

A Retrospective Look at Silencing ‘The Other’ As A Phenomenon in *Akale*

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Abstract

Silencing others is something that has been happening from the very beginning when people started to settle down and live like a society. Silencing started with man’s attempt to tame animals. Later it started spreading in course of time based on power. Man began to dominate and silence others giving rise to the Master/Slave, Haves/Have-nots dualities. Silencing is a phenomenon that is imposed upon the underprivileged/vulnerable group. The so called silenced group is termed as ‘The Others’. Silencing happens not just in any particular arena of life. It could be seen in our society, habits and even in literature. If we go through various theories of literature, we can see how people have been silenced. One of the unique features of silencing is that, those who are silenced never get a chance to voice or express their feelings. To add pain to the injury, people who are silenced sometimes don’t even realize that they are silenced. They think it’s the way of the world or it’s their destiny to be inferior. With pseudoscience like Eugenics that emerged in 18th century Europe, black and gypsy races were silenced and oppressed. With the advancing of colonialism backed up with capitalist interests, thousands around the world were oppressed and they were manipulated into believing that it was for their own good that they were ruled by a foreign identity. Though religion and science claim to be impartial and objective, these discourses are bound to be influenced by the hegemonic power factors. But this claim of infallibility makes it powerful and thus, it would become sinister to question them. In Hammurabi’s code of law, which is supposed to be one of the oldest scriptures available, we can see that slaves were used in Mesopotamian civilization. This proves that, power relations and silencing might have a history since the inception of civilization. Many factors including physical force, political strength, capitalism and religious force have played the role of lynchpin while silencing ‘The Other’. But ‘silence’ is essential for power to be executed. No government can exist unless there is a silent consent or the verbal consent of the people, says Rousseau. The paper is an attempt to closely evaluate, analyse evidences of silencing based on the 2004 Malayalam movie *Akale* directed by Shyamaprasad, inspired by the American classic play *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams.

KEYWORDS: Silencing, the Other, Silenced Youth, Silenced Motherhood, Silencing the Feeble

INTRODUCTION

*“I never knew until then that snow made everything quiet,
Somehow silencing, all the world’s noise.”*

Karen Thomas Walker

Silencing others is something that has been happening from the very beginning when people started to settle down and live like a society. Silencing started with man's attempt to tame animals. Later it started spreading in course of time based on power. Man began to dominate and silence others giving rise to the *Master/Slave, Haves/Have-nots* dualities. Silencing is a phenomenon that is imposed upon the underprivileged/vulnerable group. The so called silenced group is termed as *The Others*. Silencing happens not just in any particular arena of life. It could be seen in our society, habits and even in literature. If we go through various theories of literature, we can see how people have been silenced. One of the unique features of silencing is that, those who are silenced never get a chance to voice or express their feelings. To add pain to the injury, people who are silenced sometimes don't even realize that they are silenced. They think it's the way of the world or it's their destiny to be inferior. With pseudoscience like Eugenics that emerged in 18th century Europe, black and gypsy races were silenced and oppressed. With the advancing of colonialism backed up with capitalist interests, thousands around the world were oppressed and they were manipulated into believing that it was for their own good that they were ruled by a foreign identity. Physical force is a means through which one can dominate others as well as to perpetuate the status quo by threatening them. The other means to silence could involve creating certain ideologies and gradually legitimizing it so that everyone is forced to follow these ideologies. Silencing thus turns out to be the foundation of power structures in the world. It is hegemonic since it positions the other as inferior by suppression. Silencing is sometimes forcibly imposed through physical or psychological punishments, and gradually manipulated so as to make people (the subjugated) believe that it is right to be silenced. It is an unpleasant reality that the subjugator is considered superior and never pays heed to the voice of the subjugated.

Silencing gives off in feminism when patriarchy holds authority over females and silencing them by giving a mumpsimus reason that they are inferior to them. The concept of feminism itself was an offshoot against the silencing and subjugation of women. They were always considered secondary and were denied rights. There are many ways in which this silencing occurs. One such way is silencing by the denial of education. In earlier years in American history, women were discouraged from pursuing higher education because it was considered unnatural for a woman to be educated. Women who were educated were considered 'unsexed'. In colonial America girls were taught to read and write, but could only obtain higher education if there was a room left in the schools after boys. *A Vindication of the Right of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy, which responded to those educational and political theorists of the 18th century who did not believe that women should have education. "Everyone who has have written about female education and manners, from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, has helped to make women •more artificial, weaker characters than they would otherwise have been; and consequently •more useless members of society." (Wollstone Craft, 14)

