

Silence: The Loudest Language in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

The paper examines the role of silence as a language to convey emotions faced by characters and the Parsi community in *A Fine Balance* (1995) by Rohinton Mistry. The paper uses the method of textual analysis to understand how silence helps the author portray turmoil within a group or individual when combined with the realism of the narrative. The idea of suffering in silence and silence being one's fate, as depicted by Okami Kamikaze in the poem *Eternal Silence* will act as a theoretical compass for this investigation. The paper discovers that silence is a language woven into the characters of the novel to give characters their layers of identity. It further comprehends that the author uses silence to block out the antagonist of the novel and gives voice to the victims of the narrative time period while maintaining within each character the measured usage of silence. The instances where silences have the greatest impact on character arcs and communities within the novel are examined and evaluated by the paper.

Keywords: silence, Parsi, character arch, voice, turmoil, suffering

Introduction

Silence is a technique that has been used in English literature historically to convey the depth of an event to the reader and pass time in a narrative by allowing the reader to absorb the minutest details the author wishes to convey. This can be observed in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* to Ruta Sepetys' *The Fountain of Silence*. This paper uses Okami Kamikaze's poem, *Eternal Silence*, in which he states, "Silence fills this hollow world, Silence is the choice we make, Silence is the death of this all, Silence is our fate." (Kamikaze 2008) to give a theoretical structure to the investigation into silence and its nature in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. The author speaks to the readers, through his quietest characters. Characters are introduced in silence and are removed in silence; it is used to communicate the intricacy and weight of a dialogue and also used to convey the power of subsequent lines. The character that is the embodiment of this silence in the narrative is Maneck Kohlah. Mistry uses the silence of Maneck to lure the reader into a brief moment of suspense where the next action is unexpected. In the first encounter with Ishwar, another

major character, the silence Maneck is able to permeate is understood, the loud and talkative Ishwar is transfixed in nostalgia by Maneck simply choosing to remain quiet in the following lines, “They walked quietly for a while, occupied with home thoughts. Omprakash broke the silence by pointing out a watermelon-sherbet stand.” (Mistry 13). To help the reader gauge and reminisce on lines, Mistry employs silences throughout the narrative.

Silence is not exclusive to Maneck, he is but one of the many characters that employ it to show their emotion. The technique used by the author allows for other characters who witness the silence to understand the inner turmoil of the character in question. Among the many voices in the novel is Dina, the Parsi woman who starts a tailoring enterprise in her house, which later becomes the home of all the major characters. Dina’s mother slowly slips into a lifetime of silence after being widowed, when Dina was still a child, the author later depicts a Dina who goes into silence after feeble attempts to draw her mother’s attention bears no fruit. The author then shows how Dina herself goes into silence after Rustom, her husband, is killed in an accident. Here the reader takes on the role of young Dina and the suffering Dina experienced comes back to the reader through her silence. Rohinton Mistry carefully places the void of dialogues to convey emotions that would be otherwise limited by a character’s intricate description of it.

Silence in Characters

The author builds characters and the relationship they share with each other using silence. Om, another major character, is quiet when he first meets Dina. This leads the reader to speculate of the wide range of thoughts going through the teenager’s mind. These include the memory of his mother and seeing her in Dina or the fact that he is merely a shy individual. This is the result Rohinton Mistry looks for, he requires the reader to create the character mentally, and by withholding what the character is thinking, he is able to build intricate layers for the character’s identity. Further, the relationship one character shares with the other can be best understood by examining the unnamed antagonist of the novel: Indira Gandhi. The author does not name the former leader of India but uses the term “Prime Minister” to refer to her looming presence. The novel, set during The Emergency period of 1975-1977 speaks of the acts committed by the leader by denying her a voice. The entirety of the narrative does not have any direct dialogue by Gandhi, rather, Mistry uses the description of events to speak of the horrors of her ideology. The beautification programme and forced vasectomy of the marginalized were rampant during this time of crisis in the country. The author depicts these atrocities through the exchanges between the characters, as seen in the lines, “What are we to say, madam, what are we to think about the state of this nation? When the highest court in the land turns the Prime Minister’s guilt into innocence, then all this” (Mistry 427). This technique ensures that the voiceless of the time period, the victims who were thrown out of the cities they lived in the men who were forced to become impotent, have a voice, that speaks over the silence of the individual who spoke the most during her tenure, controlling the media, police and the law. While this is Mistry’s method of giving a voice to these individuals who have suffered, he forces the fictional Indira Gandhi to

relinquish all sense of identity in the narrative, instead, her entire persona is built upon her silence. Even though Gandhi is forced to not speak by the author, she does communicate. The overnight raids on roadside squatters, the murder of Avinash in police custody and the atmosphere of fear the political vigilantes groom the city into, are Mistry's way of allowing the Prime Minister to communicate, all the while remaining silent.

