



## Ryhaan Shah's Silent Screams of A Silent Life

Judith Misrahi Barak

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### RYHAAN SHAH'S SILENT SCREAMS OF *A SILENT LIFE*

JUDITH MISRAHI-BARAK  
(UNIVERSITY OF MONTPELLIER III)

#### Abstract

*A Silent Life* (2005), the first novel by Guyanese writer Ryhaan Shah, spans several generations of East-Indians, from the descendents of the first indentured labourers on the plantations of post-emancipation British Guiana to the Indo-Guyanese, discriminated against in the 1960s and 70s. The novel essentially foregrounds the ways historical legacy has an impact on our contemporary lives, all the more so when the traumas of the past have been bottled up and all that is left is either silence or screams. The bond between the narrator and her quasi-aphasic grandmother is at the heart of the complexities of filiation and affiliation, of trauma and the memorialisation of trauma. When the grandmother's silence is visited upon the granddaughter, it is the signal that the knots of this 'blanket of silence' have to be undone. How Aleya is going to mediate a trauma she has inherited and that is not directly hers, forms the crux of the novel, the rhetorics of voice and silence allowing the trauma to be eventually *worked through*.

Ryhaan Shah's novel, *A Silent Life*, was awarded the 2007 Guyana Prize in the category of Best First Book of Fiction—a prize that was granted to Fred D'Aguiar and Cyril Dabydeen in their own time. Guyana has often been famed as “the land of six peoples”, or “the land of many rivers” (Essequibo, Demerara, Corentyne and Berbice); it should also be named “the land of many writers”. The list of the writers born in Guyana and now living in the Caribbean diaspora would be too long to complete, I can only mention a few names here—Wilson Harris, his daughter Denise Harris, Fred D'Aguiar, Cyril Dabydeen, his nephew David Dabydeen, Pauline Melville, Jan Shinebourne, Lakshmi Persaud, Sasenarine Persaud, Meiling Jin, as well as Ian McDonald, Martin Carter, Mahadai Das, Beryl Gilroy

(Paul's mother) and of course Mark McWatt who won the Guyana Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2005 for *Suspended Sentences*, all living in other parts of the Caribbean, in the UK, the US or Canada<sup>1</sup>. Ryhaan Shah lives in her native country where she is the President of the Guyana Indian Heritage Association.

Guyana is classified as belonging to the Caribbean and yet it holds a special status in the Caribbean, both apart and yet oddly representative of the Caribbean in its entirety. It is not an island, it is part of the South American continent, it has borders with Suriname, Venezuela and Brazil. It is also the only English-speaking country and the only country that is a member of the Commonwealth on the South American continent. It is not considered as the most glamorous of Caribbean countries, it is not Jamaica, it is not Trinidad, not even Guadeloupe or Martinique ... It does not have luxurious beaches, nor an island culture. Yet, the way it appears haunted, almost possessed, by its hinterland, a big part of which is still unpeopled, is highly reminiscent of the sense of disjunction that may be seen as defining the Caribbean, of the sense that history is ultimately defeated by geography, as Pauline Melville says. Although Guyana was spotted by Columbus in 1498, it was not colonised by the Europeans until the Dutch settled there in 1616, and established the three colonies of Essequibo (1616), Berbice (1627) and Demerara (1752)<sup>2</sup>. It became British only in the early nineteenth century, without having been passed between the hands of many imperial powers. British Guiana came into official existence only two years before the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, and seven years before Indian and Chinese indentured labourers were shipped to Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad, Guadeloupe and Martinique, to work in the cane fields. It had to deal with the ethno-cultural divide between the African and the East-Indian communities, as

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<sup>1</sup> Amerindians are estimated a little below 7%; Africans around 35%; Mixed Guyanese including Europeans, 10%; East-Indians, 50%. The majority of the Portuguese and Chinese have left since the 1970s.

<http://www.guyana.org/NDS/chap22.htm>; accessed September 28, 2008.

To convince oneself of the richness of Guyanese literature, or rather of literature written by writers of Guyanese origin, one can consult the website of Peepal Tree Press, and particularly Jeremy Poynting's presentation of Guyanese literature published by Peepal:

[http://www.peepaltreepress.com/feature\\_display.asp?id=10](http://www.peepaltreepress.com/feature_display.asp?id=10) accessed September 28, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Guyana remained Dutch territory until 1814. In 1815, the three territories became British, and were renamed British Guiana in 1831. The country took the name of Guyana in 1966 upon independence. Accordingly, I will use "Guyana" only after 1966.

well as political dictatorship in the twentieth century. Thus, beyond apparently non-Caribbean features, Guyana holds in store much of what is sometimes referred to as *Caribbeanness*.

