

Jose Varghese

Silent Woman

I don't remember the kind of girl I used to be before my awakening to silence. I am sure though that I was never the kind who thought there was a need to express myself in some way, or to tell my side of the story to others. The silence that came in search of me must have uprooted any trace of such a desire. But when my twenty-nine-year-old son was recently struggling to describe me to one of his new colleagues, I felt it was high time I found my own way of interfering.

It is easy to defend yourself when others describe you the wrong way, but it's much tougher to explain what you really are, especially in the case of a person like me. In a way, whatever my son said was true, but there were certain things which he couldn't talk about. I thought I had only one choice left—to transform myself into a story and leave it to those who were willing to accept it. And then there was this question about the length of the story I wanted to become. I can only talk about what is left between the words—the fragments that could fill up an imaginative mind – that leads to something which is full of missing portions. When all that is said makes a fragment in itself, what is not said can only add just a little more. So, it will not be an epic by any standards.

Well, she was not well.... mentally, you know. Not that she had to depend on us for everything....she could look after herself quite well and do all the household chores. But...you know, she had these 'spells' at times and it was never a good idea to leave her alone near water—near a well, river, or sea..."

My son and his friend pretended soon afterwards that they had forgotten about my disturbing presence and started talking about other things—mainly about what they were reading and writing recently. I too pretended not to listen to their talk about post-colonial identities and cultural representations of nationality. I knew what they were talking about, and I didn't care. I had the freedom to linger on like a pampered cat in my son's room or the verandah when he talked with his wife, little son, friends, or father. I had gained a level of invisibility that people usually attributed to animals which can't comprehend in full, or respond to, human conversation.

I was even better than a cat, because I never made any noise or sought attention from them. Actually I thought they were relieved as long as I stayed indoors and did the things I was good at—cooking food for them, cleaning, washing, and staying silent all the time unless someone asked me something. I had the freedom to answer them in monosyllables,

meaningless nods, and also to say things which were not really intelligible, because I was not well, you know, mentally.

I knew they would return to the topic of me sooner or later, because of the recent incidents which made me a character fit for the role of a protagonist in some strange story.

The first time I jumped into the well was five years ago. But I was rescued by a man who worked in the nearby rubber plantation. It was early morning, and he heard the loud thud and splash before I started flowing down the cold water. He knew it was the crazy woman who ‘fell in the well’ because he caught a glimpse of my white sari.

A few moments ago, I was looking at the water deep down which looked dark green from above. As I dived into it, the overgrown ferns bent their fragile leaves to brush me momentarily and left white powdery streaks on my bare arms and face. Or I imagined so. The thud and cold shocked me for a second. But then I was flowing down.

I heard sea waves roaring and wondered whether the well contained the sea beneath it. And then, the voices came—no, not the meaningless voices that come to schizophrenics. The voices that came to me were the ones stored in my consciousness, in whatever levels or layers that your psychotherapists will describe for you. I heard clearly the first lessons of *Carnatic music* I learnt as a child, in the definite, husky voice of my teacher in her late forties and in the shrill, shaky voice of the five-year old me. And also the *slokas* from the nearby temple, that had become a part of my early morning essence. Maybe that was one voice which came from outside the water, not from my consciousness—I am not sure. Also, the highly contrived musical notes from the *bansuri* of Hariprasad Chaurasia which came from the dilapidated tape recorder of my son, whenever he was feeling low (which was quite often).

And that music I couldn’t name...

The music from a movie my son watched with a friend, and I was allowed to watch in my cat-self. A movie by the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowsky, about the blue colour of human mind. There were movies by him about the White and Red of human mind too, but I liked Blue more than them. It had a lot of music, loss, melancholy and authentic inner voices. And water too, which I loved. There is a sad woman in it who tries to kill the music in her. The music of losses, of a husband and a child who died in an accident. My own losses were different, of a more abstract nature, but I knew what she felt like. Among the many strange things she did was an attempt to drown the music in a swimming pool. But it keeps coming back, in full voice when she has to pop her head out of the water, and in muffled persistence when she tries to hide her face underneath. They re-played it a few times, talking about diegetic and non-diegetic sounds in the movie. I didn’t get all that, but was fascinated to see it again and again.