The characters go through events of the narrative decade silently, capturing the suffering of existence in a time of absolute national chaos. The meals they share are often in the quietness of a home where a single word is not uttered. The reader pieces together how, even when the author shows the togetherness of the characters, they are truly reflecting their individual life in silence. The author in these instances depicts the inner chaos the character goes through by inducing a quietness that forces the reader to remember what the character has gone through a few lines ago, this is captured in the lines, "Eating in silence for a while, he listened to the frogs bellowing in the humid night, then asked his wife, "You are not having anything?" (Mistry 77). The silence of Dukhi's meal is a guilty one because the author makes it clear to the reader that the wife says she is not hungry, which is understood to be her indirect way of telling there was no food left to eat. Mistry draws out this silence to induce guilt in the character in Dhuki, pain in the wife and within the reader, a sense of pathos for both the characters.

In *A Fine Balance*, even the strongest of characters, comparable to the stronger chess pieces are not safe. The character Beggar master, who has great individual power and takes the top place in the hierarchy of beggars, suffers in silence. When his father is killed in an accident, he cannot lament and cry nor can he complain about the incident to the police. Rather, he adorns the facade of silence. Here the author gives the character silence as a language to show his strength. If Beggar master had cried out loud and lamented, he would have appeared weak to his employees. He embraces silence to show that nothing can break the iron grip he had over the underbelly of the city.

As discussed earlier, Maneck is the embodiment of silence in the novel. The quietness in which Maneck dies is where silence is the strongest in the narrative. The last words uttered by him "Thank you"(Mistry 464) is where the author brings out his recurring method, for instilling the reader's attention in its fullest power. Maneck carries with him the chessboard of Avinash, along with it, he carries the silence in which Avinash died. The chessboard is an interesting plot element for it transfers the silence into the chessmen, who like many of the characters in the novel, experience the realism Mistry weaves through their own sacrifice. Like the pawns, they are quiet and wasted away in a chessboard, which can be compared to the city of Bombay, by forces that dictate their very life. Destruction comes to these silent characters who cannot protest or fight against the hand that moves them to their doom.

The Structural Silence of *A Fine Balance*

The novel in question exists in a timeline that spans across the fiction of Rohinton Mistry. His first novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) speaks of a Parsi family and particularly of a Parsi man who must overcome government corruption and save his friend and family. The

novel shows the intricacies of the Parsi religious life, depicting the *Kusti* ritual and the strict beliefs followed by the community. It is a work that informs the readers of the details of Parsi religious life and the adherence to it by characters who interact with non-Parsi individuals. This is carried with greater rigour in the authors final novel *Family Matters*(2001). The conservatism of certain characters like Mr Vakeel and Yezad, towards the epilogue of the work, draws the reader into a world where the Parsi characters live exclusively chained to their community or attempting and failing to break free. The character of Yezad, especially brings this to the fore, through religious rituals at the Tower of Silence, the character seeks comfort in the religion he was indifferent to. This transition, while creating the identity of the character, informs the reader through events and stories, of the rich heritage of the Parsi community. It uses stories within stories, such as the ones about Persian Heroes, to voice Mistry's concern and gravitas for the community living in Bombay. This is quite an interesting take by Rohinton Mistry because in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry withdraws from the depictions of Parsi rituals and customs when compared to the other two novels. There is a silence by the author himself about the community and the focus is rather, as mentioned earlier, on the voiceless of the time. This is clear in the criticism given by Vibuthi Wadhawan in *Parsi Community and the Challenges of Modernity: A Reading of Rohinton Mistry's Fiction*, the author writes, "The novel deals with the struggle of the Zoroastrian minority and more with the disposed subaltern" (Wadhawan 77). The narrative is therefore silent, in comparison to the other works of Rohinton Mistry. There is an active motivation for Mistry to detach from depicting the community. The Parsi characters in *A Fine Balance* are silent for the most part about their heritage and are separated from their families. Dina lives the lonely life of a widow and she is not a voice that describes or even engages in the rituals, that is her silence. Maneck, the only other major Parsi character, is separated from his family and remembers rituals and the community only while remembering his family. The author consciously brings these two characters together, however, the discussions they share are void of the descriptive nature of depicting Parsi life. This not to say that Parsi symbolism and description are entirely avoided from the narrative, the author does bring in religious rituals and events at certain sections in the novel. The argument here is that *A Fine Balance*, through the main Parsi characters, is actively silent about the community, or at least attempts to be, in contrast to the author's other fictional narratives.