Ryhaan Shah's *A Silent Life* tells us about a specifically Guyanese story which is also typically Caribbean. It relies on an homodiegetic narrative voice. Yet, through the use of myth and poetic vision, it goes beyond the internal focalisation traditionally associated with homodiegetic voice. Revisiting history and delving into the present, it foregrounds the ways historical legacy can have an impact upon our contemporary lives. I would like to suggest how, through the use of the disjunction and conjunction of voice and silence, Ryhaan Shah negotiates the narrow path between filiation and affiliation, between heritage and choice, between trauma and the memorialization of trauma. Writing an apparent story of oppression and silencing, she writes in fact a story that is ultimately one of empowerment and emancipation. Hearing, or not, listening, or not, are also gradually associated with seeing and perceiving something of the ghostly presence of the *Other's* story within oneself. Between screams and whispers, how are words going to be granted a shape and existence?

The novel spans several decades and encompasses the history of Guyana, particularly from the consequences of the Indian indentureship in the early twentieth century<sup>3</sup> to the 1960s and 1970s when the country came under the grip of Forbes Burnham who led a policy favouring the Afro-Guyanese and viciously discriminating against the Indo-Guyanese<sup>4</sup>. The focus is put on the bond between the first person narrator-focalizer, Aleyah Hassan (a teenager at the beginning of the book in the 1950s, a woman in

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<sup>3</sup> Between 1838 and 1917, some 700,000 indentured labourers were shipped from India and China to take the place of the emancipated Africans and work the cane fields of Jamaica, Trinidad, **British Guiana**, Guadeloupe and Martinique, as well as Fiji and Mauritius. The crossing of the *kala pani*, a second Middle Passage, has been getting more attention in the past decade. One can be grateful to writers of Indo-Caribbean descent for having contributed to making that historical episode more visible and talked about.

<sup>4</sup> Forbes Burnham was in power from 1964 to his death in 1985, first as the Prime Minister, then as the President during the last five years of his life. In 1950 he had established the People's Progressive Party along with the Indo-Guyanese leader Cheddi Jagan from whom he split five years later. Burnham set up his own People's National Congress in 1958, rigging his first election in 1964 and leading a pro-Afro-Guyanese policy from then onwards, discriminating against the Indo-Guyanese. The culminating point of Burnham's policy of racial violence was Wismar massacre in May 1964, when during two days, from May 24th to 26th, the Indo-Guyanese living in the villages of Wismar and Christianburg were killed and raped and their homes looted and destroyed.

her forties at the end) and her grandmother, Nani, someone whom she has always known to be locked up in quasi-silence, in their house in Georgetown, one of those *mad women in the attic*. When she was young, Nani was very much involved in revolutionary politics, she was very vocal in her attempt at defending the cause of the East-Indians working as indentured labourers on the sugar plantations and the rice fields. She was an outspoken woman then, she read books, she knew how to use the oral and the written word in order to take up a revolutionary cause. First and foremost, she gave her articulate voice a political edge, translating the unvoiced suffering of illiterate and despised subalterns. That is also one of the major functions voice is granted in the novel, a political function. But while she is arranging strikes and marches, Nani is made to realize that 1930s British Guiana is not ready for women to be more vocal than men<sup>5</sup>. The emergence of the reformist Hindu religious movement (the Arya Samaj) or the rise of Indian nationalism (the Indian National Congress) in the late 1920s did a lot for the advancement of the Indo-Guyanese women's cause but, as the novel shows, it was only the first innings<sup>6</sup>.

During one of the few conversations that Aleyah has with her mother, Shaban, Nani's daughter, about what she calls 'the trouble', Aleyah finally obtains from her mother that the story be told. Through the mediatory voice of Shaban who was a young and unimportant witness at the time, part of the story is indirectly passed on to the next generation, to the next daughter down the line:

"That was the trouble, you know."

"What trouble?"

"The trouble with Ma, your Nani. She wanted to change the world, well, change this little corner of it. She wanted to save everybody from illness and poorness, even death if she could."