You may not believe it, but she used to read a lot – all kinds of books from everywhere. She was educated in a convent school, and learnt English when she was very young. A bright student loved beyond religious

boundaries by the nuns, as my grandmother used to remember. But when she started falling in love with Jesus and his Virgin Mother, and started carrying a rosary in her bag, the Brahmin community decided enough was enough. She was just sixteen years old then, and was quickly married off to the government clerk my father was. No one knew what was happening in her mind because she was strangely silent most of the time.

You need to be silent to know the music that comes to you. There should be silence around you too, but they did not let me know my music that day. There were voices—real voices—above me, and they thought I was drowning, and a man came down in a rope and pulled me up by my hair from the water, to meaningless voices which did not know what they were doing.

I felt so sad to see the shame on my son's face, and wished I thought of him earlier. But all sane people will agree with me that there are moments when you fail to control yourself, when you are in a spell, when the silence in you leads you to water.

Did I care for anything else? No. It was my son who kept waking me up from my spells. It was not that I was a doting mother. I felt no special pride in being a mother. I gave birth to a daughter first, who died soon after she was born. Everyone was afraid that I would have a nervous breakdown. But I didn't care, and I was already the crazy woman anyway. She just looked like a worm to me—I never saw her open her eyes. It was good that she never heard anything, other than the roaring of the sea in me. It was good that her thoughts died before they were born. But it was my son who made me sad. He opened his eyes, cried faintly, and stayed in this world. It was a tragedy. I always felt pity for him, the kind of pity out of which love of the purest kind emerges.

His friends were all losers like him. They believed they could change the world, like the European youngsters of the 1960s. But they were not able to explore the freedom of the Sixties, to have the fun, as they say. They were in the wrong time at the wrong place, with mothers who were crazy or fighting for independence; and fathers who were drunkards or losers like them, or dead and gone; and some had siblings who opened their eyes and managed to cry louder than them. And all the people around them were buying things which should not have been bought—love, family, dignity, education, jobs.

My son and his friends had drowsy eyes. They were all the time reading and thinking, and fighting to find a place for themselves in a world which had lost any notion of justice—even the kind that exists in the wilderness. No wonder they were all losers. Education, intelligence, honesty, sincerity—all these were no more the kind of commodities that were in demand. They were the elitist idiots who would be misfits anywhere they went. I felt pity for all of them. And I loved them all, and gave them the best tea and snacks I could make. And I got books in return from all the libraries in which they were members.

When you read so much, people expect you to talk about it. But I wanted to be silent, like Sister Miriam in the convent. It was she who used

to supply me books, some covered clandestinely in brown paper. No one really had any idea what those books were about or where they came from. She didn't talk much to anyone else but me. She was studying for her Masters in English Literature in the university in a big city where she stayed in another convent, and came to stay in a room next to mine only in the weekends. She had to convince the Mother in our convent that whatever she was reading and doing during her studies did not result in the loss of even a fragment of her faith. One day she came to my room, all in tears: "I knew this dear, Mother Clara will not allow me to do my dissertation on *Sons and Lovers*. I need to tell Father Paul about this. I will not get good grades if I can't do my dissertation on something I like". I looked at her for a moment and said: "But Sister, I feel Paul never finds it easy to choose between Miriam and Clara". This made her stop crying, and we laughed together and read new books the whole night.

We had silent meditations in the convent during which no one was to utter a word, usually for a week or so. I was very happy to be silent, but when Sister Miriam was around, we made it a point to talk secretly. Once, she told me how she embarrassed a handsome young priest during the silent meditation in the hall which stood between the seminary and the convent. It was soon after the lunch in the meditation hall, and she followed the priest to where he went to wash his hands. She stood behind him and murmured—

"In the beginning was the word, and what was that for, Father?"

