

IN THE SILENCE OF RURAL PAKISTANI WOMEN – EXERCISE OF AGENCY THROUGH MAINTAINING RESPECT AND HONOR

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Abstract

This article focuses on silence as a unit of analysis, investigating it as a form of agency or conscious choice by women in rural Punjab, Pakistan, against the backdrop of patriarchy. The experiences of rural Pakistani women indicate that in a patriarchal set up, silence can be used by women to their own advantage, while voice leads to negative consequences. It primarily focuses on how rural women maintain respect and honor in public and private spheres, through their strategic use of silence and thus claim agency. The methodology is observant participation and narrative based, conversational interviews, conducted with respondents residing in village Trekhanwala, in Sargodha, Pakistan. It was concluded that the use of silence is linked to the identity of a 'good woman' in the society, making her worthy of respect as she upholds her family's honor. In 'being' silent, women strategically avoid negative repercussions in the society where their survival is entrenched in cultural, patriarchal values which provides them with a set of concrete constraints; maintenance of their respectful identity is one of the ways to achieve strategic benefits in their everyday lives.

Key words: Silence; Respect; Rural Women; Agency

INTRODUCTION

In the context of raising one's voice as an act of power, the marginalization of Pakistani women in patriarchal society takes center stage. Their submissiveness and docility is marked by their silence, which is taken as a negative construct in the feminist literature. Most of the studies conducted on 'silence' as a unit of analysis regarding women explore its usage as an inhibitor, explaining how it is muting and marginalizing. Whether the contextual factors are related to rural indigenous work (Adom et al., 2020) or in an urban office space (Mahrukh, 2017) or silence as a tool used by men, carrying out an oppressive function (DeFrancisco, 1991; Jaworski, 1992) within the context of patriarchy, silence has been used to explain the circumstances of women's subjection.

Demands for speech may not always be a source of liberation for the individuals involved and this stands true in the case of rural women. The difference between being silenced and being silent should be investigated (Duncan, 2004). The former relies on power relations as an oppressive force while the latter has the intent of active choice as a logical and strategic decision. Instances of both, being silenced and being silent were found in the locale, however, the present article discusses only the latter where women deliberately chose to remain silent to negotiate the limiting boundaries and restrictive principles of patriarchy.

When assumptions are made about rural women's lives, it is concluded that they are powerless and oppressed, requiring help. This demeans the different forms of negotiation and patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti, 1988) that women use in everyday life. As survivors, these women yield power which allows them to live, survive and experience their world from a perspective that others may not understand. One of these communicative strategies is their use of silence. This article explores how rural women use silence as a strategy to maintain honor and respect in the society they live in, knowingly staying silent in everyday life experiences to attain benefits and thereby using

silence as an agentic act. It is important to state here that this study in no way attempts to undermine the significance of raising one's voice; rather the focus is to comprehend how within patriarchal set up women by following the normative expectations negotiate and strategize to exercise agency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of oppression and disempowerment, feminist discourse has indicated that the silenced need to be given 'voice', particularly the devalued and marginalized communities of the developing world, which are often overlooked (Hooks, 1991). However, silence connotes various meanings in a variety of contexts and its paradoxical, linguistic power cannot be ignored (Gal, 1989).

Silence and Communication

In the literal sense, silence denotes the absence of sound. In a communication, silence may be understood as having a negative value, but it can also have a positive utility according to its use in that conversation. In many instances, voice 'silences' and silence has voice, which means that the metaphor of voice should not be perceived as the only way to attain empowerment (Clair, 1997). In a similar way, women's silence may not be due to the lack of choice, but a conscious strategy for protection and survival (Blomqvist et al., 2021).

Women in the developing world are usually perceived as victims, universally oppressed and silenced by others. Voice is discussed with regards to a solution and their liberation from this inflicted prison (Dingli, 2015). This is especially true for women belonging to lower class and status (subaltern women), their empowerment is situated in the movement from silence to voice, in domestic and public spheres and in all aspects of life (Bergeron & Marchand, 2019).

Women's agency and role of silence

Silence 'mutes' the women's voices and thus plays a negative role in their marginalization. To end the 'silence of inequality', women have to speak up and work to be involved in the policy making of education (Rana, 2016). Majority of the studies also view silence as disempowering, whether it's at home or in workplace (Mahrukh, 2017) and solution to the Pakistani culture of silence is giving voice to the women, to assist in the reduction of their emotional and psychological subjugation in a patriarchal society (Zainab et al., 2017).

