

**“The Sounds of Silence”:
An Analysis of Two Stories
by Singaporean Women
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Where the story-teller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there in the end silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence.

(Isak Dinesen *The Last Tales* 100)

The above lines are spoken by an old, wrinkled, gypsy storyteller in Isak Dinesen’s short story, “The Blank Page.” The story addresses one of the paradoxes central to literary studies—the significance of silence in making meaning. Literature is ever primed to explore the nuances of language. It deals with, among other things, the precision and subtlety in various kinds of articulation. In “The Blank Page,” however, it is precisely the limit of articulation that is explored: how at times silence can become a more important signifier than speech.

In this article I explore how the silenced can make this removal of voice an important way of communicating their resistance. These two short narratives deal with the poor, hence parochial, community and the working classes of two Asian races, Chinese and Indians. “Bandong” and “Kumari” are of interest because they are written by two Singaporean women hailing from two of the four identified racial groups in Singapore. Christine Suchen Lim is a Chinese who can claim antecedents from two different Chinese dialect groups—her Cantonese mother and her Hokkien father. Denyse Tessensohn is of Eurasian¹ descent. “Bandong” is an extract (Leong, 1998, 24–46), from a longer novel by Lim that is forthcoming while “Kumari” is a short story (Leong, 231–6).

Power and Silence

If literature is the mirror to life, questions inscribed within literary texts have an important bearing on life situations. Thus, in the context of Singapore and indeed in many other countries where sensitivities regarding political governance can close off or closely guard many possible channels of articulation, the impact of silence emerges as particularly relevant. Very often this enforced silence is associated with an authoritarian system of government. Such a conception of power as essentially centralized is critiqued by Foucault² (89–90). He disagrees with the notion of power that locates it as an overarching structure. This model of power suggests the ability to compel obedience resides in a centralized authority. In contrast, Foucault argues that power is tolerable and is tolerated only when it masks a substantial part of itself. Power can be effective only when it is exercised at multiple sites and by no one particular agent. Thus the power to silence ‘an other’ may emerge as a strategic rather than a juridical model, where power is seen not as emanating from a central point, but rather as being produced by unstable familial and other communal relationships. We get an opportunity to glimpse these strategic power points and how they successfully silence ‘the other’ in the two short stories by Lim and Tessensohn. Power acts to exclude and marginalize. From this act of exclusion, however, crucial significations can emerge. In order to comprehend these subtleties we need to understand the political and social setting of these stories, namely Singapore.

Singapore—the modern island nation state situated at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula is a nation of immigrants (mostly from China and India), with also a sizeable proportion of Malays, native to the peninsula. Singapore has over the last three decades emerged as a remarkably successful capitalist economy following its separation from Malaysia. So successful has its economic experimentation been that many countries around the world have taken it as their role model for economic progress. This remarkable progress (which has been realized in the form of vast reserves in the world bank, very low unemployment figures and one of the highest per capita incomes in Asia) has been accomplished through a system of ‘communitarian democracy,’ as it has come to be

termed (Chua, 1995),³ and a climate of multiculturalism. The major races that inhabit the island according to the last census figures released in 2000 (found in Singapore Infomap website: <http://www.sg/flavour/1m-people.html>) are the Chinese who form the majority with around 76.8%, the Malay, who form the second largest segment with about 13.9%, and the Indians, the third largest section forming a minority of about 7.9%. The rest—1.4%—is made up of what official terminology specifies as ‘Others’—mainly constituted of Eurasians, Caucasians and the expatriate community.

Economic growth has enabled remarkable social changes to be fostered, particularly in the areas of education and health. This in turn has brought about notable changes in the lifestyle of both men and women in Singapore. Women have excellent access to jobs, education and have progressed steadily over the last thirty years. There is no doubt, however, that the speed of change has made it impossible for all sections of society to benefit equally, and inevitably some social groups have been left behind. This is particularly the case for orthodox and working class sections of the three Asian communities.

The two female protagonists in “Bandong” and “Kumari,” from Chinese and Indian communities respectively, inhabit the narratives, imprinting their presence strongly within them. They are, however, portrayed as completely silent from the beginning to the end of the narrative, throughout the entirety of events set into play by their initial actions. This article sets about analyzing how and why silence as a strategy holds sway in the lives of these two women and seems to become their only mode of expression.