"What?"

He turned around awkwardly and found her smile peacefully at him, as if nothing had happened.

*Once we watched a few movies at home. One of my friends who was doing a Film Studies course came with a lot of DVDs of movies made in Israel, Latin America, Spain, Sweden, Poland, Austria, France, Germany, Iran, Korea—you name it. We hired a TV and a DVD player. The world came to our village, in bits and pieces. She loved to watch all those movies—around twenty of them. We did not take any break and watched five movies everyday, to save the rent. She would just sit cross-legged on the floor with her eyes glued to the TV screen, and would hurry up to make tea and food during the breaks when we changed the DVDs. We waited for her to return before we played anything. I found her very attentive and contented throughout, except for once. There was a movie called *Sacrifice* by Tarkovsky—oh, you know about that? You may remember a silent child in the movie, referred to as 'Little Man'. A very intense movie where Little Man's intellectually inclined father sacrifices everything that he values, including his intelligence in exchange for a better world. And he burns down his house. Yes, exactly—it has that legendary long shot towards the end where he is chased by people from the asylum and taken away in an ambulance, as the house burns down in the background. Little Man is seen afterwards speaking his first words: "In the beginning was the word, why is that papa?"*

She started laughing loudly when he said this—which was, you know, totally out of place, awkward. She looked maniacal. This left us a lot disturbed, not to talk about the confusion and agony caused already by the movie.

It was Sister Miriam who first told me in her hushed voice about the hidden pleasures of reading a book, and also about the need to be silent—

“When you contain so many books inside you, your connection with the world is on an altogether different trajectory. The mundane affairs of life bore you as much as your bookish thoughts bore those who don’t get any of it. That is why you should learn to be silent, and to carry on an eternal, imaginary conversation with interesting people from those books. Whom do you want to speak to today, Miss Alice in Conventland? Gregor Samsa, Lady with the Pet Dog, or Zorba the Greek?”

I told Sister Miriam that there were some in the convent who thought she was crazy.

“They are right. I am crazy the way the Virgin Mary and Jesus were crazy. But I don’t want to be worshipped later. Because I have committed many sins—like reading *Lolita*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*; and I even made a bright, young, innocent student like you read them too, ruling out any possibility of a religious conversion.”

And we started giggling. I told her that I loved the blue robes of Jesus and Mary, and also the blue beads in the rosary Mother Clara gave me. She told me blue was a colour that made many people gloomy, but it was a beautiful colour, beautiful like gloominess itself. She said she used to paint once, and was fond of the different shades of blue. She said she stopped painting because she knew what she held in her mind would come out through her painting, and everyone would be shocked. I asked her whether it was a good idea to stop doing what one likes to do, and she told me that it was alright; that refusing to do what one was good at was some kind of a protest; that silence had a lot of power, and that it was the strongest weapon in the world. I was not totally convinced then.

Her silence was annoying at times, but we got used to it. For her my wife and son never existed. I don’t know about her feelings towards me, but there used to be some sort of communication between me and her, from the very beginning. I don’t know when she stopped talking to my father—seems it could have been from the day they got married. He carried her like an unavoidable burden, as long as the marriage was functional and she didn’t complain about the housework.

It was only once that some really evil young men came to our house, pretending to be my son’s friends. They came early in the evening, and I asked them to wait for my son. He was travelling long distance for his work. It took him two and a half hours’ bumpy ride by bus to reach back from his work place.

They started talking ill of my son right in front of me, as if I was an animal who had no idea about human language. It didn’t upset me that

they underestimated me so much, but the things they said did really upset me.

