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**‘Among All the Ghosts and Memories’: Anguish and Alienation in  
Ingmar Bergman’s *The Silence***

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**Abstract:**

My paper intends to explore Ingmar Bergman’s *The Silence* in accordance to the sensitive nuances of anguish and alienation in adherence to human experiences. It looks into Bergman’s subtle use of his art with an intention to locate specific expressions of brutality, which is remarkably permuted beyond the singularity of the characters. The paper intends to show how the film transcends its interrogating politics to consider the intimate involvements with life and to connect the whole idea with the inevitability of isolation. In this context, I have contextualized some other works of Bergman and that of certain other distinct directors who have sensitized this appropriation of bleakness as a fundamental essence of human emotions and involvements.

**Keywords: anguish; alienation; brutality; isolation**

Bergman writes tragedies. It is the tragedy of reality and dreams and the realization of such dreams in realities that is given a distinct impressionistic understanding in his cinema. The fragility of human suffering, loneliness, aggression and rage, the dissipation of love, the claustrophobic need of belonging to a faith and the imbued violence of indifference, can be considered to be some of the various realities that Bergman captures in his cinema. There is this dislocated and disjointed world that he describes in terms of human relationships and the metaphysical permutation of God with an utterly godless universe. What become particularly evident is the absence and the constant yearning for the necessity of love, tenderness, compassion and togetherness. Individuals caught in the vortex of violence, desperately striving to liberate themselves or to succumb to it and inevitably becoming a part of it.

The process of individuation and the trajectory of human misery are given considerable importance in the conceptualization of sexual identity and the empowerment of the silences. It is his depiction of the women in his films that comes close in elucidating on this ideology of marginalization. Rather than prioritizing women as individuals contesting with men for the fundamentals of existence, Bergman conceive them as identities caught in a continuous process. They never acquire a compact wholesomeness and that makes them susceptible to an ongoing process of experiencing brutality and indifference. The loss of the ideal and the obscurity of faith that motivate the structure of his films become frequently significant in revolving around the women. If his men are a part of the larger process of the inevitable universe of agony, psychological turbulence and moral dichotomy; his women serve continuously to become the victims of their own interiorized elements of reason and fantasy, convictions and silences, brutality and powerlessness. The sickness that pervades these women grows and overcomes the physical frame and suddenly starts assuming their vulnerable and their essential human aspect,

without their cognition. Bergman's own tendency to trace the ultimate meaning of life and the inability of the artist to locate such a meaning, outside the peripherals of tragedy becomes for him a source of vital significance.

Bergman appropriates the idiom of language with a deliberation of reality seen and experienced by his characters. The world in which we move about, the lives that we continuously predict and assume are all distinctly intercepted by a subliminal calculated silence that settles in varying situations underlying human relationships or the absolute lack of it. The episteme of a relationship that emerge through the cartography of *The Silence* is the obscurity of a "story" told in fragments. Its narrative is in the perpetual silence of the "meaning". One recollects Michelangelo Antonioni's *La Notte* (The Night, 1961) as a consideration of those "life becoming graces" that are undermined of all its compactness and the negation of the ideal. It can be suggested that the empty hollow misgivings, the boredom, the turmoil of faith and the visceral sterility of emotion and that of the body, projected in his cinema, are not only images on the screen. The spectators, start mistaking them not any more as images but shadows of the self.

In *Images – My Life in Films* (1994) Bergman records a certain 'notation' that becomes reminiscent of 'the first outline of *The Silence* : "The old man walks through Siljansborg Hotel. He is going to take communion; he stands for a moment in the open door between the dark room and the light room with the golden wallpaper. Strong sunlight on his head, and his cheek, blue from the cold. A red flower is resplendent on a rococo dresser. Over it hangs a portrait of Queen Victoria. The old hospital with its treatment rooms and equipment. The flat footed Frida, the sunlamps, the baths. The dead body topples out of the toy closet in the nursery". Later again while talking about his friend Nykvist, Bergman follows a similar pattern of evoking this sinister ambience of fear and uncertainty. The unfamiliarity of the city where he and his friend were traveling through is referred to by the incomprehensibility of its language and whole idea of verbal and cognitive silence – "It could also be a husband and wife with a child on the journey and the husband takes ill. The wife visits the city, and the boy has his experiences in the hotel all alone or spies on his mother in the corridors".

In *The Silence* (1963) the preoccupation of language with the characters and with that of the setting, invokes the metaphor of a sense of loss and hopelessness. It can be considered that Bergman foregrounds this element of confusion and moral angst, almost in the same dictum of Antonioni in *L'Avventura* (1960); *La Notte* (1961) and *L'Eclisse* (1962) popularly considered as the 'trilogy of alienation'. Bergman looks into sexuality in correlation with repression and suffering from the loss of an idea. It can be suggested that it is this muted presence of an almost already withered object of love or a dissipated idea that has already disappeared. Yet this silent and empty recognition testifies the unnerving trauma of the characters in *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1963) and *The Silence* (1963).