Predictably enough, silence has never been considered alien to women in any patriarchal society. Feminist theorists such as Felman (7–8) point out how Derrida⁴ and other deconstructionists, who critique the *logocentrism* of Western metaphysics, perceive it as based on the principle of the repressive predominance of ‘logos’—primarily *speech* over writing. This perception gives a privileged status to voice and valorizes ‘presence.’ This *presence-to-itself* of a *centre* (given the name of Origin, God, Truth, Being, or Reason) centralizes the world through the authority of self-presence. Consequently, it subordinates to itself, in a hierarchical

manner, all the other cognizable elements of the same epistemological (or ontological) system. Thus thought (presence/absence, being/nothingness, truth/error, self/other, identity/difference, etc.) is identified in fact as a subtle mechanism of hierarchization, which assures the unique valorization of the *positive* pole and the subordination or repression of the *negative*. Feminists claim that this binary division therefore privileges masculinity over femininity, speech over silence and so on. The implication follows that within Western discourse is inscribed a latent design which works to exclude women from the logical production of speech.

However, though speech generally means empowerment and silence is more often than not arraigned on the side of powerlessness, the equation is not always straightforward. This is because, traditionally, in Western societies, a strange ambivalence exists with regard to silence as a concept. In society at large and in educational institutions in the West, there is, without doubt, a great premium placed on verbal assertiveness. By contrast, silence is often perceived negatively as absence or, as Tannen and Saville-Troike (xi) point out, ‘an out-of-awareness phenomenon.’ In other words, silence is merely the background against which talk takes place. Even in the Bible, several of the allusions regarding speech and silence are mostly negative⁵ (*BibleGateway* 2000). Paradoxically, however, within the Bible itself, and in Western philosophical tradition at large, there is also a strain of sentiment that valorises silence. In the Ecclesiastes we are abjured that there is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes: 3:7). Furthermore, in the philosophical tradition many, starting with St Augustine,⁶ and continuing with others, including Heidegger and Wittgenstein have valorized forms of silence. Also, from proverbs that exist in English and several European languages (“Speech is silver, silence is golden;” “Empty vessels make the most sound;” “Still waters run deep”), it is clear that Western folk culture attaches a positive value to silence.

Women and Silence

This ambivalent stand with regard to silence is also apparent in feminist discourse. On the one hand, when opposed to speech, silence seems to imply powerlessness and yet, on the other, when opposed to chatter

it seems to indicate power. Ironically, feminist theorists point out how within texts in patriarchy, women have always been ranged on the side of powerlessness. Thus, we can point to the enduring social and literary stereotypes of the chattering bird-witted woman who is opposed to the strong, silent purposeful male or, in contrast, to the forceful, articulate male who is thrown into relief by a silent (often passive) woman, whose silence then comes to signal sullenness, stupidity or cunning. These stereotypes are played out extensively in Hollywood films of the fifties and sixties as well.

This idea of silence as a largely negative entity that conveys variously inscrutability, docility, passivity and submissiveness has also led to minority groups living in the West being labelled in certain distinctive ways. In *Articulate Silences*, a study of silences in fictions by Asian-American women, King-Kok Cheung makes the link between women and minority groups when she points out that “[t]he quiet Asians are seen either as devious, timid, shrewd, and above all ‘inscrutable’—in much the same way that women are thought to be mysterious and unknowable—or as docile, submissive, and obedient, worthy of the label ‘model minority’, just as silent women have traditionally been extolled” (2).

In many Eastern cultures, however, silence contains complex significations.⁷ Cheung for instance, analyzes different kinds of silences that prevail in distinct Asian Cultures such as Japan and China. Silence therefore need not necessarily be the result of prohibition either by patriarchal structures or a dominant culture. On the contrary, silences can carry meanings that vary with individuals and cultures. In this analysis, I would like to undertake just such an exploration of silence that attempts to unearth some of its composite meanings arising out of specific contexts. For this purpose I will compare the two short texts “Bandong” and “Kumari” to work out the multiple complementary and contrasting positions that mark the use of silences in these texts.

The two women protagonists are Ah Fah—wife of Ah Lai, the acknowledged ‘village idiot’ in “Bandong,” and Kumari, the central figure in the story by that name, both located geographically in the Malay/Singapore peninsula. While “Bandong” is set in an earlier pre-colonial Chinese settlement, the “Kumari” is very much the product of the

modern, present-day nation-state. Despite this contrast in the stories, which should inevitably reflect the different social circumstances within which the women exist, the writers still foreground silence as an innate yet indefinable element of the 'self' in the two women protagonists.