Language is another major means of silencing and domination. Helene Cixous was a part of the French feminist movement which had significantly grown since 1968

when the frustration and anger at the exclusion of women from the political institution became apparent. At that time, women had also been excluded from the public discourse, in general. Feminists were convinced that language reflects this kind of exclusion and that their presence in literature would change existing power relations. Their aim was to be heard as women within a female discourse rather than women as a subject of male discourse. As a result, the idea of feminine-defined writing practice emerged. This way of writing soon became the starting point for a female consciousness as well as a means of subverting the system of patriarchy in the society. Cixous put this goal quite nicely saying that "...if women are to discover and to express who they are, to bring into surface what masculine history has repressed in them." (Janik 57) It's this repression through which they are silenced. "Like Cixous, Irigaray emphasizes the need for women to challenge the 'phallogocentrism' of the symbolic order by producing a 'women-centered' language, and asserts the creative and emancipator potential of a language which express female sexuality." (Routledge181). Language is always male centered and women are silenced by the denial of a language to speak and express.

NIEL: REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SILENCED YOUTH

All the characters in this movie live in their own dream world and are afraid to face reality. The fragile & sensitive rose spends her time with fragile glass toys, Neil lives in the dream world of movies and writing stories. Margaret the mother lives in a dream world where her daughter is not different from any other and that her daughter will soon find a suitable boy. The movie is about an Anglo Indian family living in Northern Kerala. *Neil* (Prithviraj Sukumaran) is a disturbed youth working as a clerk in a factory for low wages. His intention is to become a writer. He lives with his mother *Margaret* (Sheela) and his sister *Rose* (Geethu Mohandas). His father was a Portuguese sailor who left the family when the children were so young. One of the important things that we can notice in this movie is that the family showed in the movie is Anglo Indian, a minority section in India. Neil is one of the most silenced characters in the movie. He often escapes to the fantasies of a local cinema house to escape the constant grumblings of his mother who goads him to find a match for Rose. The time line from the original economic depression in the US has been captured with as much as authenticity as possible within Indian setting, especially using Anglo Indian characters to suit the original theme. "When we were at Goa, we had a lot of servants. Gone, everything is gone. What a life it was! "I didn't marry a banker or an officer but at last I married a sailor." (6:23-6:56)

The film begins with Neil, a middle- aged writer, struggling with the story of his life, which he has promised to give to a publisher. As he starts writing he is taken away to his past, occupied by his cranky mother Margaret and sister, Rose. In the very beginning of the movie we can see Neil is narrating a movie's story to his wife Kamala even in that story we can see a section of people living in their own world, ignorant about the outside world. They stay silent in their own air conditioned compartments ignorant of the outside world. They are the representatives of the capitalist world who is ignoring the poor working class. Even while narrating the story Neil is silenced by his wife's apathy and lack of interest to it. This is what the writers are facing now; the intellectuals and thinkers are silenced in the scientifically growing, busy world. As Neil puts it, "Within them there

are a few people who know about the world above them, but they...” (1:23-1:29). This sentence remains incomplete when he looks to his wife Kamala’s face and sees the lack of interest on her face he automatically becomes silenced. We can see another major aspect here that is the silencing of the history by the writers. We can see this concept of silencing in the book *Silencing the Past : Power and the Production of history* by Michel Rolph Trouillot, in which the author discuss, history may be written by winners, but it is also written by those in power. Often they are one and the same. So it is those in power who is to say what “history” becomes and what does not. What is recorded as history and what is forgotten? What events are ignored or left silent. We need to consider that some things have been “silenced” or simply left out of the narratives we read. We can see the shades of silencing of the natives by the colonizers even after colonization in this movie i.e., silencing the in post colonial discourse. The Family uses both English and Malayalam for communication. Moreover in this scene we can see the mother instructs her son not use his fingers and to follow table manners, which is a complete western practice. Unconsciously the colonial effect silences the native instincts.

Neil leaves without completing his food. Accusing on his mamma’s instructions that she won’t let him enjoy and have a bit of food. Margaret like an orthodox, believe that classics are dirty books and she will not let his son to read those. She tries to impose that old ideology on her son, she throws his books out. It shows the conservative mentality of society towards literature. Neil is not at all happy with his job as a clerk in the ware house. His dreams and aspirations are silenced. He has an intense desire to be a writer, but due to his financial struggle he is compelled to work there. Here Neil is silenced due to the lack of economic stability. So one of the major way in which Neil is silenced is through lack of economy. Due to economic burden of his family and the conservative mind of the society in which he lives he is silenced. Though he is a youth who is supposed to be the back bone of his family and hope for future, he could never fulfill that. Even Neil’s sadness and sufferings are silenced and deeply buried in his heart. “Mamma you have told right, you have things in your mind that can’t be disclosed, like that in my mind I also have things which I can’t disclose”. (33:16-33:23). His desires and his true self is silenced by the trials and tribulations of his life. Society, its ideologies and his lack of financial stability is the reason for all these.

