

Exploring Silence as a Form of Expression in Perumal Murugan's *A Trial by Silence*

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Abstract

Silence is a language without boundaries, possessing the remarkable ability to effect change. Paradoxically, it can be more painful than words themselves. A person's silence has the potential to profoundly alter the course of another's life. Kali is a protagonist of the novel *A Trial by Silence* but he does not speak to anyone in the novel due to hatred towards his family. One incident changed the directory of a family and made a simple cheerful man to be silent and full of resentment. Emotions such as anger, guilt and shame are addressed in accordance with silence. The paper sheds light on the transformative potential of silence and the responsibility that comes with it.

Keywords: Silence, Anger, Guilt, Regret.

Perumal Murugan is a renowned author and poet born in Tamil Nadu on January 21, 1966. He is celebrated for his literary works that delve into the lives of rural Tamil Nadu residents and address various social and cultural issues. Among his notable works is *Madhorubhagan* (translated as *One Part Woman* in English), a novel that both received critical acclaim and stirred controversy. This novel explores the challenges faced by a rural couple who come under societal pressure due to their inability to have a child. The book ignited significant debates and even led to protests, but it also earned Perumal Murugan multiple literary awards and recognitions.

Perumal Murugan's writing is esteemed for its vivid depiction of rural life and its examination of intricate themes such as caste, identity, and tradition. His literary works have been translated into several languages, making them accessible to a wider readership, both in India and around the world. His *Trial by Silence* is one of the sequels of his *One Part Woman*.

Kali and Ponna, a deeply affectionate couple, have been married for 12 years but have not been blessed with children. Their inability to conceive becomes an increasingly heavy burden as they grow accustomed to the taunts of their village neighbours. They have exhausted all possible solutions, from vows and rituals to prayers, in their desperate pursuit of parenthood. In a final, desperate attempt, Ponna reluctantly agrees to a plan that excludes Kali's knowledge, as he had initially rejected the idea. She is convinced to participate in the last day of a local temple festival, where unions between strangers are permitted, and children born of such unions are deemed holy.

Upon discovering his wife's visit to the temple festival, Kali is consumed by anger, shame, and a sense of betrayal. His reactions include emotional outbursts and an ultimate suicide attempt by hanging himself from a portia tree. *One Part Woman* ends with this twist and *A Trial by Silence* begins with Seerayi, a mother, saving Kali in the nick of time. Shortly after, Ponna returns from her parental home, where she was meant to rest. She is understandably upset with her family for arranging the temple visit without Kali's knowledge, especially given Kali's devotion and the fact that he now rejects her. Ponna, though profoundly sad, begins the arduous process of rebuilding her shattered marriage to the best of her ability. Ponna and her mother-in-law, Seerayi, unite to run the family farm, given Kali's lack of interest in life.

The story evolves to encompass issues of childbirth and Kali's ongoing rejection and silence. Kali uses his unrelenting silence as a means of punishing Ponna, displaying a mix of contempt and an unforgiving attitude. Ponna becomes a victim of her circumstances, enduring the pain of her husband's complete emotional detachment. The entire narrative circles Ponna's suffering due to Kali's silence. This paper delves into the emotions surrounding Kali's silence.

Perumal Murugan's novels often delve into intricate human relationships, and *Trial by Silence* is no exception. At its core, the novel revolves around the challenges faced by the protagonists as they grapple with the decision of whether to maintain or break their relationship at various stages.

Trial by Silence explores themes of guilt and bereavement within the framework of family and marriage. Kali's character embodies a spectrum of emotions, including frustration, suppressed desires, anguish, loss, hatred, and fear. Notably, the primary link between Kali and Ponna in the story is their silence.

Ponna, deprived of her husband's care and affection during her pregnancy, discovers her own path to cope with the situation and find a way to live for the sake of her child. Kali's descent into complete silence is driven by a profound dilemma. Kali and Ponna initially have a traditional marriage, characterized by Kali's role as the dominant figure. They experience love and happiness in this arrangement. However, when traditional norms begin to unravel and Ponna is presented with choices that challenge the obedient wife role she had previously occupied, Kali's world starts to crumble.

The subjugation of women is a common issue in many households, where either the male members adhere to traditional gender roles or suffer from feelings of inferiority. In Kali's case, he appears to grapple with an inferiority complex as his family questions his manhood due to his inability to produce an heir and, in a desperate attempt, allows Ponna to become pregnant through someone else. This situation threatens Kali's position in the family, and he finds himself unable to process the complex emotions he is experiencing. As a result, Kali retreats into silence, making it his closest confidant and choosing to live his life in silence. As Edgar Allan Poe in his Sonnet "Silence" says,

There is a two-fold Silence- sea and shore-
Body and soul. One dwells in lonely places,
Newly with grass o'ergrown; some solemn graces,
Some human memories and tearful lore,
Render him terrorless: his name's "No More."
He is the corporate Silence: dread him not!
No power hath he of evil in himself;
But should some urgent fate (untimely lot!)
Bring thee to meet his shadow (nameless elf,
That haunteth the lone regions where hath trod
No foot of man,) commend thyself to God!