"Bandong" relates the tale of a woman being punished for adultery. The omniscient narrator of "Bandong" presents the adulteress first from the perspective of Wong Tuck Heng, an immigrant and a newcomer from the Chinese mainland to a tin mining settlement in the Malay Peninsula. On his arrival Wong witnesses the torture and pillory of a young woman, Ah Fah, by the Cantonese community of men and women who punish her for adultery with a man from a rival Hakka clan. The woman is finally drowned in a basket used to carry pigs to the market. We thus enter the episode from Wong's *male* perspective. He is the spectator; the woman is the spectacle, the object of the androcentric gaze. As Wong's companion and guide, an older miner from the settlement gleefully informs him: "The gods, ah! You're in luck, young dog! They are going to drown the bitch tonight. Come, come! You can watch it with me" (28). Ah Fah is both figuratively and literally at the receiving end of the community's wrath. When Wong first comes upon her, she is at the centre of an angry mob that is circling her ominously, "splattered with mud and dung, and bleeding from several lacerations on her face and arms" (29), we are told that "it was obvious that she had been whipped and the lashes had cut deep into her flesh" (29). Verbally too, she is abused ("slut, slattern"), and thereby reduced to her sexual parts. At the end when she is being carried to the sea in the pig basket, the sex-starved men also sexually abuse her. Throughout all these experiences, however, she never utters a word.

In Tessensohn's short story "Kumari" we encounter another mute woman. The narrative relates the story of how the young Indian girl Kumari, who serves at the till in a local National Trade Union Congress [NTUC] supermarket is persuaded by a Malay social do-gooder Arif Mydin to steal from the store in order to replenish the rapidly diminishing stock of a neighbourhood home for the elderly that is very short of funds. Kumari's theft is discovered and a move is made to bring her to trial. But the situation is speedily resolved by the timely intervention

of the inmates of the home who represent the case to their Member of Parliament who, in turn, intercedes successfully on Kumari's behalf. Kumari is freed through no active representation on her part. A progressive young man comes forward to marry her, who she passively accepts, and she is set for a happy future.

The two short texts complement each other in significant ways. In both, the central protagonists never utter a word throughout the narratives. Their plights are conveyed to us through the narrative voice. This strategy, however, offers no insight into their minds. Kumari is shown as rather slow and incapable of absorbing the actual significance of her act. She is shown as eminently persuadable and as blindly following the instructions of her friend Arif Mydin. Therefore, her inner thoughts when presented show themselves to be infantile, confused and illogical. Lim's protagonist in “Bandong” is even more of a problem for the reader because her inner thoughts or opinions are never probed or displayed. She goes to her death with her thoughts a complete mystery. Readers, however, do not perceive this young adulteress as either dim-witted or submissive as a person.

In intriguing but contrasting ways in both narratives, silence becomes an aspect of the feminine expression or ‘voice.’ It becomes interesting to analyze the process through which a subjective self is constituted in the complete absence of speech in the two stories. The women writers seem to signal sympathy for completely silent characters in their texts. The strategies used and significations that emerge out of these become important to our considerations. One possible point of entry for our analysis could be Bakhtin's ‘dialogics.’

Voice in Society

In *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin points out that “the novel always includes in itself the activity of coming to know another's word, a coming to knowledge whose process is represented in the novel” (353). According to Bakhtin, language offers many social voices. These voices construct both selves and characters-as-selves. Because all language is inherited and because it is all socially and ideologically charged, the conflict of voices in a novel can reveal power structures and potential

resistances to those structures. Each character's voice within a dialogized novel, Bakhtin claims, represents ways of seeing the world; that voice competes for ascendancy to power or, at least, seeks an intense relationship on the threshold where boundaries between the languages of self and other break down. Though Bakhtin was, in effect, talking about the novel, it could be usefully applied to the fictive world of the short story as well.