SILENCED MOTHERHOOD (Margaret)

The very first scene when we see the mother figure she is in dim light, under a mosquito net inside her house, sleeping silently inside the four walls of the house. This is the position of a woman in a traditional society. This mother an Anglo Indian, who almost always in a wistful mode, harking back to her youth, when her beauty and charm had according to her own version, brought her a line of most eligible suitors. She believes that women are just like an object to attract man’s attention, thus silences all other potentials and worth of woman’s life.

“When your mother was seventeen, you know how many young men came to see me. Women of that time knew, how to dress how to behave, how to talk and all. My mummy taught me all these and she was so strict that’s why I was the most well groomed girl around. You know when I was in Bombay I got seventeen

proposals, of bank officers, railway men, fishing businessmen so many of them, but I last accepted your papa.” (11:32- 12: 13)

Margaret settled for a sailor who had lot of charm, but who had eventually become an alcoholic and eventually abandoned her to take care of her two children all alone. She is constantly silenced by her son’s scolding. We can also say that the mother is silenced by physical force; the powerful masculine gender is silencing her using energy and sound. Neil is raising his voice and throws the type writer to the floor and he makes mother shut her mouth. Furthermore, he also threatens her saying that he is going to leave home like his father. All motherly anxiousness and the expression of her care to her children and her voice is silenced through Neil’s typical masculine out roar. We can see when she scolds her son for reading modern classics in her house; her son Neil silences her by asking about who is earning. Man who is termed the *breadwinner* of the family silences women by claiming they live under his mercy of financial freedom and threatens her. “One day I destroy this house with a bomb then mamma and mamma’s Goa stories everything will burn into ashes... You chattering old witch” (22:28-22:36)

“I am living only for my children. And I am now an ugly old witch for you!” (30:02 -30:08). Like a typical mother her life is for her children, and she is living for their sake, it’s evident from her words to Neil. A mother’s world is always shrunken in to her children, and this is what the society demands too. Her husband and her son abandon’s her, leaving the responsibility on her shoulders and they are dwelling is their dreams and chasing their hearts desire. This arises from the stereotypical attitude of the society that it is only women, the mother who is doomed to look after the children. As Judy Brady says in her essay ‘*Why I Want a Wife*’ “I want a wife to take care of my children. I want a wife to keep track of the children’s doctors and dentists appointments... I want a wife to make sure my children eat properly and are kept clean. I want a wife who will wash the children’s properly and are kept clean.”(Brady 57)

We can see Margaret working on embroidery and handicraft, as we see in the work *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens* where the creativity of woman is silenced and it linger only inside the walls of their house. She is artist who is left back with only minimal materials which she could afford and her only position in the society is to use those materials as per societal norms. The artist and the creative genius inside Margaret is thus silenced. Moreover she is like a widow, her husband left her for no reason, forgetting his responsibilities. Thus Margaret is an extrovert gregarious mother who hides her anxiety of a woman deserted by her husband, a sensitive mildly handicapped daughter Rose, and a son Neil who is in a world of his own. Margaret is silenced as a women as an Anglo Indian a minority and as a person who lacks economic stability. Her life and her dreams are always chained in the four walls of her house. Her whole world is her children and their bright future. She is a wife, who is left alone by her husband, a mother, who is ignored by her son and an artist who is denied a space to explore her talents.

SILENCING OF THE HANDICAPPED (ROSE)

Silencing of an individual becomes complete when that person is made both ideologically and physically inferior in the society. Rose is such a character. Geethu Mohandas playing the role of Rose brings out the rare and delicate persona of the

character. The Cinematography gives the movie its special feel and nuances it well with memory. The faded blue of the paneled windows fluttering in the foreboding thunderous an image that would linger in our mind. Rose's life is buried in that home with her glass animals. In the movie Rose is called as Blue rose. Blue is not the expected colour for a rose flower, similarly Rose is also an exception in this world and because of that she is silenced.

Rose is first introduced in the movie through the words of Kamala. The very first sentence that we hear about Rose in the movie elicits her position as an inferior one. Kamala: "Go ahead; at least she deserves your time." (04:50 – 04:53) It is very evident that when Rose was alive she was ignored and was not given due attention or consideration by Neil and the only reason is that she was a woman and she was handicapped both physically and mentally which made her unfit to live in this world. Rose is a fragile and sensitive woman with an inferiority complex who hides her thoughts amongst her glass figures. Freddy, Neil's friend who was also her schoolmate, his encounter with Rose, elicits the sufferings that remain hidden in the heart of such quite people. When Freddie, the thoughtful and caring man's engagement with Betty is disclosed, Rose's dreams are shattered just like her broken glass unicorn. Rose slowly retreats into the sanctuary to disappear altogether from this uncaring world. In the beginning of the movie we can see Neil as a writer who is going to write about his sister. There we can see a chance to silence the true story regarding Rose in his work, because he as a writer bores in mind only his readers and not characters or reality. He tries to create a perfect world- a fantasized one rather than portraying the world with true colours of life. There by representing Rose's story in an entirely different way we could sense a deliberate attempt by Neil to silence the real life of Rose. The *Silencing of History* by those who write it is what we witness here. In his book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel Rolph Trouillot, clearly states the fact that, "History may be written by winners, but it is also written by those in power. Often they are one and the same. So it is those in power who is to say what become 'history' and what does not. What is recorded as history and what is to be forgotten, what events are to be ignored or left silent." (Trouillot, 1987)