On the other hand, there is research conducted on the utility of silence in modes of communication used by women, where it plays a productive role through words and art, as traditional embroidery, as a way to self-preserve and as a form of agency to achieve personal goals (Iggluden, 2002; Farah, 2013; McAlister et al., 2021) amongst others. There are also studies that depict Pakistani women's negotiation and strategizing as a means for survival, depicting underlying agency (Agha, 2021; Mehmood, 2019; Khalid, 2022; Qureshi & Abid, 2022). The latter studies are an inspiration to explore this function of silence, in the context of power and agency, within the patriarchal structure of rural areas.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research was qualitative and inductive, where the data aided in understanding the concept. The data collection methods used were conversational interviews and informal group discussions (conducted in Urdu and Punjabi) along with observant participation.

Less participation, and more open, long-term patient observation can allow for an insightful study (Davies, 1999) and observation must lead to insight if it is to be valued (Ellen, 1984) which was especially true for investigating silence. Purposive and convenience sampling method was used to identify the respondents. For the purpose of the research, around 10-15 respondents were interviewed and were part of discussions from the locale, which was village Trekhanwala, located in Tehsil Sahiwal, District Sargodha. The same respondents were also part of the observant participation. It should be noted that the researcher acknowledges that women are being silenced within patriarchal structure but focused on instances where the women consciously and strategically opted for silence, thereby exercising agency. These women constituted the research's sample. Thematic data analysis was carried out in order to identify, analyze and interpret common themes emerging from the qualitative data acquired.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the data analysis, it was extrapolated that rural women utilize silence strategically in their everyday lives with the intention of maintaining the image of a 'good woman' in the society whilst ensuring that they are respected and upholding the family honor through their communicative approaches.

Maintaining a good image and respect through silence

Majority of the respondents associated the use of silence with maintaining the image of a 'good woman' in the society, simply because a woman who speaks up is perceived negatively or raising issues, while someone who stays quiet is thought to have manners and perceived positively. A respondent (49) stated:

"Log sochte hain k jo aurat khamosh hai wo achi aurat hai. Zada success usko ko milti hai jo khamosh rahe, apne right k lye na bolay. Kyun k uska image acha hota hai k flaan ki biwi behen bari achi aurat hai. Bolo tou aisay masail hote hain p sambhalna mushkil hojata hai, kisi ki bhalai k lye chup hojana behtar Hai. (People think that the woman who stays quiet is a good woman. Women get more success if they remain quiet and doesn't speak up for her right because then her image in the society remains good that someone's daughter or sister is a good woman. When she speaks, there are so many issues that it is difficult to handle, it is better to stay quiet for someone's sake.)"

The identity of a woman is linked with her use of silence because she is identified as someone who does not cause trouble and is successful in her relations because of this. As per the data, being silent is also linked to how people perceive the woman's family members, because she is known as someone's daughter or sister. It was interesting to note that 'speaking up' was associated with one's right, which is in line with feminist discourse linking 'voice' with agency and liberation. However, in the context of this research, women's use of voice in everyday life had a negative connotation. This was augmented by a male respondent in his sixties, explaining why a talkative woman is not considered good:

"O changa nai samjh de. Ghar ich aap da banda ho, hek wari bahir da banda aye tou gal theek nai hondi. (No, it's not considered good, as it (outside) is not the woman's place, it's the man's place. Inside the house, it's your own people but outside the house, it's strangers and it doesn't look good).

Not surprisingly, the public sphere was considered to be a male dominated space, where a woman's voice was considered a negative occurrence. In contrast, a woman's use of voice inside the home, i.e., the domestic sphere was considered to be acceptable. This is linked to the woman's image because the perception of strangers in the public sphere is significant in ensuring that the woman is considered to be a 'good woman' and the use of a woman's voice (in public) is a hindrance to maintaining that perspective. A female respondent in her forties was of the same view:

"Chalaak samajhde hein, haya na ich. Jedi boot zada gallan karedan pi, uno koi nai mathe charanda. (She is considered to be cunning, not having modesty. Those who talk too much, everyone ignores her. They let her talk.)

She further insinuated that people in the society try to avoid a woman who talks too much because she is considered to be cunning and not modest, which means that a woman's extensive use of her voice in the public not only affects her image in the society, but also decreases her respect within the relations she builds in the community.