From characters that represent the community to the entirety of the ethnic group, Mistry divulges how the community is silent now, a shell of its former self. Manpreet Kaur in her dissertation titled *The Legacy and the Quest* writes:

However, with the departure of British colonisers from India, power equations changed overnight, resulting in the dethronement of self-assumed colonial elite; therefore, once revelling in self-sufficiency and in their self-identification with the British colonizers, Parsi community witnessed the most dreadful and distressing psychological impasse. (Kaur 17)

Structurally the work of Mistry depicts the silence of Parsi characters with regard to their community and the relationship they share. A deeper analysis of the novel reveals the

retirement of the Parsi community as a whole from its days of glory. Tanya Luhrmann in her book, *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial* says, "There is no body of natives in India so remarkable for their intelligence and enterprise as the Parsis. Bombay has owned its advancement in a great degree to this class" (Luhrmann 24). She further continues "I have not yet seen a thin Parsi, and I doubt if I have seen a poor one. They seem all to be fat, rich, and thriving" (Luhrmann 24). The description of the Parsi community depicts a strong group of individuals who built the city of Bombay and are never unsuccessful in their social pursuits. *A Fine Balance*, uses the poverty and the desperation of the Parsi characters to show how quiet the community has become. The Parsis do not have a say in the administration or development of the city, in other words, the community has lost its voice and has become silent. Dina and Maneck, the main Parsi characters struggle to make ends meet, the tailoring enterprise of Dina is constantly under scrutiny by her landlord and Maneck comes to Bombay to save his family from bankruptcy. The cola business his father ran successfully is on the verge of shutting down owing to globalisation and cheaper international products encroaching on the market his family dominated. These characters are far from the description used by Luhrmann, the Parsis in the novel are poor and thin, they struggle economically and are under constant abuse by the inhabitants of the city their ancestors help build. The community itself, not purely the characters, are understood by the paper to be silent. The fact that the community has retreated into the middle and lower class of the country post-independence is brought to the fore by the description of their standard of living by Maneck in the following lines. "But for Dina Aunty this was home. Everywhere there was evidence of her struggle to stay ahead of squalor, to mitigate with neatness and order the shabbiness of poverty. He saw it in the chicken wire on the broken windowpanes, in the blackened kitchen wall and ceiling, in the flaking plaster, in the repairs on her blouse collar and sleeves." (Mistry 154). The silence with which the characters go through this lifestyle is the most important point the study brings forward. Similar to the silence employed by Dukhi and his wife, the Parsi characters carry the burden of their financial status and rarely complain or dirge about it, they too become silent to the realism that flows through the narrative.

Conclusion

The study finds that the entirety of the novel *A Fine Balance* is populated by isolated pockets of silence. There is silence used by characters to evoke certain emotions, specifically woven in a narrative that is aware of the strength its silence can wield. The author has also given the garb of silence to his characters to depict the realism spread within the novels. The quietness in which characters isolate themselves from the surrounding characters in a particular context allows for the reader to have a deeper understanding of the character by building on his or her layers of identity. The study also understands that the silence used to portray the fall of the Parsi community is captured through the character, rather than the author revealing it in a didactic manner. Silence can hence be understood a language that communicates more than the surface level intrigue brought in by its sporadic use. The layers it builds for the readers to explore gives the novel its very identity. The protagonist Maneck is overcome by sadness, confusion and surprise when he is confronted by Om and Ishwar after their forced castration.

Instead of dictating these emotions to the reader, Mistry decides that Maneck must be silent. The silence itself speaks and communicates to the reader the emotions the character goes through, no dialogue or description is necessary for understanding these emotions. When Ishwar looks up and says to Maneck “O babu, ekpaisa?” (Mistry 461) Maneck has a sequence of thoughts go through his head, only for Maneck to remain silent as Om and Ishwar pass him. It can thus be said with certainty that Rohinton Mistry uses silence as a language to fill the gaps between dialogues, where the inner disorder of a character or an entire community can be understood by the reader and hence proves why silence is the loudest language in *A Fine Balance*.

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