

**DR PRIYANKA SINGH**  
**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH**  
**JMIT, RADAUR, HARYANA, INDIA**

**SILENCE AS STRENGTH: EXAMINING SUSAN'S SILENCE IN  
THOMAS HARDY'S  
*THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE***

**Abstract**

There are varied means by which people communicate and silence is one such way. While enforced silence has as its objective disempowerment and marginalising, deliberate silence works in opposition to one that is imposed. It can be considered as a means of resisting or refusing hegemonic power. Considering this function of silence, an attempt is made in this paper to analyse how silence has been deliberate by Susan in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Widely presented as a stereotypical character, Susan is considered as timid, passive and unassuming who takes the humiliation of being sold as a feat of fate. Such an interpretation is partial as her introspection during the silence period is not paid attention to. The paper looks at Susan's silence afresh thereby presenting Susan as a woman who has a desire for better future and exhibits her ability to take decisions.

Keywords: Silence, communication, power, patriarchy, feminism.

The world in its present state is sick! If I were a doctor and was asked for advice,  
I would answer: 'Be silent.' (Kierkegaard)

The Scandinavian thinker's statement, without a second interpretation, is indicative of the disaster of multiplicity of words, power of silence and its healing capacities. Often seen as an antithesis of speech, silence is considered as a much necessitated refrain. It allows one section that is empowered with speech to assume control over the other. In context of the human beings inhabiting the world and in the Darwinian world order of survival of the fittest, men have assumed control over women by historically muting them. The muting has vivid connotations that embraces within its periphery unheard articulations, buried desires, powerlessness, solitude, denial of equal space and rights and denial of identity. These mutings have been of special interest to the feminist thinkers who have endeavoured for equal status

and standing of women in a world dominated by patriarchy. However, the expressions that are often interpreted as silence need to be heard, paid attention to and even read. This would allow multiplicity of meanings/interpretations and understandings of individuals involved in the process of silent communication.

It would be interesting to comprehend silence as a medium to reject male hegemony, privilege and dominance. To this end it would be my endeavour to locate silence in opposition to the common belief of considering silence as disempowering, marginalising and subjectivity and voice as an agency to reverse the implication of silencing. For the purpose I propose to limit myself to the opening episode of Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Inherently vivid in nature, silence is "probably the most ambiguous of all linguistic forms" (Jaworski 24). For psychoanalysts silence communicates safety, understanding and containment as well as distance, disinterest and disengagement. The psychotherapist takes the patient's silence more as a challenge owing to the multiplicity in the reason of patient's silence. "It may evidence agreement, disagreement, pleasure, displeasure, fear, anger or tranquillity. The silence could be a sign of contentment, mutual understanding, and compassion. Or it might indicate emptiness and complete lack of affect. Human silence can radiate warmth or cast a chill. At one moment it may be laudatory and accepting; in the next it can be cutting and contemptuous. Silence may express poise, smugness, snobbishness, taciturnity, or humility. Silence may mean yes or no. Silence may be giving or receiving, object directed or narcissistic. Silence may be the sign of defeat or the mark of mastery (Zeligs 8). For feminist thinker silence means subordination, disempowerment and marginalising. Janis Stout in his *Strategies of Reticence* (1990) proposes that indirect conditioning of relegating women is often done by undervaluing their voices in decision-making and praising soft-spokenness (vii-viii). This silence is virtually regarded as the best ornament of women that establishes a culture of passivity and conformity. Contrastingly, silence is also seen as having some significance: "Like the zero in mathematics, it is an absence with a function" (Samarin 115). Rowe has appropriately interpreted silence as "a space of fluidity, non-linearity, and a sacred internal space that provides a refuge—especially for non-dominant people" (2). The psycholinguistic approach reflects participant's silence as indicating the participant engaging in decision making process.

Literature has undoubtedly been a medium that has voiced silence despite the pressure of the contemporary society to conform to the conventions and criticising deviations. Thomas Hardy's works have been an exception to the conventions and expectations of the Victorian

society more particularly because of his feminist inclinations. If one disagrees, it is more because there have been voids in interpreting his works. Critics expound that Hardy's feminist stance has been irregular. Singh observes that there are critics who find Hardy's novels beleaguered with "female stereotypes and misogynist generalisations" (25). But there is no doubt that Hardy becomes increasingly uneasy with the duality of the society and is at war against the same in his works as *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Amidst the shifting between strong feminist cause and projection of conventional patriarchal sentiment is placed Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1885) predominantly because it has at its centrality Michael Henchard who commands undivided attention of the reader as a protagonist. The subtitle, *A Story of a Man of Character*, undoubtedly, indulges a curious reader to progress effortlessly through the course of this one man's rise and fall that trim down other characters as mere fill ups in the entire setting. Despite the sympathy and attention Henchard receives there is a need to reassess women characters in the novel, proposes Singh (28). With this background the reader is introduced to Susan who, to the observant critics, is taken as an instrument "for the probing of the significance of patriarchal power of the male" (Boumelha 3). Michael Henchard, the man she accompanies displays only his indifference towards her and the child she is carrying. His pretention of reading and his "unbroken taciturnity" indicates that "the women enjoyed no society whatever from his presence" (5).

