

# GROWING UP THROUGH SILENCE: INSTANCES OF TRANSATLANTIC FEMALE CONSTRAINT IN ANITA DESAI'S *FASTING, FEASTING*

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What Uma said was nothing<sup>1</sup>  
And silence is Brahman, the Absolute, the Uncreate<sup>2</sup>

Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* portrays transatlantic experiences of female constraint on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite the prevalent differences characterising the Indian and American societies, women from both countries undertake similar experiences of (in)voluntary silence in search of a voice of their own. In India, Uma, the eldest unmarried woman of a traditional Indian family, inculcates her duty to quieten her own voice while managing to use silence as a retaliating weapon to prompt her growth as a woman. In the hectic American society, where noise is so prevalent, Melanie, a bulimic young female in the land of plenty, feels the need of silence to hear her own voice in the midst of the surrounding hubbub. The interaction between words and silence in Desai's novel proves a metaphor for women's transatlantic growth in search of raising their voices over the deafening noise of America or the overwhelming silence of India, only broken by the constant voices of others.

Throughout many of her novels, Anita Desai lyrically portrays the inner life of different female characters belonging to the Anglicised Indian bourgeoisie. This trait has often been mentioned to justify the sympathy Desai's characters tend to arouse in both Indian and western readers. In her novels, females habitually

<sup>1</sup> Anita Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* (London: Vintage, 2000) 151.

<sup>2</sup> Raja Rao, "The Cave and the Conch: Notes on the Indian Conception of the Word," *The Eye of the Beholder: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Maggie Butcher, (London: Commonwealth Institute: 1983) 45.

become trapped and alienated characters subjugated to the yoke of different institutions embodied within the Indian society such as family, marriage, patriarchy, tradition and cultural identity. Nevertheless, in her novel *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai establishes a transatlantic parallelism between the situation women experience both in India and America. The female characters of Desai's novels usually undertake a process of personal growth while coping with daily constraints by adopting escapist ways to tackle reality embodied in instances of silence. Desai's characters willingly isolate themselves within an idealised silent past often disturbed by the demanding and noisy present of responsibilities towards others. In an essay about the Indian conception and understanding of the word, Raja Rao focuses his attention on some verses from Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsha* that make reference to the fact that a word and its meaning form one single entity. In *Fasting, Feasting*, silence and words become prominent factors by means of which women grow and find their own identity in their own culture, despite the fact silence threatens to subjugate their inner wishes.

Likewise, in the Hindu mythology, the sacred couple formed by Parvathi and the Lord Shiva also represent a union. The female being, Parvathi, who is conceived as the daughter of the Himalayas, represents "the vibrant activity of the mountain" (Rao 1983: 44), and by extension, she stands for the necessity for action and movement in order to perform Shiva's demands. Translating this into linguistic terms, Parvathi is the word and its sound, the external and physical part of one self. By contrast, Lord Shiva is represented as an ascetic, a Lord who is deeply concerned with meditation. Shiva is often associated with lack of movement and he is often represented sitting on the Hymalayas, the mountain of which Parvathi is a daughter, meditating in the midst of a profound silence.

Raja Rao equates this couple with the union between word and meaning that takes place in literature. Word and meaning become one, and form "the unobstacled", that is, literature, which becomes in turn sacred and true. As for the figure of the poet, he becomes the seer and the sage who turns the silence or the unspoken word ("para") into the formulated and visible word ("pashyanathi"). Subsequently, this visible word becomes the sounding word ("madhayama"), and finally the latter becomes the utterance ("vaikhari"). Moreover, the dichotomy word-silence can be interpreted as complementary, not only because both items become a unity in literature as silent written words, but also because for any utterance to be noticed silence is required. Both sound and silence cannot exist without its counterpart. Even silence is not defined as the lack of sound by Raja Rao, but as the womb of sound, since silence comes before and after. Likewise, before any creation, which is associated with sound, and therefore, with a female gender, Parvathi, there must be that which is the uncreated, the silence, which appertains to male gender, since it is associated with Shiva. In turn, the uncreated

becomes the created by means of love-making (“rasa”), which is defined by Raja Rao as “the aesthetic joy of the unmanifest rising to manifestation” (1983: 45), and the created eventually returns to the uncreated in order to complete the circle.