Apart from the use of voice in public sphere, the female respondents were of the opinion that extensive use of voice, or being talkative, even within the domestic sphere puts women at a disadvantage, because their respect decreases. A young female respondent (27), explained:

"Agar koi cheez accept karaha ho, chup ker k ignore karte rahay tou aglay ko pata chal jaega, uske dil mein izzat ajati hai. Isne chup reh k mere ehtram kya hai. (If you are quietly tolerating stuff, and ignore while staying silent, then the next person knows that and they respect you because they think in staying quiet, she has respected me.)

It is common knowledge that in the Pakistani culture, staying silent, especially in front of elders, is considered to be a sign of respect. The data highlights that in addition to the age factor, if a woman stays silent, she is respected more because her silence (in the face of injustice) is also taken as a sign of respect. This form of reciprocal silence, linked with tolerating, ignoring, and being accepting, denotes a woman's patience, which is depicted through her silence.

Upholding the family honor through silence

Further, the data reflects that for the rural women, the concept of *baradari* (community) is very important, and in that context, the use of silence maintains not only their image and respect, but honor of the family. When shared respect is associated with this sense of community, it is referred to as the honor of the family. A female respondent (55) shared:

"Log baten kartay hain. Bolenge tou izzat kam hoti hai baradari mein. Zaat ki izzat rakhne k lye chup rehna behtar hota hai. (People talk. When women speak too much, respect within the community decreases. To maintain your caste's honor, it is better to stay silent)."

Women often stay in places in close proximity to their *baradari*, which is loosely defined as kin or family, and is part of the social geography in rural areas (Ahmed, 2020). Women's identity is not only linked to their *baradari*, but this sense of belonging is conditioned by certain actions and ways of behaving that are expected from women, allowing them respectful membership. Extensive use of voice or speaking too much is associated with disrespecting oneself and their caste's honor, as reflected by the data.

Another young respondent (21) explained how a vocal woman's statements may be perceived negatively by her husband, which would in turn cast a negative image on the woman and her family's honor:

"Shohar k mamlay mein chup he rehna chahye kyun k shak ka beej mushkil se khatam hota hai. Baaz aukat wo kisi se baat karaha hai, jinke samne kuch izzat hai uski, aur ham kuch aisa bol dete hain jis se uski izzat kharab ho tou wo yeh sochega k meri biwi bad zuban aur be izzat hai kyun k usne meri izzat mehmano k samne nai rehne di. (In case of husband, a woman should remain silent because if the seed of doubt is planted even once, then it gets difficult to erase. Sometimes when he is talking to other people, who respect him, and the woman says something which might be perceived as disrespectful, then he will think that my wife is bad mouthed and has no honor because she did not respect me in front of my guests.)"

Silence, in making sure and maintaining respect and honor of the woman also ensures the respect of the husband, especially in front of strangers. Voice here, is perceived as a recipe for disaster and destroying the woman's identity as an honorable woman. Interestingly, a married woman's actions and communication reflects upon both her husband and her parents' honor, which was elaborated by a female respondent in her sixties:

"Chup rehne se izzat rehti hai. Log kehte hain maa bhi aisi he hogi jesi beti hai. Aurat khamosh rahya larai mein tou agla sochne pe majboor hojata hai. Wo bolti rahay tou izzat nai banti. Maa baap ki izzat pe aanch ajati hai bolne se (Staying quiet means you are respected. People say that her mother must be the same. If a woman remains quiet in a fight, then the next person is forced to think about their actions. If she keeps talking, she has no respect and her parents' respect (honor) is on the line as well.)"

The respondent explained the use of voice in the context of a fight, where the woman should stay silent because that makes the next person pause and reflect. If she keeps arguing, then she is not respected. This was extended to the concept of honor by linking her respect with that of her parents', insinuating that they must be just as disrespectful, or have not taught her manners which reflect the ways of the society they live in.

Majority of the respondents proclaimed that the use of silence is more advantageous than the use of voice in the context of their lives, as a silent woman is associated with the marker of a 'good woman' which allows them less complications and avoiding of negative minor and major consequences, ranging from increased fighting in the household and domestic abuse to divorce. In addition to the interviews and discussions, it was observed that the women continuously remained silent to achieve the goal of being heralded as a good woman in the community, which was ironically also true for their participation in the discussions as well. Their views and experiences were narrated after time was spent in rapport building and even then, they were comfortable in being vocal when they deemed it significant enough and when there were only trustworthy females around.