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<sup>5</sup> The Compulsory Education Ordinance of 1876 in British Guiana had made education compulsory for all children up to 14 in towns and 12 in villages. Yet, a majority of Indians remained sceptical about the necessity for their children, especially the girls, to be educated. The Swettenham Circular, which was enforced from 1904 to 1933, stated that the 1876 Ordinance needn't apply to girls if their parents objected to their attending school for religious reasons. Clem Seecharan demonstrates in *Tiger in the Stars': The Anatomy of Indian Achievement in British Guiana 1919-1929* how this "backward measure" did "considerable damage" (Seecharan 266).

<sup>6</sup> The Arya Samaj was founded in the Punjab in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83).

The election of a woman, Sarojini Naidu, as President of the Indian National Congress in 1925-26, was also a great step for Indo-Guyanese women.

“Isn't that good?”

“Where's the good in saving the world and losing your own soul?” (22)

The transmission from mother to daughter however, is biased and partial, in all meanings of the term, and the final issue is kept secret: « “But what happened, Ma?” This time my question is insistent. “Something broke”. That's all she says before she gets up and switches on the lights » (25).

Nani, whose husband had not been able to come to terms with the modification of gender roles, had had to step back when she realised she was responsible for a family tragedy. Even if the reader knows from the beginning what the tragedy was (the suicide by hanging of Aleyah's grandfather, Pa Nazeer), the mystery only becomes completely unraveled on the last page of the novel—what if it wasn't a suicide and Pa Nazeer was handed the rope he used to take his own life? Pa Nazeer, pushed front stage by his exalted wife, has a “clear voice” but “speaks hesitantly” and utters “awkward phrases” (25). He stumbles and stutters, people jeer at him, he cannot explain the revolution in a way that would be as clear and congenial as Nani's. Shame is the result—shame on Pa Nazeer for having been laughed at, shame on Nani for not having “known her place” (20).

The frustration caused by a lid being ultimately kept on revelatory words, leads Aleyah towards a compensation—she supplements her mother's fragmentary oral revelations with visual ones, her own, based in her imagination and visionary powers. The novel's narration, now in the present tense, now in the past, is interspersed with Aleyah's visions of the past, of what did happen in the past of the fiction, or of what may have happened. Easily passing from the realistic to the poetic mode, the reader slips into those visions as easily as Aleyah, thanks to a transitory sentence such as, “Then I saw him there...” (10), or:

The night air is warm and barely stirs the leaves of the trees and *I must have dozed off for a while* because when I open my eyes and look down the red-brick dam, I see that a crowd has gathered in the market square. It is a public meeting and a slim man with an elegant moustache is talking into a microphone and punching the air around him. My eyes open wide: it is my grand-father, Pa Nazeer. (italics mine, 25)

The silence into which Nani has chosen to lock herself up, only interrupted by her faint humming and praying, is in a way reverberated and thrown off balance by the ghostly visions which Aleyah allows her head to be filled with. Against the absence of words and the emptiness of voice, the pleasure of fancy and the plenitude of vision. It is Aleyah's

strategy to try and understand the family history everybody knows about except herself, to try and understand how words can be “choked off” (30) and scrape the throats that hold them back—her little brother calls it “playing with the night jumbies” (29). The rope that Pa Nazeer pulled around his neck not only choked off his words but also those of the people who remained alive after him. The repeated excess of vocality for one can lead to the repeated excess of silence for the other.

The crux of the novel is that the silence that has become the home and the prison of the grandmother may well be visited upon the granddaughter, the risk being that history repeat itself. The novel activates the link between the loudest vocality and the most sonorous silence, and weaves the tenuous relationship between granddaughter and grandmother through the exchange of half-screamed half-whispered words.

In the second part of the novel, Aleyah is seen leaving Georgetown on a scholarship that takes her to the London School of Economics for a four-year BA, followed by an MA, then on to a job with the organisation World Aid, and a family of her own. The four years turn into twenty, which correspond more or less to the years during which Forbes Burnham was in power. Aleyah remains in contact with her Guyanese family through the letters she writes and receives, refracting on paper the oral echoes of the different voices that used to make up her community. She also keeps having the visions she used to have about her grandfather with no words left in his throat, about her grandmother with “a big cry inside her” (69), and about the indentured labourers she still listens to: “Out of the clamour, individual voices speak” (69). This is the part of the novel where family history repeats itself, Aleyah falling in love with a fellow Guyanese who will not let her speak out at the fullest of her voice and will restrain her creative power, unable to accept that her professional life is more successful than his. As the years pass, silence also sets in between Aleyah and her husband Dean: “Dean smiles and shrugs and nods. I watch him and say nothing. I am part of a silent life, and I cannot but think of Nani and Pa Nazeer. But I push the thought away...” (97).