With respect to literature, silence, the womb of creation, eventually turns into words by means of love-making, and the words are reified by the will of the poet. In order to complete the circle, these words become silence again after the reading has already been finished. Consequently, the interaction between sound and silence, represented by Parvathi and Shiva, becomes transcendental in order to understand the creation of universal literary works, but it especially proves relevant to describe the situation of the Indian women in Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*.

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Raja Rao’s Indian conception of silence can be applied to Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* at two main levels: as a work of a creation per se and as representative portrayal of the voice of which both western and Indian females have traditionally been deprived. According to Anita Desai, “without silence, and privacy, no two consecutive and comprehensible lines can be written.” (1983: 55) In other words, no work of art can be created if there is no previous silence to reflect firstly so as to give voice to the resulting thoughts. Anita Desai believes it is the lack of silence in the Indian women’s home place what leads to the scarce outcome of literary fiction produced by female writers in India. Women seem to fulfil the female role of action and movement set by Parvathi, since they are entirely devoted to the cares of the family and the home. Indian women are constantly in touch with the voices echoing in their home place, and they are accustomed to hearing them. However, the hearing of their relatives’ voices prevents them from speaking, and therefore, from raising their voices to materialise their needs as women and as writers. Women’s paying attention to others and sacrificing for them eventually leads them to her confinement in a home of silence, which they can only escape by being granted a voice. Anita Desai, by means of her portrayal of Indian women’s situation in *Fasting, Feasting*, is trying to raise the voice of some women whose voices either have been silenced, or are too low to be heard by the rest of the nation.

Most of the female characters in *Fasting, Feasting* are silent women whose voice is only allowed to be raised when they perform a role that tradition and society has purposefully designed for them. Taking into consideration that the fact of naming by means of the use of one’s voice implies asserting the existence of a being, it is assumed that these female characters, and by extension Indian women, are deprived of their identities as separate human beings. They are rejected their right to use their voices, and eventually they are condemned to silence, that is, the uncreated. Their voice is only granted to them by what Raja Rao calls “love-

making”, that is, the female’s intercourse or relationship established with parents (parenthood), husbands (marriage), or children (motherhood). As a result, the roles of an Indian woman as daughter, wife and mother are the only parts that define her as a female, and consequently, grant her a possibility of having voice, since society would only listen to a woman who proves capable of performing these roles.

However, in order to complete the circle of creation, silence returns to the life of an Indian woman after a period through which she has been granted some attention. Firstly, her birth gives her some identity as a daughter, although the birth of a girl is fairly less desired than that of a son, which is soon counteracted and silenced by her obeying the desires of the institution of parenthood, which in the novel becomes one in the name “PapaMama.” Moreover, a woman’s marriage to a proper husband grants her some voice in the family and society and this is symbolised by the dowry the father figure presents to his family-in-law. Nevertheless, the daughter’s voice is soon silenced by her husband and her in-laws, and it is sometimes the case that the female is silenced to the point of death, as happens with Anamika. Thirdly, the identity of a woman is only fulfilled according to social and patriarchal standards if she becomes a mother. It is only then that a female voice is allowed to rise loudly since motherhood is considered the most privileged duty for a woman. However, women are even silenced as mothers, since when their daughters get married, they belong to their husbands.

Most characters in the novel attempt to perform the roles that the Indian society requires them to play. This seems to be the only plausible way for women to use their voices, and be granted an identity as a daughters, wives, or mothers, even if it is only a half identity which has to be shared with a male figure, that is, a father, a husband, or a son who make women daughters, wives, and mothers, thus granting them an identity and, by extension, a voice of their own. Uma’s identity as a wife and a mother is silenced, since her two attempts of marriage are never made effective, and her third and achieved marriage turns to be cancelled because her husband Harish was already married and had four children, which leads her to be regarded as ill-fated female by her family and society. Nevertheless, Uma learns to use her silence, and by extension, her lack of identity, as a wife and mother to her own advantage as a daughter. In her case, her silence can be interpreted as lack of sound or repression. Uma’s silence eventually becomes a womb for sound or response, that is to say, a weapon resembling the Gandhian peaceful movement of non-resistance, a silence which is retaliating and ultimately embodies the womb for the sound. Subsequently, Uma learns to use the masculine feature of silence used to describe the Lord Shiva, who is a male, to complain about her situation as a female and grow up despite her repression.

