



## **Speech in Parentheses: Reading the Interplay of Silence in**

### **Habiburahman's *First, They Erased Our Name***

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#### **Abstract:**

On analysing Habiburahman's *First, They Erased Our Name*, the first available Rohingya memoir in the post-exile era, this paper wishes to read how silence gets woven into memory. In its most primary form, silence hints at the absence of speech, not arising just from the absence of a speaker, nor just highlighting the oppressive forces rendering that silence. Rather, the speaker's socio-cultural and political identity, situatedness, and relative affects create layers of silences. Adhering to Robyn Fivush's distinction between "being silent" and "being silenced" as its overarching framework, this paper will delve into untangling the mesh of socio-political reasons that render one speechless due to the clash of agencies of self and the other.

**Keywords:** Rohingya, silence, memory, identity, statelessness.

## Introduction

Who is an outsider? Who is an insider? One ponders upon these questions when facing a testimonial of exile and/or forced migration. More than the common people, it is the state that initiates the arbitrary labelling of people living within its borders due to certain geopolitical shifts. The Rohingya in post-colonial Myanmar experiences the same kind of othering that did not allow them to get assimilated with the majority of the country. Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess mention that assimilation is a long-term “process of interpretation and fusion” (qtd. in McGunnigle-Gonzales 11). As the Rohingya have been devoid of this dialogic interpretation, their ethnic memories witnessed a stunted growth that gave birth to socially-accepted silences. Around these silenced memories, their narratives take shape like a deformed entity that always strives to conceal the gaps. However, *Habiburahman* in *First, They Erased Our Name* – the first available memoir of the Rohingya, takes up the task of laying bare his memories with all the crevices and fissures. This paper aims to explore these nodes of silences as sites of both inhibitions and strategic agency for people devoid of freedom of choice. These sites of silences will be read in this paper in personal-political, emotional-rational, temporary-permanent, passive-reactionary, ethical-relational (strategic) terms to unveil not only the layers of silence but also to understand their creative dynamics utilised by the author-narrator.

## Discussion

“We see the past [...] What is left repressed or what can't be uttered, is often as significant to the whole shape of the life as what is said” (Braham 45) says Jean Braham. These pockets of “what can't be uttered” (Braham 45) are the locales of silence. In its most primary meaning, ‘silence’ hints at the oppressive forces that render one voiceless. However, scholars like Robyn Fivush opine that silence is a dynamic entity that emerges and functions

through a web of socio-political contexts. According to Fivush, the act of silencing has two axes, i.e. “being silenced” and “being silent” (Fivush 88). While the first case refers to the usual repressive force of muting one, the latter can be inferred as a source of power on the part of the speaker who does not ‘need to speak’ per se. It is in this juncture that the context and subject of silencing become important. This paper will take forward Fivush’s notion of silence as its cornerstone to untangle the complex web of imposed silence and tactical ones in the present memoir.

To begin with, the state of Myanmar has been silent on the Rohingya issue on the universal front forever now. Whereas, in reality, the Rohingyas are silenced by state-sponsored violence lest the rest of the world gets to know about the atrocities inflicted on them. The latter group is not only barred from free movement or education on the Burmese land, but they are also not allowed to use any type of means of communication. Even after the mass exodus in 2017, which happened as a result of the Rohingya genocide in the Rakhine state, Myanmar government kept voicing their non-violence stance in this project of fundamentalism. The silence of the state became deafening when, in 2019, the then de facto leader of Myanmar, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, attested in front of the International Court of Justice that the Fact-Finding Mission of the United Nations had captured only a “misleading factual picture” (*Aung San Suu Kyi defends Myanmar*) of the Rakhine state. The Nobel Laureate further declared, “If war crimes have been committed, they will be prosecuted within our military justice system” (*Aung San Suu Kyi defends Myanmar*).

This becomes an essential instance of “conspiracy of silence” (Zerubavel 3) as Zerubavel terms it, and brings forth the complex mesh of silence and power politics. That the UN was not ready to sit back silently in the face of the genocide, destabilised Suu Kyi’s position as a leader and made her even more desperate to ignore the ongoing violence. A state cannot essentially escape being dominating and banal. As modern nation-states are

confluences of ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism, the power of the state depends on exhibiting a balance between the two on the global stage. Doing so, however, pushes it further towards precarity. A constant struggle goes on among the citizens in proving their belongingness to the geopolitically marked land, mostly barred of ethnic and cultural ties. Amidst these contestations, a state, by its very nature, becomes prone to irrationality to sustain the power and maintain the status of an independent political entity. Therefore, Aung San Suu Kyi's monumentalisation of peace and denial of any genocide on the international stage, besides being a deafening silence, acts as a weapon of maintaining sovereignty. However, within the nation, it paves the path for absolute power and injustice.

