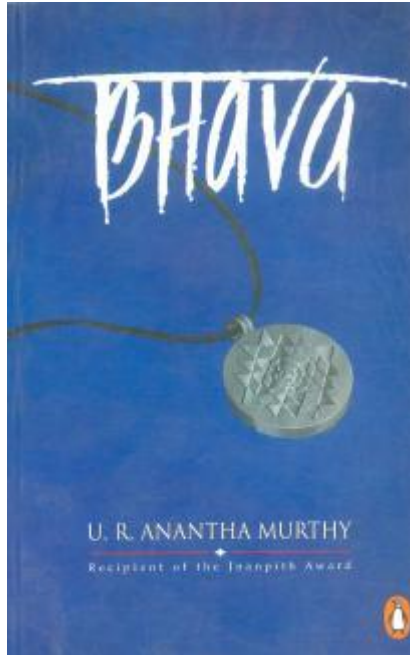


**Silence: Anything But Nothing -
A Reading of Ananthamurthy's *Bhava***

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Silence is a celebrated concept in philosophy and literature from time immemorial. In earlier days, it was associated with absence and mostly silence was given a negative connotation in culture and literature. Most of the writers especially women and postcolonial writers use 'absence' to indicate negativity, passiveness and death. Steven Pinker considers silence as a mode of communication; he gives the status of language to silence. He says that people hear language but not sounds. During 1990s, theoreticians like Jacques Lacan, Van Manen, Bilmes developed the metaphorical meaning of the silence as absence. According to Lacan silence is the absence of signifier; Manen adheres that, "speech rises out of silence and return to silence" (qtd. in Ephratt 1911) and Bilmes' saying is interesting: "where the rule is speak not speaking is communicative," and "conversational silence is the absence of talk (or of particular kinds of talk) where talk might relevantly occur" (qtd. in Ephratt 1911).

Connotations of silence are developed philosophically and theoretically, and in literature, it associates also with the negative aspects like, suppression, oppression, marginalisation, etc., and in the case of women's writing, double marginalisation is portrayed

through silence. In social and cultural norms silence of women represents their obedience and chastity.

U. R. Ananthamurthy, a post colonial writer in Indian literature, introduces powerful **women characters** in his works. He uses the concept silence in his novels to represent different perspectives – social, cultural, racial, and gender. He portrays round characters in the background of postcolonial Indian villages. Acculturation and assimilation bring a state of liminality and how the individual confronts it is the main thread of his works. His heroines, like Chandri from *Samskara*, Saroja from *Bhava* and Gouri from *Awasthe* are not vulnerable but they are powerful and consistent than heroes. Their silence could be anything; other characters interpret, describe and manipulate the heroines' silence in their own way but they are living as examples of real women.

Ananthamurthy gives ample space to readers to interpret them as equal as he does. This paper concentrates on one heroine's silence, Saroja from *Bhava*, and analyses its depth and possible phases of meanings. Postcolonial writers usually use the concept silence to represent suffering, oppression and marginalisation but Ananthamurthy, being a postcolonial writer, not only concentrates on these themes but gives or uses higher phase of silence, that is nothingness. Joy Nozomi Kogava, Japanese Canadian writer, uses silence as a metaphor for transcendence. In Kogava's work, *Obasan*, silence associates with a state which leads to real self. It is connected with Buddhism and its concept of nothingness.

The title of the paper, "Silence: Anything but Nothing - Reading of Ananthamurthy's *Bhava*," is an elaboration of **Deborah Tannen's** paper titled "**Silence: Anything but**" published in 1985 and it is a reverse reading of the general approach towards silence, that is, it is nothing. The paper approaches silence as a female cipher and tries to decipher it in an authentic manner and also makes use of Hubbard's referential role of silence, that is, if one does not understand others' silence, s/he will not understand others' words.

Silence of Saroja in *Bhava* represents not only the post colonial and female silences and silencing but also the state of calmness and the realm of transcendence. Whether female silence is merely a symbol of oppression and marginalisation or is it a cipher which needs

tedious effort to decipher, or a metaphor for woman and her quality as such – negative quality or positive –, or is it a state of transcendence is discussed in this paper.