Bergman points out in his workbook: "...My basic concern in making them (the trilogy) was to dramatize the all-importance of communication, the capacity for feeling. They are not concerned – as many critics have theorized – with God or his absence, but with the saving force of love. Most of the people in these films are dead, completely dead. They don't know how to love." Karin's illness in *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) is her desperation for love and togetherness, neither in the absolute human form nor that of the divine and essentially implicated outside the hypothesis of tradition. However, it is the utter loss of this need that faintly allows her to see God in his face, only in the form of a spider crawling over the wallpaper, allowing her

to see him, only darkly through the glass and somewhere within herself she glimpses the hollow absence of love or that of God. *Winter Light* (1963) similarly portrays Thomas' inability to communicate with love as he sinks in the memory of his dead wife and becomes delirious of a silent God and all those religious artifacts of the old church. Marta's love for the Thomas remains unreciprocated and incomplete, slowly and distinctly as she recognizes a rigorous egoism in her emotional commitment. Her sole presence in the church, at the end of the film, is a complex image of faith and life that repels Thomas. In the manner that he understands the ambivalence and the impossibility of belonging to either of the two absolutes of love and God.

The treatment of suffering and the illusion of catharsis are brought to a subtle understanding in the use of the sexual motif in *The Silence*. Essentially, in considering *The Silence* as the last film in the series (the other two being *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light*) prioritizes the whole system of a morbid structure into which we are located. The element of brutality that the film centers around, reminds us of two of Bergman's successive productions *Persona* (1966) and *Cries and Whispers* (1973). The relationship between the two sisters in *The Silence* is that of indifference and withdrawal and yet a compelling sense to be together, as a testament for the illusion of a tenderness which does not exist. It can be pointed out that Bergman's treatment of the relationship between women in films like *The Virgin Spring* (1960), *Persona* (1966), *The Passion of Anna* (1969), *Cries and Whispers* (1971), *Autumn Sonata* (1977) are far more and intricate than those that primarily focus on men-women relationships.

Ester and Anna, the two sisters, are traveling through Europe. Anna is probably married and is travelling with her eleven year old son, Johan. Ester falls sick and suffers a violent fit of coughing and they had to stop in the middle of an unfamiliar city. They stay there for almost a day due to Ester's deteriorated condition; she decided to continue her stay, while Anna and Johan resumed their journey. This is all what happens in the course of the film. But as Carol Brightman points out in her essay "*The Word, The Image and 'The Silence'*" (collected and edited together by Stuart M. Kaminsky and Joseph F.Hill), "The plot synopsis is irrelevant because the film is not "about" a plot, but about certain emotions, about character. Events serve to provoke characters to certain quintessential routines through which we see their existences circumscribed."

Quite significantly the opening scene of *The Silence* is worked out like the perceptions of a fragmentary dream. For a moment, Johan's movement and curiosity become for the spectator an essential need to identify the characters, not as figments but as human beings. The first words uttered, is when Johan reads the inscription on the glass door and Ester fails to tell him the meaning. This is soon followed by Ester's sudden bout of coughing and the decline of her health. What is significant is the way Anna expresses her concern for her sister. This is almost similar to a different scene, quite later in the film, when Anna was shocked to see Ester unconscious outside the room where she was along with the waiter. The relationship between the two sisters is on these lines of silences and a certain kind of communication that has several other projections throughout the film. In fact it is quite appropriate to suggest how Bergman incorporates the metaphor of communication and spoken words, on one hand and silences and implications on the other. His stark use of symbols is elementary and perfectly relevant to the consideration of these implications that are intently and elaborately worked into the structure of the film. The setting of the film makes it an absolute requirement to utilize 'unspoken' words as the only means of communication and connection. The unnamed city, the hotel, the strangers, the

ongoing war with the surreal battle-tanks appropriate these instances of silences like a thick web of the subconscious mind, into which these three characters fall.