In the absence of voice, then, it should by right be difficult, if not impossible, to perceive the world of these characters. If coming to know another's word is the first step toward asserting self-consciousness in an interpretive community, the silence of the female voice excludes it from consideration, for language is the arena where social hierarchies are formulated and reified. In this instance, Laura Mulvey's assertion becomes relevant. She writes that

Women stand in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male 'Other', bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command, by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (7)

In the two short stories under analysis, though the women protagonists both observe silence, paradoxically, they still emerge as the central presences. Also, there seems to be a distinct difference in the quality of the silence and the effect that silence renders for the interpretation of the characters. As women in patriarchal communities, both the Chinese adulteress and the Indian shoplifter are essentially 'other' to the norms of their community. However, while Ah Fah's is a complex and resisting silence, Kumari's silence seems an inadequacy born out of simple-mindedness rather than a location arrived at through ideological positioning.

"That mousy girl Kumari" (231) as she is referred to by her fellow employees at the supermarket, is persuaded to steal from the supermarket steadily for nearly six months in order to supplement the stock for twelve old destitute people in true Robin Hood fashion. She is discovered and taken to task by the authorities and her case is made public. However, her case elicits a great deal of public sympathy.

There were letters to the press. Offers of assistance to the two accused in the form of money and legal counsel were generously extended. People gathered money and gifts for the twelve old people who were featured by the media in the most poignant manner. (236)

One important point that emerges out of her case is that when questioned by her employers, she is shown as initially confused/bewildered by their reaction. “Why, Kumari echoed slowly to herself . . . I won’t do it again if it causes such a big fuss. But . . . was it really wrong?” (231). This question, posed as incidental, is in fact crucial to the whole issue. It probes the age-old philosophical position that Robin Hood’s deeds raise: does the end justify the means? It draws our attention to the fact that although the unlawfulness of the act is never in doubt, the ‘sinfulness’ of it is debatable.

Similarly, in “Bandong,” the adulteress is married to a mentally retarded man who refuses to consummate their marriage. Her mother-in-law, however, demands that she provide her with a grandchild to continue the family line, as recompense for the bride money that has been paid. Conflicting discourses within the interpretive community debate the ‘wrongs’ of her adultery. Her mother-in-law’s truculent stand: “I know my son is dumb. That’s why I bought you. Straight from the brothel keeper. A woman like you ought to know how to teach my son” (39) is contrasted with other women’s viewpoints: “Ah Lai is twenty-eight this year . . . but inside his head he is just six years old . . . Ah Fah, your daughter-in-law, cried every day because Ah Lai hated her . . . Wouldn’t go near her and shoved her away. Punched her if she tried to get into bed,” (41). These contrasting positions throw into relief the protagonist’s unenviable predicament. Thus in both cases a strange disjunction occurs between the judgement of dispassionate authority and that of the compassionate community. The relentless rules of authority indict the women, but paradoxically the suggestion remains that their actions would withstand the scrutiny of someone from a higher moral perspective. Furthermore in “Bandong,” to complicate matters, the narrative voice is strangely quiet about the reason for Ah Fah’s adultery. Was

Ah Fah attracted to the Hakka man? Or did she do so in order to get a baby to satisfy the mother-in-law? In other words was it an act of pleasure or a dutiful deed undertaken because of social pressure?

Both women are portrayed as existing at the fringes of society. They resemble in some senses Mary Russo's "female grotesques" who are "repressed and undeveloped."⁸ Ah Lai's mother buys Ah Fah, her daughter-in-law, from a brothel: a woman practically on the shelf at "already twenty-five years old" (40) in the ultra-conservative Cantonese commune, "a used hen" (40) to adopt her mother-in-law's description of her. Kumari too is at the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder. As an Indian in Singapore, she is already marginal to the mainstream Chinese community; furthermore, we are told, "Her parents were barely literate, ultra-conservative and without any hope of better times to come" (232). She is described in the following way: "A nobody. Poor grades at school, close to missing the marriage boat for being without a decent dowry, and plain to look at" (232). These women, however, seem to be chosen, quite deliberately, to challenge and unmask dominant codes.

Kumari is shown not to possess the linguistic resources necessary to secure a position in society and hence remains silenced. This lack of voice would appear to indicate a locus signifying weakness and vulnerability rather than contention and strength. Yet strangely enough, at the end of the narrative Kumari has overturned the codes of the status quo and, in the material sense at least, emerged a winner with a secure marriage accomplished without a dowry. No mean feat! How can we reconcile this triumph to her silenced and passive positioning? Ah Lai's wife in "Bandong" is put to death by the incensed mining community of which she is a part. Yet, despite her silence, her death becomes the most significant and poignant statement drowning every other 'voice'. How are these accomplished? The text of "Bandong" is at all points evasive about the woman's feelings. Readers hear about her unenviable predicament from her peers. We find her abused and condemned by society at large and indicted by her mother-in-law. But her own thoughts are *never* presented. Why is this so?