Bhava

Ananthamurthy presents a group of characters who are in the *bhavavali* or *bhava* and in the process of “becoming” in his novel *Bhava* published in 1994. Mostly the characters in *Bhava* are round characters and they are a bit above the normal course of life and thoughts in their action and behaviour. He juxtaposes time in a very interesting way and it is one of the specialties of his writings and the story line goes through flash back technique. Apart from a few past incidents, the ambience of the whole novel is in calmness and acceptance. His heroines are powerful either in the beginning or towards the end, because he attributes strength of mind and power to women than men. The interesting factor is that they are not from noble backgrounds but from common and sometime below common social status; however, they are dignitaries than noble women because of their detached attachment with mundane world.

Saroja, second mistress of Viswanatha Shastri, comes into his house in her teenage. The failure of making fruit in Radha, first mistress of Shastri, leads him to Saroja. She does not open her mouth and face to Shastri at all and he comes to know that it is not because of coyness but of contempt. He remembers their first meeting: “...with her large, heavenly, indifferent eyes, Saroja got married without ever saying what she wanted” (38). He puts a tedious effort to loosen her but fails, and that makes him feel inferior and averse. He remembers her indifference:

. . . even now that his beautiful wife never lifted her face and looked at him. He came to understand this was not shyness but contempt. If he took her hand playfully, she would stand like a statue of stone. In his memory, her eyes never met his eyes but passed over him as if he did not exist. Shastri chided her, beat her, but nothing he did could change Saroja’s indifference. She slept by his side dutifully, allowed him to enter her, but no fruit came of their contact. (39)

Though she is dragged into the situation because of cultural and social system(s) rather than fear and anguish, she straight away hits the feeling of contempt. She starts with her resistance.

Shastri, Saroja and Radha

Saroja is a classical featured girl, loves book, enjoys nature, sings and has a good companionship with Radha. Saroja's realm of interest is something higher than Shastri's. Her silence haunts him in the form of protest, contempt and challenge which make him more suspicious and inferior. Her friendship with Radha, her reaction to cuckoo, and her chitchat with plants surprise him and he enjoys it at the same time, and that ensures his doubt and contempt towards her.

Meanwhile Shastri's new acquaintance with Karunakara Pundit, a Kannada speaking Malayali, who opens a new Ayurvedic shop in the village, changes his life. Pundit offers his help to Shastri to beget a child and win over his wife through medicine and mantras. Pundit detects presence of a devil in Shastri's house and assures help to expel it. He gives the remedy: "A tantric rite must take place in this house. It should be performed jointly by husband and wife. Towards the end of the rite, the lady of your house will have to sit naked and offer worship... it will have to be done secretly," (43) and he finds an auspicious day for the ritual.

Transformation of Saroja

The presence of Pundit brings changes in Saroja that, "A sprightliness appeared in Saroja which Shastri had never observed before. The uneven parting in her hair was made straight. She put on all her bridal ornaments. After the ritual, the coffee she prepared was just the right temperature, and had not lost its aroma" (44-45) and he is also happy to see that her respectful acquaintance with Pundit because that helps to end the ritual in a smoother way with her naked presence. But his happiness gradually transforms into suspicion which turns him as the suspected ghost in his house. Pundit and Saroja's friendship flourishes and occurs major changes in her behaviour but her indifferent eyes still haunts Shastri. Saroja cooks and serves him food, gives him coffee whenever he wants, but she never looks or speaks with him, and ". . . even when she does look, her eyes still seem to be gazing far away" (48-49) and her enthusiasm in his absence begins to fidget Shastri. Saroja's silence turns her as "another ghost in his house" (49) in Shastri's eyes. The suspicion, tension and fear lead him to anguish and that turns him up totally an impotent man. Her silence becomes a complex riddle in front of Shastri. He does not know how to decipher it and which squishes him day by day, and his humanness starts to evade.

Pandit and Saroja

Pundit visits Saroja often, and once Shastri enters into the house and hears the *alap* (Hindi word, the opening section of a classical performance) of both. He loses his control and with rage opens the door but their indifference and Pundit's invitation to join with them make him inactive. He thinks, "No, I would not be able to beat and kill either Pundit or Saroja. I have become impotent" (51). Saroja acts as if nothing has happened and does not open her mouth. Shastri's transformation becomes explicit more and more:

The sound he made was a long sound, going higher and higher, then falling and falling into silence, terrifying him even when silent...and then it began rising again. It was a moan, and it was the bellowing of a cruel animal. No human animal could produce such a sound. Shastri felt that his body was making a sound more terrible than the cruellest language, something like the empty husk of a language. Inside him now there swelled a huge prideful demon that could eat language, that would destroy the waves of *alap* created by Saroja's divine throat a little while ago. (52)