Liyun Wendy Choo in her paper "Hearing the Silence: Burman Privilege in Myanmar" shows how often the dominant narrative does not feel the need to be voiced. However, this silence is not imposed but is a testament to the power it carries within itself. Fivush also observes, "[...] power derived from conformity leads to being silent, a life lived in harmony with the shared cultural script that does not require rich compelling stories. In contrast, deviation often leads to being silenced and the need to gain back power through voice, to justify and explain one's life" (Fivush 96). Against such a background, Habib's memoir does not only encompass various moments of silence but silence becomes a tool for weaving the same. It absorbs and reflects the tension between the different situations of silence that have hitherto been put into a single bracket as oppressive.

However, this paper would also begin with the most dominant type of silence – "being silenced" (Fivush 88). As mentioned above, this refers to the imposition of silence – be it by an authority or by self. In both the cases, the control emerges from the hegemonic power that leads to the loss of memory as well as the loss of self. In Habiburrahman's life narrative, this imposition of silence comes mostly from the politically majoritarian state apparatus of

Buddhist-dominated Myanmar. The very first chapter of the book begins with the pronunciation of an impending silence,

[...] to retain Burmese citizenship, you must belong to one of the 135 recognised ethnic groups, which form part of eight ‘national races’. The Rohingya are not among them. With a stroke of the pen, our ethnic group officially disappears. [...] From now on, the word ‘Rohingya’ is prohibited. It no longer exists. We no longer exist. (Habiburahman, ch. 1)

This systematic denial of citizenship to the ethnic minority does not only enable the leaders to ignore them on the universal front but also initiates the process of collective forgetting since the Rohingyas may not necessarily transform according to the dominant cultural and social norms of the state. Although this specific instance does not literally silence the subjects, the metaphorical one paves the path for the active violence to gag the Rohingya even in their personal spaces.

Nevertheless, till the third chapter, Habib's family space does not get intruded upon, and only the public sphere remains the locale of the silencing processes. The second chapter that flows with Grandma's stories of the past of the Rohingya comes to a halt only when she recounts the present scenario and the state-sponsored erasure of their identity. Joseph E. Davis opines that stories simultaneously re-narrativise the past and bestow it with meaning and link those to the present (12). Habib's grandmother telling stories therefore, acts not merely as a leisurely family-time but operates as a medium continuity between the past and the present to move forward into the future. Davis opines, “[t]hrough identification and “co-creation” of a story, the storyteller and...listener create a “we”...told and retold, “my story” becomes “our story” (19). Thus, she is can reconfigure the identity of the new generation from being a victim to becoming aware of the silenced histories.

It is from this very notion of being bound in a thread of “our story” (Davis 19) that the word ‘Rohingya’, which is forbidden and can be pronounced only in secret, evokes a fellow-feeling among Habib and his distant relatives. However, Habib's father's silence and warning against this identity hint at the imminent danger tied to it. Infliction of another identity, on the other hand, cannot satisfy Habib's desire for thrills. While the ‘Rohingya’ identity fills him with the nostalgia of a lost golden age, ‘kalar’ strips him bare of his day-dreams and thrust him to the impending dangers of their everyday life. In contrast to Habib's sense of identity in his childhood, his father feels safe by being called a ‘kalar’ instead of feeling insulted, as it allows them to get grouped with the Muslim community. This gives them the opportunity to be slightly invisible in a heavily hyphenated society and keep death at the bay for one more day. Thus, even the subjective choices of silence regarding identity in a state like Myanmar are actually governed by the hegemonic preferences of being silent.

Not only this, the quandary of a lost time and a confused identity enter the realm of covert and overt silencing as theorised by Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger in “Silence and Collective Memory”. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger write, “To remember the past, it seems, we must recount and recollect it” (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger). Grandma's storytelling sessions, where every day she recounts the same history of the state in her youth to her grandchildren appear to be a mnemonic activity to instil their unique identity in them. She does know that these cannot be voiced in the public space anymore, yet her daily activity surpasses the state-sponsored overt silence and keeps the memory alive. Thus, while being stuck in memory, she freezes memories in the present as well.