Ah Fah is excluded and silenced by the dominant linguistic community that includes the narrative voice. Her mute state seems to signal

not abjection but a quiet exclusion. She refuses to participate in a language that has silenced and erased her in the first place. However, by her silence and her refusal to participate she does not disappear into insignificance, but rather seems to unsettle the invincibility of the dominant discourse. By her silence Ah Fah gives herself alternative spaces for interpretation. Thus, even silenced, this female voice competes and contests for authority. Applying Bakhtin's principle of the dialogic, we can interpret the silenced voice of this female character as compelling a dialogue with those dominant others who would prefer to write her out of existence. This power is signified within the text by the extreme resentment displayed by the community at Ah Fah's refusal to talk. In the narrative we are told: “Her silence was maddening. It incensed the mob” (30). This resentment is understandable for the imperative of confession has often been identified as a prime mechanism by which the mutual enhancement of power and pleasure takes place in the transformation of desire into discourse. Resistance therefore can take the form of a refusal to confess, in this instance, Ah Fah's obdurate silence. It signals to the community a refusal on her part to accept the role of adulteress and traitor that has been pinned on her. Her refusal to participate in speech, to confess and accept her guilt, is therefore extremely threatening to the community.

Voice in Narrative Discourse

Ah Fah's predicament is presented to us through a complex set of competing discourses. On the one hand, her sexuality is shown to be excessive and therefore threatening to the community. She has been bought from a brothel keeper and she has committed adultery with a man from a rival clan knowing full well the dire consequences if she were discovered. This seems to point to an excessive passion/lust threatening the stability of her community. The community is enraged: “Let the whore die! ‘Without coffin or mourners!’ . . . ‘Not so fast!’ . . . ‘Strip and whip her first! Death is too sweet for traitors like her!” (29). The miners and their families pelt the accused woman with lumps of pigs' dung and shout abuse at her. However, we are told that

[T]he woman who was bound hand and foot showed no sign that she had heard. Her eyes were glazed and fixed at a point above the heads of the mob. Her impassive face was oblivious of her tormentors. A miner went forward and gave her a violent kick. She fell on to her side but no sound escaped her lips. No cry. None. She lay where she had fallen. (29)

Despite the fact that the crowd is angered and frenzied by her silence, she refuses to satisfy them by uttering any sound except that of pain when she is goaded and physically hurt beyond endurance. Moreover, we are also shown the feeling of compassion she arouses in Wong, the newcomer: “Tuck Heng trotted beside Chan Ah Fook, his heart torn between pity and excitement” (32). Later on her death opens up the voices of the other women in the community, who speak up in sympathy:

When you locked him in the bedroom with Ah Fah, he kicked Ah Fah and bit her. Yah, bit her. She showed me the teeth marks all over her body. Bit her like a dog. We heard her cries. Our whole village heard her cries. How to bear you a grandson? You blamed her and you caned her. Every night you caned her . . . But, aye, a mother-in-law is the sky and we daughters-in-law are the earth. (41–2)

Here, her initial positioning as the adulteress seems to be contested. She is positioned more as a woman to be pitied. But her identity as a *victim*, we realize, is precariously constructed. As readers who are outside the narrow codes that rule the community we are inclined to sympathise with her sad predicament. This would perhaps predispose us by and large, to be ‘on her side’. However, we also understand the codes that rule the commune and the strong sense of threat that her action poses to the community. In all of this, what is carefully glossed over is her sexuality, the very issue at the centre of the narrative. Her silence conceals the excess of her sexuality investing her nature with mystery and pathos. The precise nature and reason for her adulterous acts is left unexplained. The silence of the adulteress is in the interest of the narrative. For, if we had access to Ah Fah’s inner thoughts we would have known the reason

for her adultery. Then the danger would arise that her motivations for adultery would be out in the open perhaps emphasizing her excessive sexuality. In this case, the precarious balance of power achieved between the community at large and Ah Fah would be ruptured, one way or the other. If she is shown as having committed the adulterous act only to fulfil her mother-in-law's desire for her child, she would emerge as undeniably more powerful than the indicting community. On the other hand, if it is revealed that Ah Fah formed the adulterous liaison for her own pleasure then the power would unequivocally shift to the community condemning her for her excessive sexuality.