As they move down to Weydon-Priors fair and settle in the furmity booth, Henchard, manages to have rum served in his furmity bowl and shortly after turns quarrelsome hence offering his wife for sale. One is at once instinctively drawn towards the character of Susan and her action-inaction in the entire episode of wife sale. The patriarchal mind set and the plight of women is witnessed:

"I take the money; the sailor takes you. That's plain enough. It has been done elsewhere—and why not here?" (12)

The men in the furmity booth encourage Henchard by confirming that there are men who have been selling their wives. Another man goes to the extent of measuring Susan's worth: "I know true cultivation, and can declare she's got it—in the bone, mind you, I say—as much as any female in the fair. . ." (10). It is easy for men to speak out their opinion and when their view is sanctioned by those forming the society, a strong public opinion is formulated. Sensing the public mood, Henchard learns that his actions are sanctioned and fails to check his conduct and moves ahead to materialise the sale. Such a description confirms that observation that Hardy's novel presents ordinary men and women whose minds are not easy to unhinge. They

accept life in accordance with conventions be it with cheer or sadness and without much of judgement. But one cannot also deny that in the same milieu we have men and women who carry distinct characteristics that force one to question the rudiments of the world one inhabits and the inviolability of conventions that they are expected to conscientiously follow and maintain

What prevails amidst this gloomy mood is silence and its treatment that empowers Susan against the male voice and action. Susan, throughout the novel, is seen as passive and docile woman who undeniably accepts her fate. Singh recounts this when she writes: “Susan accepts being sold, auctioned off. She moves out silently with her new master” (29). Susan’s silence is so much assumed that when she speaks and even warns Henchard against his doings, the arrogant drunk husband chooses to unhear. Her words are not taken notice of and neither her silence. Adrienne Rich writes that silence “has a presence” and should not “confuse it/ with any kind of absence” (17). Silence is, thus given a form of power, some aim that it shall endeavour to achieve. Susan’s prevailing silence is indicative of introspection that is going within her and the decision that she ought to take in consequence of actual materialisation of sale:

“Mike.” She said, “I’ve lived with thee a couple of years, and had nothing but temper! Now I’m no more to ‘ee; I’ll try my luck elsewhere. ‘Twill ne better forme and Elizabeth-Jane, both. So good-bye!” (12)

It is perceived that “Susan resigns herself to fate” and “makes only timid and mild protests and threats” (Singh 29) but it should be understood that Susan’s thoughts and decision are for herself only. Her silence, therefore should not be considered as her passivity but as carrying a meaning. It shapes the sequence of her action and speech.

In her silence it is the rejection of subservience and a search for self-importance. It is not fear binds Susan to Henchard but her dedication towards him as his wife. She gives Henchard various chances to mend his words and actions. When he fails to play a constructive role as a husband and in fits of heightened frustration offers his wife for sale she is silently making a decision of leaving Henchard. Her self-introspection is missed by critics who read Susan’s acceptance of sale as her “psychological death” (Singh 29). Similarly, Bouhmelha recognises “Michael Henchard, in selling his wife and daughter to the sailor Newson, repeats in a startlingly blatant form the definitive patriarchal act of exchange” (3) but falls short to recognise Susan’s rejection of Henchard and acceptance of Newson as a decisive and wilful action. She moves out of the furnity booth with Newson only after she is assured that she is

welcome as a woman as well as a mother. She is quick to recognise the humane quality in Newson and walks out of the booth holding his arm:

She paused for an instant, with a close glance at him [Newson]. . . Seizing the sailor's arm with her right hand, and mounting the little girl on her left, she went out of the tent..." (12)

This communication counters Singh's opinion that Susan's loyalty to Henchard or Newson is a passive surrender to socio-economic reality (31). Susan would not have moved while communication takes place between Susan and Newson in absence of words that assures the former of better treatment by the man, such a correlation is missing between Henchard and Susan when they walk down to Weydon-Priors:

What was really peculiar, however, in this couple's progress, and would have attracted the attention of any casual observer otherwise disposed to overlook them, was the perfect silence they preserved. (5)

In the company of indifferent man by her side, it is silence that promises Susan a space to breathe. It is freedom for her that liberates her from constant reaction to what is said and done.

Hardy's treatment of silence in the novel, particularly in the opening episode, is indicative of both loss as well as universal presence of communication. The silence is indicative of absence of communication between husband and wife. But in the "aforesaid absence of conversation" voices of nature could be heard. It is indicative of the fact that nature has always existed while it is assumed that it ceases to exist amidst the uproar of inhabitants of the world. Likewise the silence of human beings too exists and is in continuous process of communicating. It is but for Susan's silence and strength to walk away from Henchard that the latter could reflect upon his wrong doing, quit liquor as repentance and congregates the reputation the sub title indicates. It is her silent refusal of the social order that denies her respectful treatment that steers her go within before she could speak and act. Her silence is articulated through her actions of search of better life. In doing so she rejects hegemonic power and dominance.

## References

- Boumelha, Penny. *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982. Print.
- Hardy, Thomas. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Ed. Phillip Mallett. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.

- Jworsky, Adam. *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*. California:Sage, 1993. Print
- Rich, Adrienne. *Cartographies of Silence*. 1978. Web.
- Rowe, Aimme Carrillo and S. Malhotra. *Still the Silence: Feminist Reflections at the Edges of Sound*. Print
- Samarin, W. "The Language of Silence". *Practical Anthropology*. 12(1965):115-119. Print.
- Singh, Priyanka. "Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Casterbrdge*: A Feminist Study." Diss. Kurukshetra U, 2007. Print
- Stout, Janis. *Strategies of Reticence*. London: UP of Virginia, 1990. Print.
- Zeligs, M. A. "The psychology of silence - its role in transference, countertransference and the psychoanalytic process". *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 9(1961): 7-43.