Silence Symbolises Power

Here Saroja's silence which symbolises suffering and her contempt turns into power which oppresses Shastri. The word "language" in the above quoted paragraph symbolises patriarchy. According to feminist theory, language represents patriarchy and silence represents womanhood and their language. Feminist writers or thinkers use silence in two different ways – one is marginalisation and other is women's language – and at the same time it is the reflection of double silencing, i.e., capitalism and patriarchy. Women are both readers and producers of its meaning. Luce Irigaray, French feminist and critic, does not conceive women's silence as a sign of their vacuity rather their silence provides an insight into the workings of the dominant masculine culture. Saroja's silence reflects hues of all the interpretations. But she does not stick to one, instead there is fluidity. Shastri's behaviour and change reflect the different realms of Saroja's silence and its course of development. The becoming is obvious in Saroja.

Silence - a Precondition for Happiness

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Silence: Anything But Nothing – A Reading of Ananthamurthy's *Bhava*

Heinrich Heine, German poet and critic, calls “silence” a precondition for happiness. Saroja’s silence attains the next level, that is, happiness. Instead of being stuck on to resistance, she prefers to move forward. Her action reflects her development from a sufferer to a free bird. She converts her silence into a state where one can see and enjoy nature and oneself. The mood change and calmness of Saroja is a victory over Shastri which turns him to a sufferer. The silence which stands for female suffering is reversed here. The retching sound of Saroja turns him a wraith and he groans, “Have you become pregnant, whore?” (58), but her reply is a calm and unmoved look at him. The gaze of Saroja makes him think: “Was it because I could never bear how her beautiful eyes looked at me with such indifference? Or I imagine then that those eyes were saying, ‘who are you, bastard, to ask me such a question?’ or did this Bhava of mine cause itself to think so, in order to prepare itself for what was to follow?” (59). The clash makes him a murderer:

Shastri lifted the heavy wooden cover of the big brass pot...he had smashed her head three times with the wooden lid.... lifting her slumped body, he strode like a gloating demon on his two great legs, ... She had seemed dead, and he had thrown her into the red earth pit. (59)

When he returns he finds that he has lost his trunk full of gold from home and sees the tyre marks of Pundit’s car which push him into the everlasting doubt and suspicion. He makes a readymade story and says to Radha: “That useless one ran away with Pundit three days ago. The whore also took the trunk of gold” (62). Saroja ends up like a cipher of silence and mystery for Shastri.

Dinakar, Saroja’s Son

Sitamma’s narration about Dinakar, Saroja’s son, which happens after forty years unwraps the doubts and guilty conscience of Shastri. Sitamma, Shastri’s distant acquaintance in village and Dinakar’s caretaker in Haridwar, remembers the arrival of Dinakar’s mother, who was a reticent woman, in Haridwar. After a few months, she gave a trunk full of gold to Tripathi, a well known charitable soul in Haridwar and Dinakar’s foster father, and she put her amulet on Dinakar’s neck and went to take bath in river. She never came back. People thought that she had slipped into the river but everyone in Tripathi’s house wondered, “Why she had put the amulet around her son’s neck just before she went to bathe” (27). This

reveals Saroja's merging of her silence with the silence of river/nature. Kogava uses sea as a symbol of audible silence in her novel *Obasan* to represent a special discourse to present and to break silence. Saroja ends up her life in river, the symbol of audible silence of nature and the journey to its destiny.

Nothingness of Silence is Herald of Joy

Shakespeare says in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "Silence is the perfect herald of joy" (Act 2 scene 1). Saroja's silence becomes a herald of joy in the middle of itself and her silence turns out to be a metaphor for a cleansed, non-interfering vision. She through her silence conquers Shastri, contempt in her, her loneliness and patriarchy as whole. The development of silence is obvious in her and it reaches its utmost level as a silence of motherhood. Silence of motherhood is equal to nature's silence – creation, protection, acceptance and detachment – after certain stage. Though Saroja faces or goes through all absent features of silence still she is able to enter the zenith of silence, that is, peace, calmness and joy. She churns out the absence of silence into power – power of woman, happiness and transcendence. She represents the real woman who resurrects from the dominating and decaying situations. Being a woman, she represents whole human and the core principle of existentialism – man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Her silence could be anything at the beginning but it ends up with nothing – the power of acceptance, calmness, transcendence and merging.

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