However, as it stands in the narrative, with no clue to Ah Fah's motivations there is a tight opposition set up between the surveillant gaze of the repressive, parochial community and the disruptive silence of the female protagonist. This tension constitutes the structure of the text. Her death or 'sacrifice' is a metaphor to be conscripted into the dialogue of the interpretive community. Her death forces her internal dialogue into the open raising questions rather than closing them, about the norms in place in the community. It is only after her death that Wong returns to the temple where the women are seated awaiting their men's return from the river and witnesses their heated debate about Ah Fah's distressing life. Her silence therefore paradoxically becomes Bakhtin's 'resisting voice' challenging dominant codes. The contradiction between her will and the authoritative will of the community inform the events of the novel. In the ultimate analysis, it is crucial to grasp the fact that she evades being caged or imprisoned by language. It is through silence that she sets up an effective dialogue with the rest of the interpretive community.

This contradiction places her in the ambivalent position of belonging to neither class of Freud's daughters. Ah Fah is not quite the 'obedient daughter,' the hysteric almost always identified as a woman ('hysteria', significantly, is derived from the Greek word for uterus) who uses only her body language to communicate and who depends on her patriarchal father to be released into speech⁹ (Warhol 161). This obedient daughter speaks only with her body and does not aspire to challenge the hierarchies in place in patriarchy. We know, from the discussion above, that

Ah Fah in “Bandong” does not fade into muteness like the obedient daughter, but precisely through her silence challenges the status quo. Nor does she exactly emerge as the ‘rebellious daughter,’ who dares to match the patriarch word for word, for she firmly remains in the realm of silence never emerging into the zone of speech shared by the rest of the interpretive community.

Kumari displays the same stubborn resistance to being co-opted into speech by the interpretive community. None of her confused thoughts are spoken aloud to either the manager of the supermarket, nor to the inspector or policewoman at the station who question her when she is caught. We are told that Kumari “maintained a silence that was variously interpreted as being sullen, unrepentant or defiant” (231). The fed-up policewoman chastises her by commenting, “I can’t help you if you don’t answer me. You want to help yourself, then speak up!” (231). But Kumari chooses to remain silent throughout it all.

Kumari’s character seems predicated upon Bakhtin’s claim for the importance of the ‘the fool’ who appears in the novel not as a fully developed character, but exhibits the characteristics of simplicity and naiveté. Bakhtin claims that the fool carries over in transmuted versions into the modern novel from its earlier forms such as the picaresque adventure novel. In the modern novel, fools do not appear as characters *per se*, but their characteristics of simplicity and naiveté inform the narrative:

Even if the image of the fool (and the image of the rogue as well) loses its fundamental organizing role in the subsequent development of novelistic prose, nevertheless the very aspect of not grasping the conventions of society (the degree of society’s conventionality), not understanding lofty pathos—charged labels, things and events—such incomprehension remains almost everywhere an essential ingredient of prose style. Either the prose writer represents the world through the words of a *narrator* who does not understand this world, [. . .] or else the prose writer introduces a character who does not understand; or finally, the direct style of the author himself involves a deliberate (polemical) failure to understand the habitual ways of conceiving the world. (402)

In “Kumari” the freedom for the woman protagonist is that of Bakhtin’s (not Shakespeare’s) fool, that is, not wisdom but one of incomprehension. The quality of incomprehension seems to render Kumari, as character, external to laws, codes or conventions that govern or reduce the individual to an object of control. Her failure to understand the rules governing the dominant codes opens up the process for these alternating discourses to be brought into the open. True to Bakhtin’s claim that ‘stupidity’ or incomprehension in the novel is always polemical (403), Kumari’s naiveté precludes her understanding the world according to dominant conventions; she in effect refuses to accept (and cannot comprehend) the ideology of the ‘other,’ here the interpretive community. Not only Kumari, but also Arif Mydin, the self-proclaimed social worker, and the senior citizen who threatens to slit his wrists if Kumari is not released, all exist *outside* the world where societal laws are obeyed unquestioningly. By refusing to conform to the norms they are querying and challenging norms. By doing so, these ‘fools’ emerge as subjects of their own discourse rather than as objects of an official line or authoritative word. This freedom is in effect is Bakhtin’s *‘carnival world’*—a world where every voice heard in the communal performance is unrestricted by authoritative speech. Kumari’s silence (like Arif’s rebellion) constitutes a challenge because it opens up the possibility that the dominant code is not normative. This potential is absolutely essential because unlike the instance of “Bandong” where, separated by time and space we stand outside the codes of the village community which we see as parochial or barbaric, the codes that govern the manageress and the interpretive community at large in “Kumari” are those most of us would accept as norm. Most law-abiding citizens believe that stealing from a supermarket where you work is unacceptable, even if it is done with the best of intentions. Most law-abiding people would feel that by right Kumari and Arif Mydin should have explored other avenues and not resorted to theft at the first instance. Kumari’s silence however opens the space to challenge this normative authority. The ideological dimensions of the dominant discursive code are exposed. Her ignorance, however, can sustain a challenge only by preserving a delicate balance. On the one hand the challenge must render itself sufficiently visible to unmask