At this point, it is worth focusing on some concrete examples throughout the novel that often identify women with silence, or describe their speech as

interventions uttered by means of an almost intelligible low-pitched voice. One of the first instances can already be identified in the description of Uma's behaviour after her parents have been discussing if she should be writing a letter to her brother Arun, or making up a parcel for him instead, which leads Uma to choking despair due to all the tasks her parents request her to complete for her brother's benefit. Nonetheless, Uma desestimates any attempt of complaint, but rather sets off to perform the task "muttering under breath" (Desai 2000: 5), which stands for an instance of Uma's silence as a sign of repression, being unable to clearly voice her situation, or even expecting her complaint would be of no avail.

Another instance which leads Uma to surrendering to silence occurs when her first suitor, recommended by Mrs Joshi, is invited to Uma's house. Before the suitor and some of his relatives actually arrive, Uma's mother starts complaining about the reason why Uma has not learnt to cook "samosas" or "barfi" since she had been attending school until she was required to stay home to take care of her newly-born brother Arun. During this quarrel, Uma feels the need to voice a complaint against her mother's behaviour. However, she finds herself unable to utter any disagreement since "Uma would have protested if her mother had not been manhandling her quite roughly, pushing very small bangles over her large hands and onto her wrists" (Desai 2000: 76). In this case, Uma's need to use her voice is not allowed again and she is confined to silence.

Similarly, there are occasions on which Uma uses her voice but her utterance is clearly ignored, or pretended to have been unnoticed. At some point in the novel, Uma ventures to give her opinion about the awful state of her father's car. Uma's father's response to her daughter's profanation of his affairs is described by means of the behaviour he adopts after her daughter's remark: "he [Uma's father] remains impassive, as if he prefers not to hear her and has not heard her" (Desai 2000: 11). Thus, in this particular instance, Uma does not remain silent, but her voice is ignored, which again confines her to another type of silence which is not voluntary in this case, but clearly imposed upon.

Another illustration of Uma's silence occurs when Papa takes her and her mother to the park. Papa is always leading the way and the two women find themselves unable to reach him, although significantly they never lose sight of his presence which is permanently looming in front of them. His presence compels the two women to keep a quick pace that unables them to enjoy the walk. Actually, Uma is delighted by the smell of peanuts and ice-cream in the park to the point "she finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing" (Desai 2000:12). Uma is allowed no time to fulfil her whims since both women are supposed to hurry so as not to lose sight of Papa.

Another instance that illustrates the repressed silence of which Mama seems to be a faithful supporter takes place when Uma's first suitor decides to propose to Aruna instead of the eldest daughter as custom dictates. Once Mrs Joshi and Mama have finished discussing the situation, Uma is told nothing about her suitor's choice, and although she knows the negative outcome of this first attempted marriage, Mama does not talk to her about it, thus not granting her any opportunity to voice her shame and express her feelings. In the novel, this fact is described when it is mentioned "at lunch Mama said nothing of the incident but kept a gloomy silence" (Desai 2000:79).

Subsequently, Uma is told to transcribe a letter addressed to her brother Arun while her father dictates everything she is supposed to write. In this case, Uma is again deprived of voicing her own feelings and thoughts since it is only her father the one who has the privilege to speak and convey his ideas. Uma is only required to write down what she hears from her father, which again stands for the prevalence of a patriarchal voice over Uma's attempt to use her own. In this case, the silence needed for Uma to listen to the words she must transcribe is interpreted negatively. It is not a silence by means of which Uma can reflect on her situation so as to finally raise her voice, but it implies Uma's total absence of words, since the silence is completely filled with another voice which is her father's.

When Uma is considered an ill-fated woman after her three attempted marriages prove unsuccessful, and she is withdrawn from school to take care of her brother Arun, she is offered a job to work outside the domestic domain. Dr. Dutt asks Uma to help her at the Medical Institute. From the very beginning, the attitude Uma's parents adopt towards this proposal is utterly unhelpful. The opinion of Uma's father is described by mentioning his "frown was filled with everything he thought of working women, of women who dared presume to step into the world he occupied" (Desai 2000:143), and consequently, Uma's mother decides to tell Dr. Dutt Uma does not need to work outside the house. Uma's parents have already voiced their opinion about her daughter's future without having even asked for her opinion. This event leads Dr. Dutt, described as a far more liberated woman, to say "shouldn't we ask Uma for her view?" (Desai 2000:143). However, Uma's mother even lies and says she is suffering from a serious illness, and consequently, Uma has to take care of her at home. In this case, Uma's voice and opinion about her future is completely silenced. Uma is prevented from uttering her wish and her enclosure within the domestic domain is even reinforced. The ultimate hope for Uma to get the job Dr Dutt had offered is phone her in order to voice her wish to accept the job, but the doctor does not quite believe Uma's mother is not ill, and she tells her she will phone her back again when her mother is at home. In addition, Uma's father discovers her daughter has been using the telephone, a fact which is almost forbidden on the grounds it is very expensive. The fact Uma is not allowed

to use the phone responds to another instance of silencing her voice, since Uma is again forbidden to speak.