Just as for Nani and Nazeer, something breaks. The occasion is Aleyah being offered a job as the new Caribbean Director for the Headquarters of World Aid, a promotion that Dean is incapable of accepting. During the depression that takes Aleyah to a psychiatric clinic, the aphasia she locks herself into echoes Nani’s thousands of miles away. The “black hole” (126) she plunges into, “the deeper and deeper blackness” she curls into, will eventually force her to confront what she still doesn’t know about her family history, that recurrent vision of the rope swaying, “golden, inviting,

its loop shining like a halo” (126). The ghosts that keep visiting Aleyah are the nagging trace of the secrets that have been woven across generations and deposited in her without her conscious knowing. Silence coalesces with words that have not been uttered and burn the throat:

The words come fast but I'm not screaming. They scrape from a dry throat in whispers that barely brush the air. They hang there, suspended by a tension created by their very calmness. [...]

Darkness descends. The world has fallen down a hole and I with it. I want to sing one of Nani's prayers as I fall, but I do not remember the words and can only hum the keening tune. I make the slightest rustle of sound and fall into the long-ago music like a leaf borne steadily, lazily downward by a gentle wind. (122-123)

Aleyah's individual story is also put in parallel with her country's history. Even if the Guyanese political background is only suggested by Ryhaan Shah in the novel, the author mentions the political situation twice: the first time when Forbes Burnham comes into power by rigging the 1964 elections (Aleyah is already in London); the second time when he dies in 1985 (Aleyah is on the verge of depression and also of “coming home”, 143). It is however of interest to mention that Shah chooses to specify how Burnham died. In the homodiegetic narration, the device of the letter is used in order to let the reader know about this. Aleyah's father exclaims, on paper: “He's dead! He's dead! The Kabaka is dead<sup>7</sup>. There's hope again, life again. He went to the hospital for an operation. He had throat cancer. We were not surprised—all the lies that throat has told! But he died on the operating table. Never woke up.” (106).

The capacity or incapacity to speak, whisper and scream, is declined in different modalities and lies at the heart of the novel, dipped in the violence of it. In Burnham's predestined case it may well have been lies that burned his throat. In Nazeer's case, he “choked off [Nani's] words for good and all with a rope” (44). In Nani's case, she “clapped [her words] down tight under her tongue” (9). In Aleyah's case, she is part of something she hasn't designed, part of something she has inherited but the bottled up words of others belong to her too. She has to untangle the knots of this “blanket of silence” (47) before she can reconstruct herself.

If Aleyah is being haunted by voices and silences that belong to others but have been deposited in her in their unresolved, unformulated state, the

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<sup>7</sup> The Kabaka, meaning the King, was the name that Burnham had chosen for himself, and the only name that is used in the novel to refer to him.



process of reconstruction she is finally undergoing takes its stamina from two sources: first, from the visions those unsaid words are turning into, and second, from the very sound of the rhetorics that give the novel its fabric and texture. These will be the last two aspects that will be tackled here.

Far from letting herself be engulfed and dissolved by what comes back from her own past to threaten her, Aleyah delves into the paradoxical visibility of her favourite apparitions to put flesh, blood and bone around her fantasms. It is almost as if she was playing on the very paradox of the concept of voice in literature, i.e. having to listen to something that is written down on the page and takes a visual shape—which reminds us of Walter Ong's definition of 'secondary orality', one that "depends on writing and print for its existence" (3). She allows words, those that have been said and those that remain unsaid, to take a visual shape. The way Aleyah allows herself to be possessed by those apparitions from a past that is only indirectly hers, is, I would suggest, part of her resistance strategy and post-traumatic reconstruction. The hanging of her grandfather was directly traumatic for her grandmother and indirectly traumatic for her, the granddaughter. This is what Marianne Hirsch, in another context, calls "postmemory": "the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first" (2001, 8)<sup>8</sup>. How does Aleyah "work through", to borrow Hirsch's expression, a trauma she had only access to through the truncated explanations of her mother or through the humming, praying and silencing of her grandmother? The consequences of the trauma remain visible generations later. As Hirsch explains:

Thus postmemory characterizes the experience of those who [...] have grown up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the powerful stories of the previous generation shaped by monumental traumatic events that resist understanding and integration. It describes as well the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first—their curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents' knowledge. (2001, 12)

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<sup>8</sup> Marianne Hirsch introduced the term in relationship with the survivors of the Holocaust, and the survivors' children, in an essay "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile". She also expanded the scope of the use of the term in "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory". Slavery and the story that cannot be "passed on" is the other context where Hirsch uses the concept of "postmemory" and "postmemorial working through". I have used elsewhere this same concept in an analysis of the work of Fred D'Aguiar and Denise Harris (Misrahi-Barak 2007)..

