw intensity that captures the gradations of lived experiences. Mushtaq's literary career coincides with her career as a lawyer and an activist and this accounts for the astute societal and political insight that she brings to her writing. She has been lauded for her realistic portrayals and has declared that she is "determined to put on record . . . the silences" (Mushtaq, 2025b).

The stories in *Heart Lamp* explore the vicissitudes of feminine experience and narrate the problematic transactions of daily life that are often submerged in varying degrees of silence. These gradations of silence are not summarily dismissed, instead, Mushtaq chooses to highlight how they become a palpable form of resistance in the lives of her women characters. In the stories, silence is not posited as a submissive response, instead, it becomes the only avenue of resistance offered to women who are subjected to the normative dictates of patriarchy. The present paper will analyse select

stories from *Heart Lamp* to foreground how the rhetoric of silence is crucial to the idea of feminine resistance.

The first story in the collection, “Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal” is a biting commentary on the plight of women and observes that the notion of the autonomy of the female body is a mere illusion in a patriarchal world. The story is narrated by Zeenat who is aware of the power dynamics inherent in marital relationships. Though she is extremely critical of how male authority is contrasted with female submissiveness, her protest remains unvoiced. The reader is made privy to the thoughts that populate her mindscape and her interior monologue becomes a shared secret between herself and the reader. The tone is almost conspiratorial when Zeenat reflects on the skewed gender politics that is rampant in contemporary society.

The reader is invited to comment on Zeenat’s relationship with Mujahid and even her silence is steeped in protest. Though she doesn’t articulate her resistance, her assessment of Mujahid is an act of resistance. She dismisses the adage that for Muslim women, husband is akin to God and goes on to demonstrate how her idea of Mujahid is far from that ideal. She reiterates that “No matter which religion one belongs to, it is accepted that the wife is the husband’s most obedient servant, his bonded labourer” (Mushtaq, 2025a, p. 8). The protest that she embodies can be compared to an “internal rebellion” (Dutta, 2025, p. 80). Mujahid’s attempts to appear as a liberal husband is again revealed to be a shallow trick to gain societal approval and the reader understands that the silent Zeenat has the upper hand in all these interpersonal manoeuvres. Zeenat critiques societal perceptions of gender performativity and while she may not be able to assert her dissent through “subversive performances of various kinds” (Butler, 1988, p. 531), the fact that her silence subverts it internally is an act of resistance.

In “Black Cobras” the silence of the women becomes a collective force that threatens the sanity of Abdul Khader Saheb, the manager or *mutawalli* of the mosque. Aashraf’s silence takes on the power of the entire community as the

reader becomes aware of all the women in the village supporting her in her plight. The mutawalli’s unjust decisions create a suffocating atmosphere as he feels the silent gaze of the women watching and condemning him. “Piercing through the veil of darkness, facing the onslaught of cold and rain, shaking off the dirt that stuck to their feet, with their heads covered, those innumerable women, where were they, who are they, where did they come from” (Mushtaq, 2025a, p. 58). As he stumbles home, he realises that the women hold him in contempt and their insults permeate his sense of infallibility. Through this powerful story, Mushtaq foregrounds “the conflation of sociocultural values with religion” (Ahmad, 2025) and how Muslim women bear the brunt of this burden. The collective vengeance becomes a powerful act of subversion and “their act of resistance lingers like a black cobra’s venom, inescapable and deadly” (Farrell, 2025).

Mushtaq’s stories bring out the myriad nuances of a woman’s life in a patriarchal world. While “Black Cobras” focused on exploitation and spousal neglect, “High-heeled Shoe” is a tale of fetishism that wreaks havoc on a woman’s peace of mind. Arifa doesn’t understand why her husband forces her to wear the high-heeled shoes and remains oblivious to his fantasies. His misplaced sense of love overwhelms her as she finds the shoes highly uncomfortable. Her silent endurance is contrasted with his inability to comprehend her discomfiture. Mushtaq highlights how the woman’s pain is her own problem and is not shared by her spouse even when he is the cause. At the end, Arifa decides to save her baby by obliterating the shoes (Mushtaq, 2025a, p. 131). Though silent, her resistance is strong enough to destroy the object that caused her concern (Ahmed 2010). The ending of the story is almost surreal as the rest of the world fades and Arifa is left alone with the critical task of saving her baby. Mushtaq doesn’t just lampoon the shoes as an item of fashion (Farrell, 2025); she uses it as a symbol of the heteronormative patriarchal regime that imposes unrealistic standards on women.

Mushtaq establishes how women are buried under the weight of patriarchal expectations. The last story in the collection, “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord” is perhaps the most poignant as it is

presented as a silent prayer to God. The narrator has suffered physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband and yet no respite is offered to her. Her prayer to God is an interior monologue that shows her resilience and foregrounds the lives of women like her, “women who live severe, isolated lives” (Rao, 2025). The woman’s silence is a testament to her quiet strength and enduring spirit. The narrator is depicted as a woman who is broken and weary and yet her prayer for God to be a woman is a stance that highlights her desire for change. Her silence is reinforced by her determination to survive and her prayer assumes a critical tone, one that “becomes a rhetorical weapon turned against patriarchal interpretations of Islam” (Farrell, 2025).

VI. CONCLUSION

The idea of silence as resistance is specifically applicable to the Indian context as opposed to Western paradigms as the Indian societal structure has limited avenues for female protest. The narratives selected for analysis highlight how women use the trope of silence to register dissent. One can even argue that it becomes a form of gendered subversion wherein the women use silence, which is typically regarded as a form of submission, to protest against the notion of adhering to heteronormative categories. The female characters discussed in the paper demonstrate that silence liberates them from societal and cultural backlash and paves way for a feminist discourse that has its own codes of signification.

Female voices that have been submerged in the deluge of dominant discourses find its release in the creation of a new liminal discourse of silences. The intersection of religion and colonial modernity created a complex web of social hierarchies and gendered norms that marginalised women. Silence, in such a context, assumes the role of a new discourse; one that enables women and restores agency. It becomes a new speech, one that goes beyond the articulation of words. It is a speech that understands and articulates the pain and anguish felt by women and does not limit itself to obsolete thought patterns.

The paper has tried to situate silence as a layered concept which goes beyond simplistic reductions. It is a transformative ideal that diverges from accepted norms and ushers in newer possibilities. One can see how silence as a form of dissent has manifested in contemporary socio-political milieus pertaining to Muslim women that generate innovative and dynamic dialogues. The rhetoric of silence has become the face of resistance as it encourages fresh avenues of expression that steer away from the thought patterns of a bygone era. Silence, now has become the new word for rebellion.

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