In certain films the sequence of episodes are completely undermined by the distinct use of symbolism. These symbols are powerfully involved with the experiences and emotions of the characters, the thematic impressions inculcated by the director and the impressions and expressions of the spectators. In the films of Bergman, there is a repetitive use of certain distinct symbols. In *Persona* (1966), *Hour of the Wolf* (1968), *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Shame* (1968) the island is a very important symbol conveying isolation, emotional destitution, a sense of sterility and the whole idea of being distant from life, love and convictions. Similarly, in *The Silence* the train can be interpreted as a constant image of movement and alteration that eventually settle in human relationships. The unnamed city, the language, the strange waiter whom Anna seduced at the bar are all symbolic of alienation and insecurity. Ester's sickness and her means of intoxicating herself to relieve her suffering is symbolic of existential fear and suffering that is there in the core of human life and the desperate futile means that we implement to transmute them. Anna's use of cosmetics, her appropriate dress, her hair and her shoes are all symbols to accentuate her sensuality and paradoxically suggestive of her yearning for love and togetherness, however limited only by the physical gratification of her self. Johan on the other hand is a central symbol that perceives and records the details that he witnesses throughout the film. He can be considered to be Bergman himself, feeling and capturing the unfamiliar landscapes of the emotional turmoil of the adult world. The empty corridors of the hotel, in the film, reminds us of the dark eccentric house tossed in the mind of the painter Johan Borg (played by Max Von Sydow), followed by his collapse in *Hour of The Wolf* and the dream fabric world of hallucinated sadomasochism in the bitter imagination of Severine Serizy (played by Catherine Deneuve) in Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967). The emptiness of the hotel in *The Silence* can be symbolic of the labyrinths of the soul, through which Johan is traversing, through the muted worlds of the two sisters, unprotected and insecure only with a toy pistol for his protection. Rubens' painting of *Deianeria Abducted by Nessus*, which Johan saw in the empty hall of the hotel is reminiscent of a brutality that is amply fostered throughout the film.

The central ideas of anguish and alienation, in the film, are primarily developed through the elements of language and muteness that goes into the vicissitudes of the understanding of the three central characters - their perceptions, realities, illusions and destruction. Ester and Anna become two problematic symbols that escape denouement and assume illusions and unrealities, indiscriminately as components of their identity. Anna uses her body, exhaustively, to explore her involvement and her craving for love. Her illusion and disillusionment is located in the importance that she gives to the biology of her existence. To understand a character outside action, it is significant to magnify the ways in which they express themselves and constantly try to establish connections with other human beings. Anna's involvement with the action becomes independent, only when she is alone with her son. The naked mother and the son sleeping in a fetal position, beside her, is suggestive of their relationship as something sensuous and intuitive. The desperation to find love in an unfamiliar landscape is not only brutal but also self destructive. Bergman is reflecting upon a world of chaos, which is absolutely bereft of human emotions and the impossibility of communication and contact. It is here that we can mention how *The Silence* is all about illusions and how fatal it can be when these illusions start responding and imitating reality. In the interview with Charles Thomas Samuels, Bergman speaks about the

sterility of human passion in respect to *The Silence* : “This is hell – perversion of sex. When sex is completely totally isolated from other parts of life and all the emotions, it produces an enormous loneliness. That is what the film is about: the degradation of sex.” (Ingmar Bergman: Essays in Criticism, edited by Stuart M Kaminsky and Joseph F. Hill)

More than witnessing Anna herself in coitus with the waiter, this idea of sodden love and its permutation with an unrestrained sadness is witnessed by Anna herself, in the unnerving image of the couples in ‘The Child Variete’, where she goes partly to distract herself from the strenuous claims of her sister and that of her son and also to experience love and to expiate herself from boredom and a possible loneliness. She is completely devastated by this spectacle of the couples, making passionate love against the backdrop of a soothing plaintive music, which for that moment becomes deranged and erratic for Anna and she had to escape. Her apparent fear of witnessing the spectacle can be interpreted as flashing a torch light on herself. Her dependence on the body to attract others, can never be consummated with the compactness of love. In the theatre, when she actually saw the couple it was this realization which not only shocked her with disbelief but she was also overcome by a tremendous need to prove herself wrong. It was this illusion of love that she tried to sustain till the very end when she confronts her sister after engaging herself in a similar instance of physical love, with the waiter. She confides to the waiter in the hotel room - “how nice that we do not understand each other”. It is the utter silence of language that she confuses desolation with affection. Though it can be mentioned that this scene is quite similar to a particular sequence in Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *No End* (1985), where Ulla (played by Grazyna Szapolowska) is involved in a physical act with an American (played by Danny Webb), who did not speak Polish. It is a similar situation of non verbal gesture of physical love, its degradation and the silence of connection between the two individuals.