the fissures in the dominant dialogue, yet the stupidity or ignorance that brings this challenge about must not be over constituted for then it would open itself to the possible scorn of the reader. Kumari's silence becomes a tool in the hands of the narrator, who reveals only enough of Kumari's thoughts to demonstrate her confusion. Her silence preserves the mystery of her otherness and the delicate balance between her code and the dominant code. Therefore, yet again in "Kumari" the dominant discourse has been challenged and its invincibility thwarted. But what about Kumari herself? Does she emerge triumphant at the end of the narrative? Here again there seems to be a deep irony that seems to be operating at an unconscious level, an irony that manifests itself differently in the two texts under study.

In "Bandong" the challenging discourse that positions Ah Fah as the subversive, leaves her finally dead, a helpless victim of a mindless hysterical mob. In "Kumari," on the other hand, 'the fool' achieves from the patriarchal perspective at least a happy ending. "Kumari" ends with a typically romantic resolution. Of course, this 'happy ever after' is open to contention, for Kumari's marriage reflects the ultimate marginalization within patriarchy where a young woman entering a marriage transaction passively continues to remain powerless, the object of yet another person's desire. Thus in both texts, in different ways, the dialogues raised during the narrative remain unresolved, ambivalent, resisting closure. So, we see the end as another isolated moment rather than as 'a final word' (Bakhtin 365).

Conclusion

French feminist literary theory associated with theorists such as Cixous and Irigaray, introduce the interesting figure of the madwoman who they interpret as redemptive. She is taken to be not what an oppressive culture has made of women, but rather what women have managed to remain in a society that marginalizes the disruptive revolutionary force of the female. Christiane Makward, one of the important translators of and commentators on French feminism, describes the female language as open, non-linear fluid, involving silence (96). From another perspective, Domna C. Stanton points out that the recurring identification of

madness, anti-reason and mystery only goes to revalorize traditional female stereotypes. She points out that

[I]t is an essentialist definition making women incapable of speaking as a woman; therefore, the most female course of action is to observe an hour of silence, or to scream . . . Women are resigning themselves to silence and to nonspeech. The speech of the other will then swallow them up, will speak for them. (86)

In the above definition, the normal premise prevalent within Western metaphysics that ascribes nothing but powerlessness and disempowerment to silence is prominent. What marks the unique position of Kumari and Ah Fah is that through their efforts they dare to radicalize this premise. In the final analysis, the determination that both women display to remain silent against all odds emerges not as passivity but as subversion, a subversion not ascribed to the function of the character, but to the function of the narrative. Through their silence, the normal hierarchy of Western metaphysical thought gets overturned. Speech and meaning becomes replaced with *silence and meaning* and the usual correlation between presence and signification gets altered here into *absence and signification*. This disruption in effect points to a new, radical functioning of narrative.

Notes

- 1 Denyse Tessensohn hails from one of the oldest and well-established families in Singapore. Recently the country paid tribute to her great grandfather J.E. Tessensohn by releasing a stamp to commemorate him. Her mother is also of Eurasian descent. Apart from Dutch, English and Portuguese ancestors, Tessensohn can also lay claim to Indian antecedents. She has also further strengthened her links to the Indian race through her marriages. Her former husband was an Indian. Her current husband can lay claim to an Indian ancestry as well. Therefore, when writing about Kumari, Tessensohn brings both an insider's and an outsider's perspective to the character.
- 2 Foucault in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* critiques a 'juridical' conception of power, which defines power's workings in terms of prohibition only and locates it centrally. Instead, Foucault offers a notion of power as strategic. He observes that power is not something that exists elsewhere and is imposed upon

us from without, rather, it comes into being from moment to moment in our daily lives.

