

Reading the Silence of Bengi in Arupa Patangia's 'Aai'

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Abstract

Arupa Patangia's *Aai*, tells the story of Pomeela Bengi, a dim witted imbecile who has been a victim of the insurgency and has been rendered invisible after the death of her only surviving son Mohan. But, her silence acted as a voice of resistance because through it she could powerfully express how the state and its mechanisms function and makes the ordinary people like Pomeela victims, and how they are searching for an alternative.

The concept of silence with regards to women has been a central concern to feminist writers. In fact, the act of articulating the silence of silence leads us to an unknown journey of untold stories/ histories, absent narratives and hidden memories related to the life of a woman..

Kartin Meise, author of the essay, *"On Talking About Silence in Conversation and Literature"*, states –

"Every silence is full of information. The information in silence is not auditory and thereby easily ignored. But if we shift modalities...we discover that silence is anything but nothing. Silence speaks [45]".

Silence speaks the unspeakable. It is as productive as speech or writing because it provides space for alternative readings /meanings of a text. Through silence, one may hear and express powerful thoughts, feeling and experiences through a variety of non – verbalized forms.

Insurgency, counter insurgency and militarization have become a way of life in the north-east region of India . Sanjib Baruah's states how the deficits of democracy, development and peace has led to a politically unstable situation in north-east India which has led to its accelerated growth and development. Arupa Patangia , one of the most prominent writers of Assam tries to explore in her short stories the helplessness of common people of Assam while fighting against socio -political issues like human rights violation, fake encounter, custodial death and so on. Her characters are drawn from the ordinary people who are victims of socio economic political milieu and are searching for an alternative. She effectively brings out the helplessness and the anguish of these innocent people who always have to pay the price.

In her short story , *Aai* , Arupa Patangia effectively narrates the story of Pomeela Bengi, the dim witted imbecile and brings out the helplessness and suffering of a mother who lost her husband in a bomb blast , her two sons who picked up guns and disappeared in the forest never to return and finally the death of her only surviving son Mohan who got killed in a fake encounter. The suppressed pain and anguish of remembering the loss of her husband and her sons took a toll to her emotional state and unable to cope up with the circumstances Pomeela Bengi, eventually lost her sanity. Without words, she was able to see and relate to her situation and perhaps found solace and comfort of her despair and grief in her newly found silence as an imbecile.

The story *Aai* , begins with Pomeela who would be glued on to a task till someone stops her. However, Pomeela was never like this always. During her youth, her mere presence would

charm every single person. Her thick black hair which cascaded down below her waist would charm every person right from the owner of the thread shop to the wool merchant. After her marriage, Pomeela gave birth to three robust sons. But destiny had different plans for her. Soon she loses her mental balance, after the death of her husband and her two sons. Unable to cope up with the overwhelming loss and depression, Pomeela somehow buried and hid those traumatic episodes from her conscious mind and it eventually led to the loss of her sanity. This is how Pomeela became '*Pomeela Bengi*'.

Mohan, her youngest son was her only surviving hope, her world now. In the story, we see Pomeela is always busy cooking for her son - '*she has been doing this for the past several years*'(67) She would greet him every morning with her baby smile and her entire day is spent on taking care of her son. In fact, after the death of her husband and her two sons, Pomeela's life now revolves only around Mohan. Her day begins and ends with cooking food for Mohan and with every passing day it seemed that the intensity of her sadness has lessened and she is trying to cope up and recover from her pain through Mohan, who is her only hope of survival. On the other hand, every time Mohan saw his mother's innocent smile, his heart ached because it reminded him of her violent past - its pain, sufferings and darkness - '*He could not bear to look at his mother for long*'(69). However, one morning when Mohan was fencing up his home, he was ordered by the police to run. The stunned Mohan, ignorant of anything obeyed the orders and started running. As he was running, he was shot by the police from behind. Unaware, the innocent and naïve Mohan becomes the victim of a fake encounter and dies. Pomeela, who was then, heading towards the town with a group of women, was totally ignorant of the entire event. When Manobai learnt about Mohan's death, she stopped Pomeela from going home because she knew that the news of her son's death would shatter her completely. The womenfolk did not

inform her, but Pomeela insisted on going, as her son would be waiting for her. Seeing her face flushed with anger, Soombari placed a tray of rice before her and asked her to sort the rice from the paddy in order to distract her mind. Little did she know, that ,her only surviving son is dead. Finally , when she was taken to the police station the next day, to identify the dead body of her son, Pomeela could not bear it and behaves insanely –