The opening sequence of the film centers on the fears, the curiosity, the suspicions and the apprehensions of Johan. Essentially in the film, Johan becomes the central core of the problematic discourse of comprehending meaning and understanding, which is repeatedly countered in the film. He is severed from the adult world and finds himself constantly trying to relocate his fondness for those who were supposed to love him. In the train compartment, he can look at his sick aunt only through the glass pane. He looks out of the train for the pleasure of watching the passing images but what he confronts is nothing but symbols of destruction – the war tanks. For Johan, the train corridor is almost similar to the huge and empty hotel. In the course of the film, he is torn and tormented between the sexual prowess of his mother and the intellectual indifference of his aunt. Both providing him with worlds, he can never belong to. His innocence overwhelms him with a tremendous sense of suspicion of the adult world. He tries to communicate with the dwarfs but when they reject him, he revolts passively by urinating on the wall. Identifying with the loneliness of the old waiter, he tried to talk to him but soon finds the old man offering him nothing but images of death. He craves for his mother’s love and care but knows that she is with somebody else behind the locked door. He cannot read to his aunt, an intellectual act. He can display a puppet show, where violence again breaks in - Punch speaks in a funny language and beats up Judy. He can only draw a sad face with fangs. He hides his tears behind the chair, for like his mother he suffers betrayed emotions. Silence descends like the darkness of the hotel corridors, specifically manifested through his inability of understanding the world in which he lives, where language is muted and the major colours are those of shadows.

Ester's silence is that of being confined in her world of intellect, without the means of reaching out to establish human communication with others. Her unnamed sickness diffuses her mind and fills it with a delusive estrangement and a kind of an emotional paralysis that negates her ability to connect with others. With the old waiter of the hotel the first exchange of communication that she indulges, culminates only in knowing the word for 'hand' in his language as 'kasi', which is again directly related to her profession as a translator. The shrewd sense of loneliness, desolation and ambiguity of her position, crippled by her own sensibility, her intellect and her limitations invoke the tormented structure of her mind in which she deliberately limits herself. It can be pointed out that her sense of sterility and rigid disposition consciously poses her aloof from people around her. It is a tendency that she has developed, to liberate herself from oppressions and obligations. As opposed to Anna, Ester becomes very similar to Karin in *Cries and Whispers*, both played with a hysterical impassivity by Ingrid Thulin.

Her unnamed sickness (assumed from the symptoms, can be concluded as some fatal lung disease), is an ailment of her soul. It breeds upon her like a breach or like an indelible wound that never allows her to experience togetherness. For her, there is always this need to intellectualize human instincts and emotions and unconsciously subvert every possible human intuition. This is reflective in her relationship with Anna and Johan. Her possessiveness of Anna is symptomatic of her intellectual superiority and her utter inability of understanding the pleasures of the body, as closely experienced by Anna. Anna's naked body becomes for Ester the problematic domain which she can never theorize with all her intellect. Though she derides Anna's ability to attract others by her voluptuous nature, somewhere deep in her conscience she is threatened by this sensuality which she can never evoke in herself. The only bodily pleasure that she is able to derive is from her own body and this is soon followed by a violent fit of sickness. Yet she hysterically continues to hold on to the need to keep her head, the fear of seeing her in that condition traumatizes her – "I'm known as a level headed person".

The violence and the animosity that breaks out between the two sisters at the end of the film assume a physicality that ceases to be anymore of a veiled contempt for each other. Anna attacks Ester, exclaiming: "You hate me because you hate yourself – and all I have!" The turmoil of this brutal insight is what enfolds the two women throughout the film and this confusion can never be resolved between them. Ester's intellect and understanding ironically reflects Anna's sensuality and animality. At the end of the film, Ester speaks about this revulsion and the fundamental silence, inherent in human lives. It is a failure of words and spoken sentiments that can only make a slight gesture of life and then everything falls into this incomprehensible silence of indifference, with those around us and most brutally with ourselves - "Erectile tissue... It's all a matter of swollen tissue and secretion. A confession before extreme unction: Semen cells nasty to me. I've a very keen sense of smell and I stank like a rotten fish when I was fertilized. It's optional. I wouldn't accept my wretched role. But now its too damn lonely. We try out attitudes, and find them all worthless. The forces are too strong. I mean the forces. The horrible forces. You need to watch your step – among all the ghosts and memories. All this talk... There's no need to discuss loneliness. It's a waste of time" It is in the heart of this irony that the silence of their existence depends. The silence of never acquiring, the ability to express their turmoil to one and another. It is self destructive and self consuming, the silence of human voices, words, emotions and vulnerabilities.

Bergman's *The Silence* revolves around the empty chambers of our mind, without ever having the solitude of remembrances and familiarities. The recognition of turmoil and the acceptance of a passive brutality that haunts human heart are all that imagination and reality can provide us with utmost certitude. It is this that hints at a possibility of a redemption. It is only in the ability of acquiring this verisimilitude of human suffering, with poignancy and perfection that the film grows into an ironic testament of human togetherness and the bleakness of a security that is readily absorbed in correlating felt feelings and emotions.

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