- 3 Beng-Huat Chua discusses the various stages through which The People's Action Party (PAP) gained ground in Singapore. Since its independence from Malaysia in 1965, a single party—the PAP, has ruled Singapore; which has been re-elected to power in every election. The PAP has been variously described as repressive and authoritarian, but even its worst adversaries would not be able to accuse it of inefficiency, with any measure of justification. Chua talks about how the PAP, following what he calls a 'communitarian ideology' and a controlled democratic process achieved its goals of economic success.
- 4 Shoshana Felman brings this up in her discussion of "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy". She describes how Luce Irigaray, among others, points to the latent design to exclude the woman from the production of speech, since the woman, and the Other as such, are philosophically subjugated to the logical principle of Identity—where identity is conceived as masculine 'sameness' understood as *male* self-presence (Feminisms, pp 7–8).
- 5 A quick check of several allusions reveals this. Below are a few quotes that illustrate this.

Unless the Lord had given me help, I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death. Psalm 94:17 Psalm 94 Psalm 94:16–18

Every morning I will put to silence all the wicked in the land; Psalm 101:8 Psalm 101 Psalm 101:7–9

In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant. Psalm 143:12 Psalm 143 Psalm 143:11–13

Sit in silence, go into darkness, Daughter of the Babylonians; no more will you be called queen of kingdoms. Isaiah 47:5 Isaiah 47 Isaiah 47:4–6

- 6 Christopher Kirwan talks about 'The Nature of Speech' in St Augustine. He points out how, 'according to Christian orthodoxy God's word is his deed; that is, God effects his will by speaking it (Genesis. Lit. 1.3.8), as in 'Let there be light' (Genesis. 1:3). Since God has no body, divine speech is not vocal; it is what Augustine called an inner word. God speaks in the same way to human beings, who hear his word internally. God uses no 'tongue', that is, language neither Hebrew nor Greek nor Latin. The word of God that a man may hear is like the word of a man who has not yet uttered it' (pp. 55–56). Thus Augustine seems to place a premium on silence over articulated word, as the divine mode of expression.

Again, Babette E. Babich's 'Questioning Heidegger's Silence: A Postmodern Topology' in Dallery & Scott edited *Ethics and Danger* (p. 83), discusses Heidegger's view of silence: 'Heidegger's reflections on language as saying (and silence as a mode of discourse) enjoin silence: 'Saying will not let itself be captured in any statement. It demands of us that we achieve by silence the appropriating, initiating movement within the being of language—and do so without

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talking about silence.’ Thus, Heidegger’s ‘A Dialogue on Language’ investigates language as a saying correspondence from within language rather than as discourse about language. Heidegger’s own interlocutor reinforces this description: ‘Above all, silence about silence. . . .’ In turn, the being ‘silent of silence’ is named ‘authentic saying’. (p. 83). Here, silence emerges as a more positive entity than speech. Similarly in Wittgenstein we get a clear sense of the *insignificance of the sayable*. As Robert J Fogelin puts it, ‘This theme of the *insignificance of the sayable* appears at various places in the text The irrelevance of this domain [i.e that which can be put into words] is made abundantly clear’ (p. 98).

7 For example, in India there are several proverbs that give a positive slant on silence such as:

Silence is of the Gods; Silence is the sweet medicine of the Heart; If you keep your tongue prisoner your body may go free; Silence catches the mouse; Talking comes by nature, silence by understanding.

8 Mary Russo raises the issue of cultural associations surrounding the grotesque from a gendered perspective. Russo argues in the text that the ‘female grotesque’ does not merely allude to physical deformity but to an exclusion; a marginality. Thus ‘the female grotesque’ becomes less a category than an operation through which genders and identities are both constituted and deconstituted, excluded or included.

9 Nina Baym discusses this at great length in her article ‘The Madwoman and Her Languages’. She traces how after World War I, with the rapidly changing social conditions of women, the kind of hysterical women patients who Freud had built his reputation on—women who used their bodies as their mode of speaking—obedient daughters who were released into speech by Freud practically disappeared. Now there were women psychoanalysts and women who were released into the public realm who had to articulate independent of the male. These Baym says constituted Freud’s ‘rebellious daughters’. Warhol and Herndl (eds) *Feminisms*, p. 161.

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