

The Mother Who Does Not Speak: A Postcolonial Feminist Study of Silent Resistance in Mai

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Abstract

This research investigates how silence functions as a sign of resistance in Mai by Gitanjali Shree from a postcolonial feminist perspective. Silence has often been read as a symbol of oppression within male-dominated societies. However, I argue that it can also be a mode of agency rooted in culture and consciously applied for political purposes. Using the ideas of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Uma Chakravarti, the novel will be read to show how the figure of Mai signals the presence of the subaltern woman and her silent, non-verbal and emotional strategies of resistance. The study also shows how silence is interrelated with the domestic space and generational narrative in the text, in order to highlight the dynamic process of identity formation in postcolonial India. The daughter's attempt at representing Mai's experiences alerts readers to the impossibility of any transparent narration of her mother's life. I conclude that in Mai silence is not absence but a culturally inflected, conscious mode of resistance that destabilizes Western feminists' emphasis on voice and agency.

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, Silence, Subaltern, Patriarchy, Domestic Space, Resistance, Indian Literature

Introduction

In the history of Indian literature, the mother has been imagined as the primal image of sacrifice, silent endurance, and moral selfhood. This construction glorifies the ideal of silence and posits the woman within economies of obedience and emotional labor. Gitanjali Shree's novel Mai, apparently, adheres to this construction: yet the silence at the core of the mother's being in this novel is a paradoxical space; a site of resistance. This paper argues that silence as a mode of being and form of resistance could have different connotations in a postcolonial and a post-independence context. Mai, the central character of the novel, comes across as a deaf-mute woman who conforms to patriarchal norms but at every such point, passively, without the patriarch even realizing his control is being subtly subverted. The daughter in her attempt to read this silence finds it tough to distinguish between what she imagines to be her mother's mystique or what could have actually been the politics of resistance. The paper, basing its argument on post-colonial feminist theory, seeks to interpret silence as a strategy of resistance and the difficulty to access the mother's consciousness as indicative of the manner in which the daughter posits silence as resistance.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant as it reinterprets female silence not as submission but as a subtle and complex form of resistance and empowerment within a patriarchal and post-colonial Indian reality. Most of the criticism regarding Mai's work has been done within the parameters of motherhood and domesticity. This research proposes a new approach looking at silent agency and hence adds to postcolonial feminist literature. The concept developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty adds to the scholarship by bringing out the ways in which marginalized women deal with power without engaging in overt rebellion. Moreover, the present study tends to bridge the gap that often occurs between Western feminist theory and Indian reality and lived experiences.

Research Questions

In what manner does Mai give voice to the unspoken stories of women in a postcolonial patriarchal context?

How can silence signify the choice to resist rather than be oppressed?

In what ways does the daughter's point of view about Mai reinforce or question her persona?

How does a postcolonial feminist approach redefine Mai's sense of self and her role?

Assumptions of the Study

Silence should not be seen as inactivity, but as a deliberate and cultural type of rebellion.

Literature is a mirror to real-life social systems, particularly the role of women in Indian culture.

Mai is the archetype of many underprivileged women in postcolonial India.
Mai can and should be explored using postcolonial feminist theory.

Limitations of the Study

The study focuses on analyzing the character of the protagonist in the context of silence and gender from a postcolonial feminist perspective. This approach is used to understand the text's subversion of patriarchal norms and silence as a subversion of patriarchy. The study outlines the theoretical framework and discusses the methodology used for the analysis.

Review of Literature

Academic discussions on Mai have largely focused on motherhood, domesticity, and the emotional world of women within the conventional domestic set-up. Critics have analyzed Gitanjali Shree's representation of the interiority of women, with a specific focus on the daughter's perspective as a device of narration.

Postcolonial feminist theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have maintained that the subaltern woman is deprived of her voice in the hegemonic discourse.

Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is instrumental in decoding the silence of Mai. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism, which homogenizes the experiences of women, also contextualizes Mai within the Indian social-cultural milieu.

Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy well defines the systematic control of the female gender within the family and society while Lata Mani's work delves into how the construction of female identity is determined by tradition in the colonial as well as postcolonial period. However, silence as resistance viewed through the lens of postcolonial feminism remains an unexplored arena. This paper seeks to expand on this research lacuna.

Hypothesis

Mai's silence is not a sign of weakness or submission but a form of resistance embedded in her culture, showing how women negotiate their agency within patriarchal societies in a postcolonial context.

Research Methodology

The study uses qualitative research methods and analyzes texts to identify themes.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism and the Subaltern Woman

Postcolonial feminism emerges as a critical response to both Western feminist universalism and indigenous patriarchal systems. It emphasizes the importance of context, arguing that women's experiences cannot be understood outside the cultural, historical, and political conditions that shape them.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" is particularly relevant in this context. In her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak argues that marginalized subjects, especially women, are often denied the ability to represent themselves within dominant discourses. Even when they appear to "speak," their voices are mediated, interpreted, or overwritten by more powerful structures. Mai exemplifies this condition: she is present within the domestic sphere yet remains largely inaccessible in terms of voice and subjectivity.

