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SILENCE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE: A READING OF SELECT BLACK AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract

Silence is precious. Silence is rest. Silence is the highest goal to achieve in life. Hence in this sense silence becomes power. But when it is imposed it suppresses freedom. Blacks have been treated violently by Americans and they lose their 'voice'. But at the same time, they have used their silence as a strategy to fool the victimizer and liberate themselves. Hence, the present paper tries to focus on silence as a strategic response or tool by taking up Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1849) and Lucy Delaney's *From Darkness Cometh the Light; or, Struggle for Freedom* (1891)

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What is often heard or listen to are words. Not Silence. Why is it that one does not listen to silence, although one often speaks through silence? Words have never been enough to communicate what one wants to. It has always been the gap, the pause, the silence that convey the meaning. Silence can be of two types: literal or physical and metaphorical. The gap, the pause or absence of words or sound in a written or oral conversation can be called physical silence. While the 'unheard', the 'unsaid' and the 'unnoticed' is metaphorical silence. So it is not lack or absence of words or speech but deprivation, suppression that is metaphorical silence.

There can be layers of silence- intentional and unintentional. The present paper is an attempt to understand intentional silence of blacks in bondage as a strategic response to reach to their highest goal, that is, to achieve freedom from their white masters.

Intentional silence is when the oppressed uses silence as a tool to break free from the oppressor. Silence and speech are usually understood as binaries. Intentional silence adopted by blacks in various adverse circumstances did great help in their journey towards freedom. Intentional silence is empowering as it does allow the speaker to retain the higher or ultimate goal while converse with the oppressor and the listener does not decipher the real meaning. "According to some studies, only about seven percent of all communication is verbal, oral and written taken together. Over fifty percent is actually body language, while thirty-eight percent is paralanguage." (Choudhary 20) Silence is a part of paralanguage. "The very absence of words allows the receiver to concentrate on other cues." (Choudhary 36-37) But, this does not happen very often. Silence is not easy to deal with. Silence can be interpreted in a number of ways and that is what

makes silence mysterious. Perhaps, this is the reason people do not tend to 'listen' to silence. "In effect silence is both signifier and signified." (Kurzon 5-6) Silence as signifier can be the absolute absence of words and that is physical silence. The physical form of silence. Kurzon further delineates, "Silence- lack of speech- as a zero signifier may be taken to be intentional silence when it is interpreted by a signified in the form of a proposition type- "I must not speak" or "I will not speak." (7) Here the speaker does not utter anything. This is what here silence signifies. Or even if he says anything that would definitely hide the real meaning. Blacks do speak and sometimes they do not in (the selected works) to the suspected whites or blacks but they do not share their secrets and hide the true intentions. Thus, their silence is not devoid of any meaning. In fact it is loaded with signified. As Kurzon notes, "For silence to have meaning in the linguistic sense, the speaker must have an intention hence- a zero signifier has an utterable signified, which can be expressed in words." (8) Here, the speaker refuses to speak. It can be one's lack of physical energy to go into an argument, confidence, fear, family shame and also a bit of sense of wrong. If someone goes silent intentionally, it implies that she/he does not consider himself or herself to go into a verbal fight or argument. So, these could be the reasons of one's physical silence but it does not mean that their silence is devoid of meaning/s. There could also be occasions when one does not want to speak taking into the account the larger good. Hence, in such cases also the silence of a speaker has meaning in linguistic sense as the speaker is intentionally silent but his/her silence can be uttered in words.

As far as silence is concerned in the context of the larger good Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings are precious. "Silence is essential. We need silence, just as much as we need air, just as much as plants need light. If our minds are crowded with words and thoughts, there is no space for us." (Nhat Hanh 22) For Nhat Hanh silence is necessary to free oneself from outside noise in order to meditate upon one's inner callings. In everyday life's noise people generally forget the ultimate goal that is at peace with one's mind and soul. The outside clutter hinders development and growth of an individual. It

sometimes can be the only answer possible and at many it can be the best answer possible. Silence is a characteristic of being at peace with oneself and the world around. Silence unlocks the immense possibility of healing and enables one to seek and see the beauty around.

Though silence was imposed on Blacks literally and metaphorically, there have been incidents in African-American autobiographies where Blacks refused speaking in order to escape slavery and attain liberty in America. Houston in the article "Speaking from Silence" substantiates significance of silence by incorporating Osofshy's idea of silence as way to resist slavery in America, "Silence, a façade of docility, and feigned ignorance were among the favoured strategies of resistance and retaliation of Afro-Americans slaves." (394) Their silence has its own meaning. So, linguistically it is intentional silence of black autobiographers. It is a form of rebellion. It has been a strategy to liberate themselves from slavery for life. Observing silence during their course of freedom they must have been able to focus on their plan and its implementation. Intentional silence must have help them in concentrating in achieving their higher goal. Hiding facts, telling lies or to pretend are all forms of intentional silence. Frederick Douglass (1817 or 1818-1895) in his *Narrative* (1845) does hide the names of kids who help him in learning alphabets. He writes, "I am strongly tempted to give names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids..." (Douglass 46) He does not reveal the names of these boys as to teach slaves was an offense which could not be pardoned. Douglass does not ask anyone what "abolition" means for he fears that if his victimizer does come to know about it he would not appreciate his slave to indulge in such any intellectual enquiry. Douglass recalls it, "I did not dare to ask anyone about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me to know very little about." (49) He further remains silent, "I held my Sabbath school at the house of a free colored man' whose name I deem it imprudent to mention; for it should be known, it might embarrass him greatly..." (Douglass 79) Douglass does not mention the exact plan of his