According to the differentiation coined by Raja Rao, these examples of silence can be interpreted as simply lack of sound, that is, a kind of silence that has been imposed and is made effective willingly or unwillingly on the part of the speaker, or a voice which is simply left unheard. It is not a fertile silence, or a womb for sound which may aid in preparing the raising of Uma's voice. One instance that may begin to illustrate Uma's unimposed silence, and therefore, carrying some liberating meaning, takes place while she stays in the temple with Mira-masi. Uma is immersed in a silence of meditation and praying to Lord Shiva. This silence surrounding her is not interpreted as an instance of repression that is inflicted on her by others or by herself, but it stands for a moment of reflection and peacefulness which, according to Anita Desai, is necessary to recover the voice. When Uma is in the temple, she becomes aware of the difference between all the noises and orders to which she was exposed at home as opposed to the overwhelming silence that rules in this sacred place. Her staying in this temple is meaningful since Uma, for the first time, seems to reflect on her repressed situation since it is mentioned that "that was what Uma felt her own life to have been – full of barks, howls, messages, and now – silence" (Desai 2000: 61). Conversely, this fruitful silence does not last for long, since Uma's cousin Ramu and her brother Arun arrive at the temple to take her back home on behalf of her parents. The silence of meditation in which Uma was immersed is progressively turned into a silent conflict between her will and that of her male relatives, until the will of the latter prevails over Uma's decision to stay.

Uma's initial contact with this different type of silence which enables her to meditate proves quite fruitful, since she learns to use her enclosure of silence as a weapon to counteract her relatives' high-pitched voices and demands. A clear instance of this takes place when Uma learns about her first suitor's being interested in her sister Aruna and Mrs Joshi attempts to cheer Uma by inviting her to go shopping. Uma remains silent when this offer is uttered, and she pretends not to have heard Mrs Joshi since Uma does not have any further wish to go over her rejection. But soon Uma's mother guesses that her daughter is trying to avoid an answer. In this case, Uma is encouraged to speak by her mother, but Uma knows her answer should have to be an agreement with Mrs Joshi's offer, and therefore, she decides to remain silent as a strategy to have her wish, thus using silence as a weapon now, as a womb for voicing her wish.

The use of silence as a weapon or a way to face the noisy reality that surrounds Uma is also exemplified in the behaviour she adopts when she learns that Harmish, the man she finally marries, had already a family of his own. While her father's reaction is to complain about it loudly on their way back home, Uma remains again

in a shameful silence while the other passengers in the train stare at her and become aware of her being deceived. Furthermore, when Uma's father comes to her new house to inform her about his discovery, her first reaction is "to shut not only her eyes and ears to it – she had gone into her room, shut the door and sat on the bed, wrapping her sari over her head, around her ears and mouth and eyes, till it was all over" (Desai 2000: 94). This voluntary enclosure and silence embodies her will to escape her present and oppressed reality.

Nevertheless, Uma also makes use of silence as a way to escape constraints. One night, Uma's parents leave home to attend one of their social engagements, and Uma stays home alone since Aruna has already married, and Arun is living in Massachusetts, where he moved to pursue further studies. Uma decides to lie in the garden singing to herself until the moment her parents arrive and she is compelled to rush back home and pretend she is asleep. In spite of this, Uma's mother starts shouting to make her aware of their return. Uma's response to her mother's requests is described by mentioning "she bites her lips and does not answer" (Desai 2000: 100). In this case, Uma's habit of benevolently accepting anything her parents ask her to do leads her to force herself physically not to voice an answer by means of biting her lips. Through her gradual growth, Uma begins to feel the need to fight against her own habits to prevent her wish to find its way. In this case, her silence becomes meaningful. It stands for a peaceful way of initial retaliation, an instance of non-resistance which might eventually lead her to find her voice. Her silence again is used as a weapon, although she is still in her path to growing a voice of her own.