The process of institutionalised silencing becomes more prominent as Habib grows up and can read situations in their contexts. In 1988, after Sein Lwin becomes the president of Burma during the pro-democratic uprising, people of all the minority communities regard it as their moment of being saved from the status of sub-humans. However, their dream of

freedom is thwarted, and the dictator Ne Win gains back power only to crush them like weeds. Although his mother's disappearance did shock him, the utter silence about it in the family does not allow him to wonder much about the ongoing violence. During this phase of his life, it is only the silences that come after great uproars leave a mark in his mind. That is why, Habib actively starts negotiating with violence in his day-to-day life when his father's shop gets looted.

The disappearance of Habib's mother, however, disturbs the grown-up author-narrator. That the shroud of mystery never left their family becomes apparent as the author-narrator reveals, "[t]o this day, I still don't know why my mother went on that journey. Nor what happened when she arrived in the unknown place that I've only ever seen in my dreams" (Habiburahman, ch. 4). While his father did not stop raising his voice even in front of the military officials at times, this part of their family history remains to be an erased past—the only instance of overt silencing in the personal space of the author-narrator. Although it does seem to be a silence consciously chosen by the elders of the family, this choice does not emerge from a desire to break the barriers but from the necessity to safeguard the children from a horrific memory. It underlines the non-negotiable truth, yet is avoidant of another truth of consequences. McGunnigle-Gonzales argues that when a new narrative overshadows the old one, or a dominant the subaltern one, the latter gets on the sideline of the collective memory and brings out "narrative amnesia" (McGunnigle-Gonzales 166). In this case, however, there remains a sheer absence of any kind of narrative to shroud the incident in silence. This takes the form of intentional forgetting, where shared silences accompany new memories and help create a new jigsaw puzzle, subduing the old one. Paul Connerton famously writes, "[n]ot to forget might in all these cases provoke too much cognitive dissonance: better to consign some things to a shadow world" (63). Habib's life thereafter gets shaped around this "shadow world" (Connerton 63), learning silence as a strategy to

survive. Quite obviously, till the end Habib does not dare disclose even what he would see in his dreams.

However, even the elders fail to save their children at times. Chapter 21 shows that after their arrival in New Thatkaybyin, one day Habib's father takes him to show their family heirloom — a piece of land that the government has taken away to build army quarters. His dad remembers family legends regarding the land to his son in an attempt to keep the memory alive and at that very moment the thin web of nostalgia gets pierced by the soldiers. The author narrator writes, “A roar disturbs the silence” (Habiburahman, ch. 20). It is ironical how he describes the rare moment of Rohingya voice and history as silence in contrast to the power that comes with a roar to render them silent. Thus, the covert silence regarding the community that was getting a moment of remembrance again gets suppressed under the heavier, state-sponsored silence of power.

Irene Levin in her “Silence, Memory and Migration” opines that while moving from one place to the other, the migrants try to lessen their ‘baggage’ by selecting some memories to remember and others to forget. Although these selections are mostly subjective, since migration is a communal phenomenon and collective memory plays an integral role in being connected with the motherland, the choice of being silent give them a shared power to move on with life. Especially in the case of physically violent environments, people learn to live in such an extraordinary situation and normalise it. Thus, it does not remain as extraordinary to them as it is to an outsider and becomes an “elephant in the room” (Levin 716) which they have learnt to ignore.

At this juncture, it must be remembered that in a vulnerable situation like this, all the acts of people are mostly determined by ‘necessity’. As mentioned above, even the sense of choice revolves around the vortex of what-is-to-be-done-to-dodge-death. The seventh



chapter, that brings the army even closer to Habib's house, hints at the gradual effacement of normal life of the Rohingya. In this chapter, the army again comes to extort money from his father's shop and this time they take their 'gifts' themselves and leave a red stain of beetle nut as a "bad memory" (Habiburahman, ch. 7) for the boy. However, his father remains silent. Habib recounts,

He stares impassively at the soldier, showing [...] no visible emotion. He has told me that you must remain neutral when the army takes a dislike to you [...] Dad remains silent. Lips pursed, he tidies the shelf before pulling me onto his lap and giving me a long hug during which I sense just how powerless and disconcerted he feels. (Habiburahman, ch. 7)

While the powerlessness is a result of their vulnerability in a fundamentalist state, the overt silence resonates more of a strategy to survive. Because in the same chapter Habib remembers how on the same day he, along with his father, entered the forbidden zones to gather leaves and woods that would survive them until the army kills them one fine morning.

On the other hand, there goes on a continuous process of normalisation of violence through being silent. This conscious choice also unravels the everyday negotiations of these marginalised people with both physical and psychological abuse. After Habib's family moves to New Thatkaybyin, cramped up in a small speed boat, the violence does not decrease. Rather, the teenage Habib witnesses everyday how his relatives would be tortured and dream about prison cells. He simultaneously represses his nightmares as well as the family does not talk about these multiple sojourns to the police station. This instance of being silent again takes the form of overt silence, which will bury the stories of degradation and humiliation without giving them a chance to be recounted. Since Habib and his community are unable to put an end to the violence, 'forgetting' becomes their only coping mechanism.