“Bengi just looked at him (Police officer) like a dazed deer....Everything seemed to be trembling...Bengi lifted her face, somebody has just thrown a rock into her rippling, dusky pond .The dark waters kept rising and falling for sometime..”(78)

(The Musk and Other Stories)

The body of her dead son soon triggers those tragic, violent and powerful memories of her husband and her two son’s death, the episodes which she had long buried somewhere deep down in her mind. She doesn’t shed a single tear rather she simply stares at the face of the police officer. She could not accept the reality of Mohan’s death and soon she becomes numb, silent and disconnected from her feelings. Flashes of her son Mohan, came to her mind as she sat in the police station:

“Her son’s voice was rising and lowering in her muddled senses. He was bringing her back from the river bank...holding on to her hands...She serves rice to him...the clay pot is alight with fire...she is cooking for her son”.(78)

(The Musk and Other Stories)

She hardly got the time to heal and mourn the losses she had experienced in her life that she is faced with a new crisis. She tries to mitigate her pain and sadness through her silence .For Bengi the act of remembering these tragic episodes is intense, powerful and uncontrollable. Suddenly she rises and goes outside the police station saying –*He (Mohan) will have his*

mea(81). Soon, Bengi is seen engaging on her daily ritual of cooking food for Mohan and all the while she kept repeating:

“He will have his meal.... A blood-soaked sack carried around by a group of men floated up like a dead frog in her foggy senses...gunshots were ringing in her ears...her son was drowning in huge puddles of blood; she could no longer see him..”(81,82)

(The Musk and Other Stories)

Thus, we can say that Bengi’s silence was a locus of resistance, a voice, an anguish in opposition to the dominant discourses of oppression, violence and murder. The refusal to say, acts as a form of agency that works as a gap between what goes without saying and what cannot be said. If we pay attention to the performances of silence as in the case of Bengi we will see that her silence carry traces of voices- voices of her pain, her sufferings and that affect us precisely because they exceed the limits of the spoken word. In fact, her silence drives the main theme of the story. The strategic utilization of silence employed by Arupa Patangia through her character Bengi, effectively portrays how women enact resistance against the normative notions of violence, political tensions, by breaking away from the hegemonic languages of patriarchy and sanity. As Helene Cixous says :

“Women must articulate and express through their bodies. They must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes..”(122)

Women must write in a language that will disrupt all rules, codes, rhetoric, classes and must go beyond the dominant patriarchal discourse to express their experiences. Bengi’s insanity, her actions especially at the end of the story, when she starts crawling like a baby, wriggling and rubbing her body and finally breaking down into spasmodic and heartbreaking

sobs becomes a vehicle of self revelation of her traumatic experiences and how she became a victim of the socio political milieu. Preeti Gill in the Introduction of her book *'Peripheral Centre, The Voices from India's Northeast'*, writes :

"The women of course are more vulnerable than men at such timesthe most obvious impact is physical or sexual violence, the psychological scarring as a result of prolonged exposure to brutality and the restrictions placed on women in a patriarchal society .The effects of violent acts like rape, sexual abuse and physical assault and abuse has led to deep psychological and emotional trauma and a very high incidence of what is known as post traumatic disorder."

Hence we can say Bengi's dim wittedness can be a sign of her post traumatic disorder. Beng the wife and mother of two missing sons , a murdered husband and son who got killed in a fake encounter, Bengi's silence reveals the horrific effects of the insurgency and violence on a woman who is both a wife and a a mother. Somewhere in the space between past and present, silence has consumed Pomeela Bengi and she sees visions of all her traumatic experiences in the end, which highlights how trapped she is, in those memories which made her lost sense of who she is. Yet she survived all the personal tragedies. However after the death of her son Mohan, she loses all sense of who she really is and feels invisible.

In the story Bengi's silence acted as a metaphor, a powerful medium which effectively showed how she became a victim. Her silence is powerful, forceful and an engaging one; one that does not require speech for, it effectively expresses and reveals Bengi's inner turmoil, her torment and how she and her family becomes mere sacrificial offerings in the face of the police atrocities and of the larger social and political issues affecting the society. Bengi's silence reveals, how the lives of the ordinary, intersects, with the repressive machinery of the state and

how they eventually become victims in the messy complexities of violence, insurgency, secret killings and fake encounter. The silence of Bengi is the silence of suppressed trauma, the unsaid experiences of the terror of a mother who is trying to cope up with, for she is left with no choice but to survive. Her silence becomes powerful because it makes us rethink and question about the patterns and strategies of the society and how innocent mothers like Pomeela are rendered invisible and gradually disappear in this chaos.

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