Hirsch insists on the powerfulness of “postmemory” deriving from the fact that it is “mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation” (2001, 9). Aleyah, be it through verbal or visual representation, is doing just that, mediating a trauma she has inherited.

A dynamics is created by the interaction between the analeptic visions and fantasms, and the words that still have to be uttered. Even though Aleyah is haunted by the holes and lacunae of the past, the ghosts that keep visiting her act as messengers, transmitters and ultimately, as revelators. By wrenching time out of joint, by disturbing the linear axis of time, the ghostly apparitions she almost invites in, are also the markers of a shared time. Paradoxically enough, it is only when Aleyah lets herself sink into depression and silence, just like Nani, that she actually connects with that communal time and is able to reconstruct her own temporality. Her coming back home, twenty years after having left, initiates this reconnection with the present but she has to make a detour through Nani's inherited past. In the last few pages of the novel, the final revelation drops from Nani's dry lips and throat: “Nani's voice scrapes from her throat in a hoarse whisper” (174). Yet, in order to explain away the phantoms that have been haunting her granddaughter, and reveal who handed the rope to Pa Nazeer so that he could hang himself, Nani has to go back to her own phantoms, to her grandmother who abandoned her two twin boys in India because she was persecuted by her in-laws but had kept it a secret. This cannot but echo the fact that three generations later, Aleyah left her two boys behind in England when she separated from her husband and came back home—voyages out and back criss-cross over the oceans of generational memory.

The novel could appear to be just another story of subalterns reduced to silence, of history covering up life stories and death secrets, of traumas unmediated. But Aleyah's reconstruction of self is also made possible through the written word of the text, one that is to be seen and heard. And the whole novel appears dipped in silence and screams, going well beyond an approach of voice, silence and trauma that would only be thematic. The aesthetics and rhetorics of voice and silence are actually what gives the novel its backbone and texture and what allows the trauma to be “worked through”. Ryhaan Shah makes us hear the different tones of silence and voice, relying on what Stephen Ross has called the “phenomenal voice” in his book about Faulkner, i.e. what is “explicitly mentioned in the diegetic discourse as sound, act, gesture, or the power of speech irrespective of speech's semantic content” (19). There is phenomenal voice, and there is also “phenomenal” silence in the way the silences are echoed throughout

the novel: Nani's deepest aphasia is echoed by Aleyah's aphasia during her depression; Nani's faint humming and hesitant songs are carried across the ocean when Aleyah passes them on to her own children; when Aleyah writes to announce her wedding with Dean, the letter that is sent back mentions Nani's loud screams that could be heard throughout the neighbourhood:

We only know that when we read her your letter she started to tremble and rock herself hard in her chair, then her mouth opened and she started to holler and the screaming pitched itself clear out the windows and doors and made everybody round here shut up their houses. (93-94)

Voice is also "mimetic", i.e. "represented [...] in fiction, to the illusion that a person is speaking" (Ross 67). Dialogues do abound in the novel, showing people communicating, or endeavouring to communicate. The dialogues that are entertained with the ghosts of the past simply push the narrative mimetic voice to its limit, sometimes making the text lean on acousmatic voices, i.e. voices whose origins, past or present, are hard to locate. Finally, it is Aleyah's "psychic voice", i.e. "the silent voice of thought heard only in the mind and overheard only through fiction's omniscience" (Ross 132) that becomes a tool for reconstructing self and revealing consciousness<sup>9</sup>.

Voices and silence in *A Silent Life* are altogether political and literary, symbolical and rhetorical. It is through the paradigm of the scream and the whisper that something finally takes shape in Ryhaan Shah's novel and is put into words. The retrieval of voice appears to be made accessible through silence itself, one that is being passed on from generation to generation, yet one that expands and blooms into words. Silence appears to be a necessary facet of voice in the "post-memorialisation" of trauma, it can be used as a tool of empowerment, just as trauma can be used in a resistance strategy. Both are the first sites where to begin articulating a strategy of empowerment.

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<sup>9</sup> Ross uses a fourth category of voice, the "oratorical voice", i.e. the text in its multiple intertextuality, as it is being crossed by the voices of many other texts.

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