They said my son was an idiot who knew nothing about the world; that those who think too much of the right and wrong of life will end up being eternal losers; that they haven't even read a fraction of books he kept in his small book shelf (which was nothing, because he did not have money to buy many books, and got his books from the library); that they were smart to play the right cards—of religion, politics and bribes—while idiots like my son were trying to educate the new generation about human and animal values; that they were 'in' the system and my son will never be anywhere near it; that they compensated for the bribes they paid for their jobs with their wives who came with money that was enough to buy luxury cars, build multi-storied houses, and live the life which suits it; that they were here in this lowly fossilized house of idiots who belonged to the once highest caste only because they had to borrow some books and advice from him, though it was shameful for college professors to borrow such things from a school teacher; that they had no other choice than to register for a PhD now, or they will not get the promotion; that they will have to find someone who will write their theses for a handsome fee; that my son was so stupid and incapable to make some money at least this way; that they feel glad anyway because the teachers' pet in all classes has made it only so far in life while they had it all...

I felt like spitting on their faces and kicking them out of the house. But that's what supposedly normal people do. I decided to play the madness card. I made some really strong tea and added two mighty spoonfuls of salt, instead of sugar, in each cup and took it to them on a nice tray. Then I went quickly to the kitchen and came back with a big knife and sat down on the floor next to their chairs, and asked them how the tea was. They had started to sip it, and I could see that none of them really liked it. But since they were the kind who were 'in the system', they did not dare to speak out the truth and said that it tasted really good. I got up and locked the front door and told them that our neighbor's dog was fond of the tea I made and it would come and bite them if they didn't give it their tea. They had to drink it as fast as possible to avoid this. I saw how silent and scared they all looked now, as if I were the dog. I sat down on the floor again and pretended to shape my toenails with the big knife and looked at their direction occasionally. I smiled at them and encouraged them to drink the tea. All the smart, rich, successful idiots sat there and drank the tea, excused themselves before my son came, got into their a/c cars and fled, never to come back.

No one knew when she fell into the well the second time. She was not at home when I came back from school, and we started searching for her. There was no sign that she went near the well, and it was impossible to search in it since it was more than sixty feet deep and almost one third of it filled with water. We called the fire force. They came, and asked us whether we were sure that she was in it. How could we be sure? If you are not sure, we can't search, they said. They had rules, which could be bent

by a bribe. I decided to pay a bribe for the first time in my life, but when I heard how big an amount they needed, I abandoned the idea. I didn't have that much money with me.

When you lead your inner life to the full and close the doors and windows that let thoughts in and out, you are in a state of bliss. You don't have to spend all your life behaving like actors, trying to convince others that what you show comes directly from inside you. You may have to live with some tags—the crazy woman, the strangely silent creature, the one whose screws got a bit loose after reading all that bullshit—but you are basically free in your world. You are not as mad as those who project false selves one after the other, and when they look into the mirror, won't recognize the one they see there. People don't expect much from an insane woman, and will be grateful for the simple things you are able to do. Those who live with you curse their fate, but so do all who have to live with someone.

The worst part of it is that you have limited freedom in the physical world. You are not allowed to travel, to go near the sea, or even to the well which is so close to your house. You have to be satisfied with the water that flows down coldly from the taps in the kitchen, in the bathroom. And the best part of it is that no one sees the sea that roars in you, all day.

I have always wanted to travel in a train, but could never do that. My father used to take me in a crowded bus to and from the convent school, once in a month or so. That was all I saw outside the village where I grew up. Once we went for a picnic from the school. That was the first and last time I saw the sea. There were so many girls like me there, in our school uniforms, and the nuns kept an eye on us. They observed that I was unusually active and unafraid of the waves. I never got enough of the sea. All my nights after that were filled with images of the sea. It's indeed strange that what I saw and experienced some thirty years ago remains so fresh in my mind even now. I feel like a writer or film director who chooses certain characters and incidents from the big messy world and lets them be experienced by others. It's not that other things didn't matter, but these made a special impact on them.

Trains might have made an impact on me. When I read about people travelling in trains or watch movies that feature train journeys, I am mesmerized. I have no clear idea how one feels sitting near a window and watching the world move backwards, but I am sure I will like that. You can pretend to be in a world where no one really exists or open your eyes and study the faces of others. I imagine there will be a sea of emotions floating in a train.