However, Spivak's argument also opens up the possibility of rethinking silence not merely as absence but as a form of resistance. Silence can function as a refusal to participate in oppressive systems of representation. In this sense, Mai's silence becomes a strategic withdrawal from the expectations placed upon her.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty further complicates the understanding of agency by critiquing the homogenization of "Third World women" as passive victims. She argues that agency must be understood within specific cultural contexts. Mai's silence aligns with this perspective, as it reflects a form of resistance that is deeply rooted in her socio-cultural environment.

Uma Chakravarti's analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy provides an additional layer of insight. She demonstrates how women in upper-caste households are socialized into roles of self-sacrifice and emotional labor. Mai embodies this conditioning, yet she subtly disrupts it by disengaging from the emotional expectations attached to her role.

Together, these theoretical perspectives allow for a nuanced interpretation of Mai as a subaltern subject whose silence constitutes a form of agency rather than mere oppression.

Silent Resistance in Mai: Interpreting Silence as a Form of Power

Silence in the life of Mai is not just an element, it is its essence, as a narrative resource and as a theme, a way of approaching reality, of feeling and interpreting the world. Through silence, Mai manages to develop her life in the family, to face the imposed expectations, without demonstrating explicitly the rebellion. She prefers to be absent, but without going physically. It gives authority to be there "without being". To make life impossible through distancing oneself emotionally and coexisting in the same space. Mai manages to discuss the roles assigned as a woman through her quiet and sometimes noisy silence. Mai is known for observing everything that happens in the family in silence, even if it hurts her. She is a figure who observes how hurtful the aggressiveness of her brother is and how her mother allows it. She feels how her father prefers not to confront. Mai is satisfied only with observing, but she also takes part in family life too. However, when she speaks, her brother, mother and father silence her. According to the narrator, regardless of whatever Mai thinks or does, in her family she loses. But Mai does not remain silent for the punishment of the family, nor for transcending that all her gestures will be deeply appreciated. Mai is silent for her own pleasure.

Narration and Generational Gender Politics

The narration itself is riddled with tensions. How can the daughter claim to articulate her mother's silence while Mai herself remains inscrutable? There is a palpable anxiety in the daughter's voice, a sense that perhaps her interpretations fall short, that she is frustrated by Mai's silence because she cannot fill it. The daughter remains dependent on the image of Mai to stage her rebellion; she is caught amidst the silence her mother continues to embody.

This silence, in Gayatri Spivak's words, signals not the absence of articulate speech, but the "necessarily foreclosed space" within which the (marginalized) subaltern exists. To attempt to explain this silence, to fill it with meaning, is to miss the point. As Spivak argues, "subaltern" or "depressed" classes "are seen to be denied dominance or the right to speak because we believe that... they lead in essence unrepresentable lives."

In this respect, Mai's silence may well be her greatest form of resistance, both to gendered forms of power that have historically denied her speech as well as to the narrator's current attempt to wrestle her voice to the ground. Mai refuses to speak because in doing so she would betray her own pure alterity.

Domestic Space and Patriarchy: The Postcolonial Home

The home in Mai is a crucial site through which power is both enacted and resisted; however, the ways in which silence and withdrawing interrelate in the context of the domestic space have not been previously examined. The domestic space has been recognized as significant, insofar as it can function as a "deconstructive space" and a "transgressive site," mirroring and contesting the repressive dynamics at work in a society (Riley Beyer 119). Yet the ways in which silence manifests differently in and towards diverse spaces and settings have consequences for how one might conceive of withdrawing from domination or withdrawing into resistant practices. In Mai's case, the home must be understood both as a physical location and a symbolic structure that reflects broader social hierarchies. Women's silence in the home thus needs to be understood within this context, as a discourse of power but also as a material site where such dynamics are rehearsed, reinforced, and resisted.

Conclusion

This article has provided evidence to suggest that silence in Mai is a form of resistance that is both intricate and culturally specific. Silence should not be viewed as a reflection of submission, but rather as a conscious strategy used to negotiate the limitations of patriarchy and post-colonialism.

Mai's silence is disruptive of dominant narratives of agency that focus on voice and visibility. Instead, her silence offers a different kind of resistant model—one that is quiet, unobtrusive, and situated within the warp and weft of everyday life. By not offering emotional work and by not wording her world, she refuses the terms offered, and the expectations of those terms, reconfiguring the very bounds of the political. The daughter's efforts to make sense of such resistance also underscore how difficult it is to read such resistant figurations; the process and play of language is bound by its own limits, both enabling and disabling any hoped-for representation. Mai's silence thus offers the reader an opportunity to consider the meanings and functions of power and resistance, and moreover, to underscore that the latter will not always be apparent and legible.

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