At some point in the novel, Uma's admired Mother Agnes gives her Ella Wheeler Wilcox book of poetry *Poems of Pleasure*. Uma decides to lock herself up in her room and read through the poems to discover that her silent reading is constantly disturbed by her parents' perpetual request to prepare coffee. When Uma finally leaves her room and serves the coffee to her parents, she remains silent while she tries to memorise some lines of poetry she has just read. In this case, her silence is meant as a weapon since, as she serves the coffee, "she screams at them silently [...], her silence roars at them" (Desai 2000: 137). Again, Uma tries to use her confinement in silence to retaliate against the surrounding voices, which are said to be "sharp as an axe" (Desai 2000: 136).

In addition to Uma, there are other characters that are also representatives of absent or silenced voices. At the beginning of the novel, Uma remembers those stories told by her they were children. It is stated that both their father and mother told them stories in their childhood, but as opposed to their father's, their mother's stories "were few and brief" (Desai 2000: 6). In fact, the only way for Uma's mother to have some amusement is playing cards, which stands for a ritual in



which she gets transformed and she is able to escape from the “guarded restraint, censured, and tired decorum” (Desai 2000: 7) that rules in her domestic space.

However, the full personality Uma’s mother seems to adopt when playing cards disappears and becomes fragmentary when she arrives home, since it is there that she is compelled to share a split existence with her husband. Uma’s parents are constantly referred as PapaMama, as if they had become a wholly united existence after years of living together. However, this union also contributes to undercutting the voice of Uma’s mother since it is said that “if Papa gave his opinion of their local member of parliament or the chances of the government in the next election, Mama said nothing because he had spoken for her” (Desai 2000:14), that is, the sake of union in marriage brings necessarily the sacrificing of some privileges for the woman, which in this case is her right to speak. In this case, Mama’s silence is not a weapon, but rather an imposed lack of sound with which she seems to agree willingly, since she understands that is the place society and patriarchy have inculcated in her.

On the other hand, Aruna is Uma’s successful sister, whose charm and grace eventually enable her to achieve a nice match to the handsome Arvind, and become the mother of a son, Dinesh, and a daughter, Aisha. Thus, Aruna, unlike Uma, performs all the roles that an Indian woman is expected to fulfil. Actually, one may draw a parallelism between Uma and Aruna in *Fasting, Feasting*, and Bim and Tara in *Clear Light of Day*, since in both novels the eldest sisters, Uma and Bim, are the ones who do not marry and are left to mind the household, whereas the youngest sisters, Aruna and Tara, eventually fulfil the roles of wife and mother, and consequently, they are fully respected and admired.

Despite this contrast, Aruna does not escape the nets that trap and silence often becomes very present in her life. When her younger brother Arun is born, she stares at him in wonder, but she cannot help voicing her opinion of him as being red and ugly when he had just been born. Her female opinion is immediately silenced, while the rest of the family marvels at the birth of the first and only boy Arun. Essentially, Aruna’s name was given to her because the family expected her to be a boy and name him Arun. Unfortunately, they had to wait up until the third child is born to have a boy and name him as such.

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In the second part of the novel, the focus moves to Arun’s life in Massachusetts and the family with whom he lives, the Pattons. The vision of the American way of life described at the end of the novel is presented in sharp opposition to the life Uma and her relatives lead in India. In America, instead of the rather oppressive silence that encloses Uma, a multitude of diverse messages are constantly bombarding the Pattons through the media. The television, which is

always switched on, mediates a national wish of consumerism. But not only is consumerism favoured on the media, since the message is also made explicit on the T-shirts some women wear in the supermarket, and the multiple stickers, strips and warnings overwhelming the passers-by in the streets. However, surprising as it may seem, this unlimited and overwhelming freedom to voice different messages can also have the same effect that enclosure and constraint in India inflict on the female characters in India. The loud hubbub surrounding the Pattons does not leave any room to voice their own needs; since they are too busy listening to somebody else's messages. Despite the difference in culture, the outcome seems to amount to the same, that is, the silencing of voices, especially those of Mrs Patton and her daughter Melanie. Their voices are often inexistent, as happens with Melanie, or they are even purposefully ignored, as happens with Mrs. Patton.