For a person like me the experiences from books and real life have no difference. In that sense, I have experienced everything in life, in all the places of the world, in all possible times. It's much more than anyone could experience from indulging in what they take for real. They restrict life to what happens between birth and death, all that falsity which accompanies each breath.

But I never got enough of the sea, the water, the blue, the train...

There were local people who offered to search for her in the well, but it was a risky affair, and many reminded me that I will be responsible for it if someone else's life was put in danger. We decided to wait. We searched in the bus station, train station and the beach. We filed a complaint in the police station, spent two sleepless nights. And on the third day, her body was found floating in the well, all bloated...The police came. They wanted to take it for post-mortem to the medical college, which was four hours away. My father was upset. So were all our relatives. They were concerned about the religious rituals. The police were nice. They asked me whether I had a complaint to register, or had any suspicion. I said no. None of the people in the village did create any problem. They were all being nice to her, to us, at last. The fact that she was strange saved us some of the ignominy. The police said there was no need for a post-mortem and gave the body to us for the funeral rites. We were lucky, you see.

My grandson looks exactly the way my son used to look when he was a boy. Poor kid, I never accepted him. Or his mother, for that matter. It was deliberate. I didn't want to take more people into my world. I tried my best to shake off my son from my script of the world, but he kept coming back, breaking my spells. My husband deserved pity, but I was afraid to give him that, fearing the untimely emergence of love. I left Sister Miriam and Mother Clara in the convent, never to meet them again. Sister Miriam gave me a goodbye kiss and asked me to remain strong. Sister Clara looked intently at the rosary with blue beads given back to her by my father. He told her that we had nothing against them, and were thankful for the good education they gave me. He just had to think about his community.

I let in my son's friends to my world, but they never tried to break me from my spells. They were just nice people for whom you could make nice tea and snacks. I could have made some very good tea for this new friend whose eyes look so harmless. He is lost in my story, and I can hear the sea in his deep voice. He doesn't ask what my name was. He doesn't ask anything at all. Just supplies filler words to let my son get it out of his system. Yes, the system!

I wonder why a harmless woman had to die this way. I don't believe she wanted to end her life. She was not suicidal. Just a bit fascinated by water. Did she differentiate life from death? I don't know. Either she was mad, or much more intelligent than all of us to face the world with silence. I just wish I tried to understand her more—this woman, my mother...

Why did someone have to save so many words in a lifetime? Perhaps to deconstruct the means and meanings of communication. In a world where so many voices go unnoticed, what does silence achieve in the end? Nothing. It just adds to the meaninglessness that surrounds us.

A woman, a Brahmin woman, Savitri—wife of Krishnamurthy, mother of Ishvar, mother in law of Lakshmi and grandmother of dreamy-eyed Vinayak the three-year-old—that's what she was. She should have remained the same, her existence made significant only through the pale,

underfed people to whom she was related, if her silence was a coincidence.

She found me, caught me unawares and followed me till here. Her silence had some power. Her thoughts resonate with me, with the world, even beyond the six minutes of consciousness after she drowned her temporal self. What else did she have to drown? I can only speak from the clues I got from Ishvar, fill the gaps in his narration. I shouldn't drown her fully in clichéd identities of religion, gender or inner longings.

I would like to imagine that she would have loved to be in a train like this. Did she ever get a chance to travel in a train? Fat chance. But now it seems I am travelling with her. Why was she so fascinated by water? Had she ever been to a beach? If yes, what could she have done there?

Ishvar said that she loved to make tea for his friends, and got books in return. The name Ishvar means God. He knows a lot, but not everything. So heavily talented, does he realize what he inherited from his mother? It would be a disaster if he gets silenced at some stage in his life; or perhaps it wouldn't be.

If she was still alive, I could have offered to take her on a short trip on a train or for an evening on the beach. No, Ishvar might not have allowed that. He kept repeating that she was not well. I should just have ended up giving her all my hundred and seventy two poems which have no takers – poor voiceless creatures. She should have finished reading them in a couple of days, the fast reader she was. What could her silence have made of it? No one will ever know.