

Language of Silence: An Outline

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, treating art as an expression of human consciousness proved a myth as questions were raised about the very possibility of the expression of human consciousness. The assumption gave birth to a new trend termed as absurdism or the literature of silence. Art was no longer understood as the consciousness expressing itself. In fact, language turned out to be a trap for the artist, forcing him to take recourse in the medium of silence. However, such a transition has turned out to be the latest enigma in the human consciousness, throwing up its own set of challenges.

Key words: Language, Silence, Meaning, Word.

1. Introduction

In the twentieth century, art as an expression of human consciousness proved a myth as questions were raised about such a possibility through the medium of language. Language turned out to be a meaningless riddle creating space for the use of silence as its alternative. However, the issues have posed fresh challenges asking for a fresh look at issues concerning, language, meaning, silence as an alternative medium and the art.

In the twentieth century, treating art as an expression of human consciousness proved a myth as questions were raised about the very possibility of the expression of human consciousness. This assumption became the basis for a whole new literary trend which was termed as absurdism or the literature of silence. It was also categorized as the anti-literature wherein art was no longer understood as the consciousness expressing and, therefore, implicitly affirming itself. Rather, language, the biggest tool of the artist, appeared as a trap.

This phenomenon rendered art into an activity through which the artist exorcises himself of himself and eventually of his art. If earlier the artist's achievement was fulfilment in his art, now his success was to reach a point where he is more satisfied with being silent than by finding a voice.

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Silence, therefore, has turned out to be the farthest possibility of communication. The writer continues to speak but in a manner that his audience can't hear. That is why most of the art in our time has been experienced by audience as a move into silence or unintelligibility. *Waiting for Godot*, the celebrated drama by Samuel Beckett is an apt illustration.

Besides the contemporary determinants, there has been a universal discontent with language whenever thought seems to have reached the level of excruciating complexity. This is where art borders spiritualism because spiritual realm also talks through the medium of silence.

Such factors led many writers in the twentieth century to call for a revision of the language. Their work was moved by this quest for a consciousness shorn of the contamination of language and of the distortions produced by conceiving the world exclusively in verbal terms. Discovering that one has nothing to say, one seeks a way to say that. The dilemma is that "there is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."¹

The aesthetic imperative underlying this artistic tendency can be put in this way – "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said at all can be said clearly. But not everything that can be thought can be said."²

The theme of the 'failure of the word' has been so central to the twentieth century literature that the distinction between language as medium and language as content has collapsed. Today, inquiries into the 'meaning of the language' itself are carried out. The same language crisis was at work in Morgenstern's "Nightsong of the Fish", a twentieth century poem of absolute silence, speaking only through its prosodic markings.

Language devolution has been very far-reaching in terms of its consequences. The classical sense of at-homeness with language is gone now. Although the human-language affair is not going to conclude soon, but the semantic reconciliation between the two has become chequered with deep ruptures which seem difficult to darn. Contrarily, alternative modes of making communion with the internal and external realities are being exacted out. Language is already in the process of giving in. Music, classically thought of as a higher medium of communication in its sublimity, is also replaced by crass noise that, instead of serving any genuine semantic function, obstructs the smooth communication between concept and precept. Again, what remains is mere *silence*.

No doubt, the exhaustion of language seems to be the latest metaphor for the universal human condition, but it may equally prove as culturally a relative phenomenon. While in the Occident, language atlas has drastically changed, in the Orient, rhythm of word is still, by and large, intact. In fact, new possibilities within the language itself are being explored. Arabic and Urdu may be cited as cases where books without using words with diacritical marks are still being written down. It reflects the varying levels of consciousness, in various cultures.

Another offshoot of the problem is that of the linguistic exiles who now galore. There are authors who master more than one language but they sense the feeling of being uprooted from their native idiom. They are not at peace with any idiom – native or otherwise. Their realization of human condition has made them cynical of the exigency of even expressing it. In fact, language is being inquired into as an ideology and is looked upon as carrying multi-layered ideologies within the worlds of word.

There are many questions which arise in the context of the clash between language and silence. Is the death of language the death of the mind? Is human identity a speech act only? What would be the world like without words? Is human being only a language animal (*haiwan-e natiq*)? These are some of the critical issues that ask for serious study in the backdrop of the loss of the word.

Language determines for its speaker the dimensions, perspectives and horizons of the total landscape of the world and even beyond. Metaphysics is as articulate as Physics itself. How will the replacement of language by silence change the horizon of the both is another perspective of looking at the problem.

Different languages handle the world differently. How would silence as universal medium tackle this problem, as it may give birth to homogeneity in the understanding of the reality in general. Once considered an answer to metaphysical riddles, language has turned out to be an ontological enigma. The world not merely *of* word but also *within* the word has considerably shrunk, leaving an infinite space to be filled by none other than the void (read silence) itself.

The curious fact is that it is the very flexibility of the language which enables it to be used to describe its opponent – silence. Both have a strange relation. One gives birth to another? And one is used to explain another. It's a sort of love-hate relation where one cannot do without the other in spite of deep-rooted maladjustment. That has turned out to be the latest enigma in the human consciousness: "I am here, and there is nothing to say. If among you are those who wish to get somewhere, let them leave at any moment. What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking."³

References

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