From this poem, one could understand the dual role of silence. Silence can be good or bad. Silence can be simple as well as harmful. Infact, silence can be evil at times. One should use the power of silence properly otherwise it could destroy people and it also has the power to benefit people if used cautiously. The power of silence cannot be debated with.

But Kali decided to use the power of Silence to hurt his own family. He seems to be unaware of the pain it could cause and he did not care for it. That is mainly because he is forced into silence by circumstances. Kali is a good son and a good husband with cheerful heart. In the patriarchal world, he believes that he should have control over his wife. He also feels guilt for not being a father as it pushes the family and Ponna to take this measure. He also feels shame that his wife slept with a stranger and he is going to be a father of a strange man's child. Guilt, shame and anger are the three major reasons that pushed Kali into Silence. Little did he know that Silence is powerful that a thousand words.

Anger, disgust, and contempt have constricting effects on perception and cognition and that is exactly happened in case of Kali. The admonitions of common sense that advise one to "bury anger" and not to "carry a grudge" are not without wisdom. Kali's anger can be seen in his statement, "All of you have gotten together and cheated me. You have cheated me, you whore" as he learns of Ponna's travel to the festival. It invokes a sense of shame in him. in shame his anger comes out.

Silvan Tomkins in his *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes of the world a veil of tears, yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man. While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul. It does not matter whether the

humiliated one has been shamed by derisive laughter, or whether he mocks himself. In either event he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity and worth (185).

Helen Lewis in *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* provides a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenology of shame. In shame, individuals experience themselves as the target of contempt and disdain. The person who is shamed often feels as though they are being mocked, diminished, and made to feel insignificant. This emotional state is often accompanied by a sense of helplessness, inadequacy, and even a feeling of being immobilized, where it becomes challenging to act or respond. Kali was feeling shame even before Ponna went to the festival. Being a landowner with no heir is hard on him. his mother Seerayi sings,

He used to wear a white veshti, he'd fold it up in style
He'd walk with a swagger on the streets
And people would salute, people would make way for him
Now he wears no white dhoti, doesn't care for style
There is no swagger in his walk, he walks on no street. (41)

Shame can also manifest as physical sensations, such as feelings of anger when the shame triggers distress and frustration. In these moments of shame, the affected adult may feel a regressive sense of childlike vulnerability, with all of their weaknesses laid bare for both themselves and others to see. There are multi-dimensional nature of shame, which encompasses emotional, cognitive, and physiological elements, and can profoundly affect an individual's self-perception and interactions with others. Unable to cope up with all the feelings of shame, feelings of contempt, he tells his mother, "All of you have conspired to dishonour me! Why do I need to live? How can I claim to be a man in this world ever again?" (18).

When an individual perceives that some aspect of themselves is lacking, insufficient, or does not meet societal or personal standards, it sets the stage for the experience of shame. This sense of inadequacy or ineptitude is a fundamental precursor to the emotional response of shame, which can be deeply distressing and self-deprecating.

Guilt, much like other emotions, is a complex and multifaceted feeling. It is linked to behaviors within the expansive realm of morality, ethics, and religion. Kali's guilt is triggered by an intricate interplay of personal values, societal norms, and cultural beliefs, making it a deeply individual and culturally influenced emotion.

Brenden Maher in his *Principles of Psychopathology* defines guilt in a fashion very similar to anger. It arises from the anticipation of losing love and facing similar forms of punishment as a consequence of one's actions. This type of guilt is rooted in the fear of negative repercussions for one's behaviour, particularly in the context of relationships and emotional connections. Kali's guilt comprises of one thing, that is his inability to produce an heir.

Kali, consumed by anger, guilt, and shame, began silently tearing his family apart. His overwhelming emotions blocked his ability to think clearly, isolating himself from everyone. During this challenging time, Uncle Nallayan, a wise family member, offered Kali much-needed advice and support to help him through this difficult period. He said,

Who are we to decide right and wrong? Something that seemed right to your father now seems wrong to you. And what seems right to you now will seem wrong to your son in the future. These are all big questions. You just do your thing and keep moving. (131)

The novel explores complex family dynamics, gender roles, and the emotional struggles of its characters, particularly Kali, as they grapple with societal and personal challenges. Through Kali's experiences, we come to understand that silence can be a potent form of punishment. Silence is a language without words, and it possesses the power to bring about significant change. In many cases, silence can be more hurtful than spoken words. The ability to wield the power of silence resides within everyone, and it should be used with caution. A person's silence can profoundly impact the life of another. This underscores the importance of being mindful of how we use this form of communication and considering its effects on those around us.

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