One instance of the silence in which women seem to be immersed also in America is embodied by Melanie, a young bulimic girl who spends her days eating peanuts and sweets, and only speaks to express the profound disgust she feels at the food eaten by Arun. On one occasion, while Mr Patton is cooking meat in the barbecue set in the garden, Arun calls Melanie for lunch, and finds her sitting on the stairs, eating peanuts, and with the perpetual sad expression on her face as if she had been crying. She does not utter a reply, and we are told that that was "only the latest in his [Arun's] many failed attempts to involve Melanie in speech" (Desai 2000:164). Melanie's silence is therefore not imposed, actually she is encouraged to speak, unlike Uma who is never asked to utter a word. However, Melanie's silence represents her apathy and passivity in front of a society that, although free as it is, sets some very definite and particular standards of behaviour and beauty that can be just as oppressive as the silence in which Indian females are confined. Melanie suffers from bulimia; an illness born out of the constraints a society too concerned with appearance imposes on women.

At some point, Mrs Patton, Melanie, and Arun go to a swimming-pool to spend the day. Melanie, who decides not to take a bath, hides from the rest of people, and sits alone surrounded by a heap of sweets, until the moment her stomach is unable to digest them and vomits. Arun becomes aware of what has happened, and asks her if she would like him to call her mother. As one would expect, Melanie is confined in her prison of silence and is unable to utter any noise, except for her panting due to the effort she has made. Arun finds himself wondering "what hunger does a person so sated feel?" (Desai 2000:224), and one may also wonder why in such a free society where everyone seems entitled to voice his or her rights, there are also some silent voices which are also confined to the bitterest silence.

In addition to the silence imposed on women by the standards set by society, a prevalent domestic silence is also inflicted on women by men in an attempt to convey American society may not be so entirely different from that previously described in the novel. Actually, when Mr Patton has finished cooking the meat in the barbecue, Mrs Patton draws her attention to the fact that “‘Ahroon’s a vegetarian, dear-’ and then her voice drops to a whisper ‘-like me.’” (Desai 2000:166). As a result, one may notice Mrs Patton feels the need to raise her voice as to remind her husband that Arun is entitled to eat what he pleases. However, when it comes to herself, she lacks the courage to express her wish not to eat the meat her husband has prepared, and her voice undermines to the point of becoming only a whisper. In fact, Mr Patton’s response to his wife is described mentioning he “‘either does not hear the whisper, or does but ignores it” (Desai 2000:166), which stands for another instance in which patriarchy confines women into silence, despite the fact they may attempt to voice their rights.

Arun is also responsible for ignoring the voice of a female student in the cafeteria of the college. This student asks Arun for some notes for a class she has missed due to the medical assistance she needs since she suffers from cancer. Nevertheless, despite the student’s approach, Arun tries to avoid prolonging the conversation, and he leaves her to herself as soon as he can, since he is in search of a life of total freedom, and tries to avoid any kind of social bond, after the years of family commitment that, in his view, he has undergone in India. In this case, although the student is granted a voice, Arun decides to ignore it, and the result is the same as if the student’s voice had also been repressed. Therefore, the silent voices of women are also present in America.

According to this analysis of the instances in which women’s voices are silenced throughout *Fasting, Feasting*, one may prove silence works as a metaphor of the oppression that especially Indian women, but also western women, undergo. The silencing of female voices, and by extension, of their rights, needs and privileges is perpetuated through different institutions such as patriarchy, parenthood, domesticity, the inability to pursue higher education, the inability to work outside the house, the importance of sons over daughters, traditions and manners and standards of beauty. All these factors prevent females both in American and India of their own voice.

According to Raja Rao’s view, Parvathi, as the embodiment of women, should not be so concerned about listening to Shiva’s demands, representative of those of men, but take part into his meditation to reflect about her situation and be granted a voice. Similarly, by means of her work as a creator, Anita Desai attempts to grant these women their voices and denounce their situation. In Desai’s novel, silence is endowed with an ambivalent meaning, since silence prompts women to reflect on their situation and becomes a weapon of denouncement, but silence can also be

interpreted as the absence of words, a lack that is often imposed on women not only in India, but still in the western society. Perhaps, when women will not be compelled to listen so much, they may have more silence to listen to their own voices, and begin to express their thoughts on paper, thus making their experiences known to the rest of society, and by extension, finding an identity of their own, that is, approaching their peripheral situation to a more familiar centre.

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