Despite all these, a streak of hope remains in them. For Habib and his father, it is the dream of education that allows them to keep their sanity amidst the overwhelming silence. It is only with that hope that allows his father to voice, “You see, Habib, even if everything is conspiring against us, we must never stop claiming what is rightfully ours” (Habiburahman, ch. 10). However, given the tumultuous situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar, even Habib's journey towards emancipation is shrouded with silence — both inflicted and chosen. The first instance of rendering Habib and in turn the whole community silent is imposing the language of the state, i.e. Burmese, as the medium of education. Habib recounts that when he grew up enough to keep a secret, he would go to “clandestine” (Habiburahman, ch. 3) classes to learn the Rohingya language. Whereas, to get assimilated and remain unnoticed in Burma, he had already been initiated into Arakanese and Burmese.

Treading the dark waters of education, when Habib finally finishes his school, he is unable to collect his certificate as he does not have identity documents. It is ironical to note that if he did have those, his dream would be nipped in the bud. Instead of being rebellious to ascertain his identity, to further his dream, Habib takes a conscious decision to betha silent and do whatever is needed to fulfil his greater goal. That is why, while leaving for college, he writes, “From now on, I use my Burmese name, Aung Soe Naing, Nyi Nyi to my friends. Although that cannot hide the colour of my skin, it does mean that I go unnoticed on the papers that are passed between the school and the authorities” (Habiburahman, ch. 27). The chosen silence does not make these vulnerable people powerless as much as it proves their desire to lead a normal life amidst all adversities. That solely speech can be silenced but not dreams, becomes apparent also when Habib recounts his father writing down his memories in the “old yellowing notebooks” (Habiburahman, ch. 23). While the father-son duo does compromise with their verbal-vocal rights, their aspirations never surrender to silence. Instead, they use verbal-vocal silence as a means to carry forward their dreams.

Habib goes a step further to move beyond the “bottomless quagmire of life as a Rohingya” (Habiburahman, ch. 26) when his father, out of parental love, tries to stop him from making the voyage outside his homeland. However, the resolute author-narrator cuts off relationships and moves forward in silence. Ironically, except towards father, this silence comes with misbehaviours towards everyone. He ingrains in them the image of himself as a gruff adult who is better gone, which can be regarded as the mnemonic to a covert silence rendering his disappearance also as an “elephant in the room” (Levin 716). He does not write back to Nway Nway, his secret beloved, only to unleash the process of forgetting, thereby removing any impediment towards the journey to his only opportunity of emancipation. Even when he did raise his voice against the state with holding secret meetings and distributing pamphlets, he does so in silence, unlike other movements across the globe. Furthermore, when he gets caught by the junta, he falls back on his father's strategy of silence to dodge the bullet for another day. These silences are not expressions of submission but of tactical resistance. Here, the action is more important than his literal voice. Habib remembers,

The more I speak, the less chance I have of getting out. I must resist. That is all I can do now, however painful it is. I am a Muslim, a student, from Shan, no ambitions, an orphan. Deny, deny everything. I am innocent, and those who are innocent can still hope for justice through corruption. (Habiburahman, ch. 34)

All the lies he tells to himself is just a way to internalize another new identity only to get saved as his proud pronunciation of his identity as a Rohingya is the greatest danger at the moment.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, this paper has illustrated instances of silence being a multifaceted sociopolitical and cultural phenomenon, signalling both power and powerlessness based on the agent using

it. In its very basic format, since it is an absence of a narrative, it is important to understand what kind of narratives get suppressed while acting as a weapon to either resilience or survival. John Barnes suggests that people remember only those narratives that help them fit into the society (qtd. in McGunnigle-Gonzales 16). Habib and his family still talk about things that will not make them prone to more state-sponsored violence. While silence has mostly been used as a survival strategy throughout the text, “humiliated silence” (Connerton 67) creates the greater framework of the memoir. Connerton proposes that humiliated silence is propounded by the civil society and is generated through shame that ultimately imposes a taboo on a subject (67). He suggests that people fall silent “out of terror or panic or because they can find no appropriate words” (68). It is this shame that keeps Habib silent about his dreams of his mother’s absence, even in his memoir, and makes his father uncomfortable about calling himself a Rohingya. However, the text as a testimonial finally comes out to mitigate the silence and voice the hitherto repressed identities.

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