Rose was a Shy and withdrawn girl, suffering from an inferiority complex because of slight deformity in her leg, She is fascinated by glass figures. She had withdrawn into her shell due to her inferiority complex, which is the result of the world's concept of considering the handicapped people as someone inferior. And especially when Rose being a girl, is double marginalized and silenced. Margaret: "I send her to learn typing but no use. How things will be, if she is full of fear and shyness. Doesn't have any company with girls of her age, won't go for a dance or a community service" (34:42-34:55). In the movie it is quite evident that Rose doesn't have anything of her own, even an opinion or a wish. She is always silenced. When Margaret asked Rose to make a wish in front of the moon, she asks her mom to suggest a wish. She doesn't even have a wish for herself! But in Neil's case we can see he made his own wish and didn't even disclose it to his mom.

Her mother's wishes are imposed on her, she doesn't like to learn typing but her mother silences her. Her interest was in reading, visiting museums, churches and

cemeteries etc... But Margaret wants her to learn typing and impose it on her, silencing her dreams and likes. Her silencing becomes complete when she falls unconscious in the exam hall. Rose has no space among the world of living so she finds comfort with the dead, by wandering in cemeteries, museums and glass animals etc. Rose seemed like an alien creature to the society, due to her odd behavior and appearance. Neil mentions this openly to Margaret, though he knows that it will hurt her. They will love her as she is because she is part of their family. But for the society she will always remain as something strange. Rose is forced to satisfy the *Male Gaze*. Rose was compelled by her mother to use powder puff in her dress, as pseudo bosom, but it irritates Rose. She was reduced to the level of an object to attract men and to please male gaze. Women are objectified and devalued here. As Laura Mulvey has stated in one of her striking articles,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasm on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey, 10)

CONCLUSION

Silencing is a phenomenon that is imposed upon. The existence of the structures in this world is due to silencing. Consciously or unconsciously we are also a victim of this phenomenon in many ways. It is present in all systems; it can be based on power relation or on ideologies. Here one is deliberately considered as inferior. The paper is an attempt to closely evaluate, analyse evidences of silencing based on the 2004 Malayalam movie *Akale* directed by Shyamaprasad, inspired by the American classic play *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams.. There are three major characters in the movie and are analysed in the light of being silenced. All the three characters are silenced in one way or the other.

Rose is the most silenced character. The society's immature ideology that the handicapped ones are always inferior and the must remain as an inferior in the world, is deeply inscribed in Rose's mind and this silences her life forever. Rose faced this discrimination from her very school days and this ultimately made her shrink into her shell. Margaret is caught in the trap of a wedlock, which doomed her to look after her children, all alone. Her husband has left her, seeking for his own pleasures of life. Margaret too as a woman and wife abandoned by her husband is double silenced. We can see Margaret always chattering about her fine old days but through this she unconsciously tries to silence her miseries to which she is doomed to, in the present state of her life. Neil being the bread winner of the family silences his mother. Neil is the narrator and the protagonist of the story. He is economically weak. He has never been able to rise up to the level that the society accepts, and that is the major reason for his silence. More over his wishes and dreams are also silenced by the concepts of society. He is deeply aspired to be a writer but was doomed to work in the stinking, suffocating warehouse, where the writer inside him got buried. People who try to swim against the current are always isolated and alienated. And this is what happens in Neil's life too. In his house and at his work he remains as an odd, a nuisance for others. The movie deals

with the world of Anglo Indians, a silenced minority. The piano clinking in the background, the sepia tinted photographs, and echoes of great parties in the past and the porcelain dinner layouts elicits their silenced culture. Anglo Indians are usually very rich but in contrast, this family is struggling due to their poor economic condition. And this is the reason why they are silenced and isolated. Silencing happens everywhere. The notion of inferiority is injected in one's mind to silence that person. It is essential for the existences of systems in the society. The head always silences the body. This silencing forms the base of all systems. In the movie Akale all three characters are silenced one way or other. And it is through making them feel inferior. The same silencing happens around as in many ways.

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