A 'good woman' exercising agency

This exercise of agency was observed during observant participation in the field. Rural women achieved the goal of being granted some benefits because of the identity of a 'good woman' as a

consequence of their use of silence. In addition to avoiding fighting within the household and risking divorce, there were instances in their everyday lives where the women acquired benefits (through long-term investment into building their identity as a good woman) without undermining the cultural expectations and patriarchal authority.

These were observed in the locale when the rural women frequented the farmhouse adjacent to the village (home to researcher's extended family). It was noted that the women who were vocal in asking for (financial or in-kind) assistance were perceived as irritating or insistent and were turned away. However, the women who came around, stayed, and helped for some time but were not vocal about their needs, were perceived to be respectful, and a good woman. As a result, they were formally invited into the drawing room, and asked about their problems, being assisted accordingly. In addition, the women who strategically practiced silence were considered to be better suited when employing them as maids or cooks at the farmhouse, as they were honorable women who could be trusted with the valuable things they would be cleaning or using.

Rural women who were perceived as a 'good woman' due to their use of silence, were also considered well-mannered and polite, and as a result, it was observed that they were invited more often at the farmhouse in the capacity of helpers, which benefited them as they received in-kind assistance ranging from eating food in the kitchen, to taking left-over food home, to being given free fodder for their livestock. Therefore, through maintaining the identity of a good woman, women ensured sustained benefits and avoided negative consequences in their personal lives.

Further, in the same context, the identity of a respectful and honorable woman was rewarding in providing the rural women opportunities and advantages that they would otherwise not be granted. A few of these instances are elaborated upon below:

According to the norms of the village, rural women don't venture into the public sphere, specifically the marketplace, without males accompanying them. However, one of the maids at the farmhouse offered to go to the market and buy elastic for *Khan Sahab's* trouser when it was needed urgently. Not only did she offer to go herself, but this was also a woman who was usually observed doing her chores quietly and efficiently, being referred to as a good woman. Through the safety of this identity, she not only went and bought the elastic from the market, but was allowed to do so, without any negative repercussions.

On a similar note, some of the respondents were employed as teachers in the nearby government school, which was situated on the main road. While teaching is still taken to be a respectable profession for females in the locale, the situatedness of the school in public arena made it a complicated prospect. However, according to one of the female respondents who worked as a teacher:

"Mein hamesha se parhana chahti thi, jab mene abba ko bataya tou unho ne pehle tou haan nai ki, magar phir amma ne unse bola k mein achi bachi hoon, kabhi koi masla nai kia, larai nai ki, tou phir unho ne mujhe ijazat de di (I have always wanted to teach. When I told my father, he didn't say yes outright but my mother said to him that I am a good girl, because I haven't ever created a fuss or problem, or fought with anyone (vocally) so then he gave permission."

This is linked to women who talk considered to be cunning and creating issues, while those who remain silent, are considered to be respectful and modest, and thus rewarded in ways that would otherwise not be granted to them. By maintaining this identity, rural women follow the normative pattern and achieve agency by creating space of possibility within the rigid structures of patriarchal society.

CONCLUSION

In this article, silence as a unit of analysis is explored when analyzing how Pakistani rural women strategize and negotiate within the constraints of a Patriarchal society, focusing on their everyday attempt to maintain the identity of a ‘good woman’ by increasing their respect and upholding the family honor in the domestic and public spheres. The findings and their analysis indicate that a woman who speaks up is perceived negatively whilst considered argumentative or cunning, while one who stays quiet is perceived positively: having manners and showcasing modesty. Silence is also understood as a reciprocal action of giving and receiving respect by women, in addition to the element of age. Further, upholding of the family’s honor is associated with the strategic use of silence by women. Whether it is the honor of the husband or parents’, a woman’s silence maintains it, while the use of her voice accelerates not only fight within the marriage but also leads to worse consequences for the woman, which would tarnish her image in the family and society. Further, the exercise of agency by a ‘good woman’ creates this space for possibility, acquiring benefits and opportunities which through limited, cannot be ignored. In identification of respect and honor as units of analysis within this strategic use of silence by the women, the research as attempted to unravel how women consciously make decisions about the form of their communication in everyday life which would benefit them, rather than attributing their use of silence to passivity and subordination. It also raises question on amplifying voice as liberation in the context of rural women’s agency in Pakistan, where the use of voice is perceived negatively while silence is linked to the identity of a ‘good woman’, leading to an advantageous position within the constraints of patriarchy.

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