escape from slavery. He further maintains silence, "I deem it proper to make known my intention not to state all the facts connected with the transaction." (95) Though Douglass explains the reasons behind this intentional silence. He does not reveal all the facts as it would create great difficulties for others and slaveholders would become even more vigilant and that would hinder the path of liberation of his fellow bondmen. Douglass further adopts silence by will, "How I did so,-what means I adopted,- what directions I travelled, and by what mode of conveyance,- I must leave unexplained, for the reason before mentioned." (100) So, here Douglass goes silent. He does not utter anything about the directions he took or how he travelled. He further delineates his intentional silence when he reaches New York, "I was afraid to speak to any one for fear of speaking to the wrong one, and thereby falling into the hands of money-loving kidnappers, whose business it was to lie in wait for panting fugitive..." (Douglass 101) Douglass maintains a willful silence by changing his name so that no obstacle comes in between his dream to free himself. He writes, "I changed my name from Frederick Bailey to that of Johnson." (Douglass 102) Though when started his journey toward freedom from Baltimore he bears the name "Stanely." He changes his name for a third time when he reaches New Bedford so that he could have a distinct identity of himself as in New Bedford there were too many Johnson there. In New Bedford he changed to Douglass and since then he has been known as "Frederick Douglass." So here Douglass does speak but does not reveal his true name. This also silence where he hides facts.

Henry Bibb (1815-1854) too maintains silence, as he writes in his autobiography, by hiding his determination to escape slavery even from his wife. He writes, "It required all the moral courage that I was master of to suppress my feelings while taking leave of my little family." (Bibb 35) Bibb puts the possibility of failure of his plan if he had told the secret to his wife, "Had Malinda known my intention at that time, it would not have been possible for me to have got away, and I might have this day been a slave." (35) His boat lands in the village of Madison and there he finds his passage to Cincinnati and hides himself. Henry Bibb uses to pretend and lies as

forms of silence to save himself from difficulties in his way to liberty. During his adventures on the Prairie on being asked where he was travelling Bibb often lies. He writes, "On being asked where I was travelling, I replied that I was going home to Perrysburgh, Ohio, and that I had been out to look at the land in Missouri, with a view of buying." (112) Bibb further befools white-men by buying a trunk to make white people believe that he was one of the travellers. He mentions it, "I acted as if the trunk was full of clothes, but I had not a stitch of clothes in it." (113) Thus, Bibb tell lies and pretends. This is also silence where he hides facts and truth.

Similarly, Lucy A. Delaney's (1830-1890) autobiography *From the Darkness Cometh the Light; or, Struggle for Freedom* is also inundated with the incidents of intentional silence. In her narrative Delaney recalls when Nancy, Lucy's sister runs away from the confines of Mrs. Cox to St. Louis and her tormentor sends for her mother. Hearing her dear daughter's run away her mother hides her true feelings from Mrs. Cox and thereby she adopts an intentional silence to save herself and her daughters. Delaney writes this episode as, "Mother was very thankful, and in her heart arose a prayer of thanksgiving, but outwardly she pretended to be vexed and angry." (6) This episode is nothing else but an example of that one can be silent even when she or he is speaking as they do not reveal their true intentions. Delaney's mother fears to talk about her plan to freedom. Delaney remembers, "She did not dare to talk it over with anyone for fear that they would sell her further down the river, so I was her only confidant." (7) It was the time when according to the Fugitive Slave Law providing aid and protection to a run-away slave was punishable act. This is the reason she does not reveal in her autobiography the name of a white woman who helps Delaney when she goes to meet her mother on hearing that she would be sold soon by her mistress, Mrs. Mitchell. Delaney writes, "This white lady, whose name I am sorry I cannot remember, sympathized with me, as she knew my mother's story and had written many letters for her, so she offered me the keys of her house..." (14) When she reached the courthouse she could not believe anyone. Hence she purposely observes silence, "...I

could not tell one person from another. Friends and foes were as one, and vainly did I try to distinguish them." (Delaney 23)

As evident in many Afro-American autobiographies, Blacks did use silence as a weapon to hide their true plans from their white-skin master. Intentional Silence in the narratives of Douglass, Bibb and Delaney takes up the shape of an aesthetics as well as politics to fulfill the blacks' aspiration to be free in America. They do not reveal the names of the people whether white or coloured who helped them during their escape, some used pretention or lied about their whereabouts even to the people of colour. And, that is how they became free and a role model for other people in bondage. Lerone Bennett in his seminal book *Before the Mayflower* (1962) incorporates William Wells Brown's praise for Douglass, "White men and black men... had talked against slavery, but none had ever spoken like Frederick Douglass." (138) In the introduction to Bibb's narrative one can see the effect of incorporating intentional silence that benefits with "...a triumphant vindication of the slave's manhood and mental dignity." (1) Therefore, intentional silence has been emancipatory as it helped former slaves in meditating upon their soul's ultimate calling- to free themselves. It enabled them to live a life of a free being. Silence hides and reveals. Speech too hides and reveals. Blacks even when they speak to any suspicious white or black on their journey to free they do not reveal their plans in their conversations with such people. They hide their names, their masters name etc. so that other fellow blacks would not be punished for their audacity and find it extremely hard to get rid of their masters to attain freedom.

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