

Shame, secrets and gossip in 'The Maid Servant's Story'

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Abstract

'The Maid Servant's Story' is one of the short stories featured in Chitra Banerjee's book 'Arranged Marriage'. The short stories in this book seem to share similar themes such as female suffering and emancipation, the immigrant experience, cultural differences between the East and the West as well as a few other themes. In 'The Maid Servant's Story', we are introduced to Manisha who is an Indian young woman educated in the United States. She is very close with her aunt, Mashi, and through the latter's storytelling, she learns of a heart-breaking secret in her family involving class and gender differences. This study aims to examine the representations of silence involving shame, secrets, and gossip in this particular text. The method used in this study is a qualitative study analyzed by the postcolonial feminist approach. The results showed that the author portrayed particular characters as showing a tendency to remain silent or having a lack of verbal response to a) shame, as a result of having failed to live up to people's social and moral expectations, b) secrets, as this can jeopardize another person's well-being, and c) gossips, which serves as a mechanism to control the behaviour of dominant individuals, but can also be used to threaten a family's social and prestigious status.

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INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta. She received her education at Calcutta University and Wright State University in Dayton. She then completed her doctoral degree in English at the University of California, Berkeley. Divakaruni is one of the Diasporic writers. She is a writer, poet, activist, and teacher who has won many awards for her work. To date

she has written 20 books. Divakaruni writes a lot about modern life in India and the United States. Some of the common themes in her work are about the experiences of South Asian women, immigration, history, magical realism, and mythology.

Background of the story

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Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995), comprises eleven short stories and one of them is 'The Maid Servant's Story'. This story utilises a literary device termed as an embedded narrative or story within a story where one of the characters in one story becomes the narrator of another. Using a third person limited omniscient point of view is effective when the narrator wishes to include both the characters' and narrator's thought processes such as their feelings and opinions. The main characters are the sister, wife, husband, and maid-servant. They were nameless to hide their identities. They were addressed from their roles in the family. The nameless characters can also be considered as a form of disguise as the sister is narrating a family secret to her niece. In fact, the narrated story also begins with a conventional opening of a story "once there was..." indicating it as a fictitious tale which could have just happened to anyone.

'The Maid Servant's Story' touches on the relationship between Manisha and her aunt Mashi, and the story about a maid servant who used to serve in their family. Manisha is an 'Americanised'(p.111) Indian young woman who seems to enjoy a 'liberated' (p.114) relationship with her Indian professor boyfriend Bijoy. She describes her own mother as being 'cool', 'distant' (p.112) and indifferent. Manisha wishes 'guiltily' that she can be her aunt Mashi's daughter.

The narrative starts off from Manisha's first-person point of view as she describes her return to India and her meeting with her mother and her aunt Mashi. Among other things, Manisha and Mashi chat about the former's future wedding plans and the latter's wedding in the past. When Manisha informs her aunt that she prefers a saffron Benarasi sari for her wedding, Mashi protests that it is a 'sorrowful' (p.115) colour and that it reminds her of a story. As Mashi proceeds to tell the story, the narration changes to third-person omniscient narration. This type of narration involves a narrator who knows a lot about the characters, even to the extent of delving into their feelings and emotions. This particular technique, in which another story is told within a story, is called a frame

narrative. The original story usually sets the stage for several smaller stories or sub-plots.

The narrative then returns to Manisha's first-person point of view, as she realises, after listening to Mashi's storytelling, that her family once employed a maid servant from the slums, and her college-educated mother taught the maid how to read and write. Manisha's mother even gave the latter her old clothes such as a saffron sari, but her father had tried to seduce the maid after seeing her in the sari. Later her father fired the maid as he felt that her low-class background would harm the reputation of the family. However, the real reason was that the maid had resisted the father's sexual advances. When Manisha's mother returned from the hospital after giving birth, she seemed to sense the truth but she could do nothing as she had to make her own position secure for her children and herself. Her mother's indifference and silence since then could be understood to indicate her helplessness and powerlessness in a patriarchal society.

Divakaruni stated in an online interview in 1998 that she grew up reading ancient Indian epics and she enjoyed reading about the male warriors and their friendships with other heroes. However, she noticed that there was no mention of the epic heroines having 'important female friends'. As such, she decided to focus on writing about female friendships in her stories, and she also included the 'conflicting passions and demands' which women face in their roles as daughters, wives and mothers. She stated that friendships are at the heart of her stories. 'The Maid Servant's Story' is one such example of the unlikely and brief friendship between a maid servant and her mistress.

According to Dimor (2015), the short stories in the collection focus on marital relationships and the transition of diasporic South Asian women questioning their duties as mothers, wives, daughters, and professionals. This insight makes them reconsider their life as women and gives them confidence and strength. Mishra (2020) reiterates that the short stories not only address the diasporic reality but also the experiences of women immigrants and their battle against cultural and gender norms in varied cultural settings.

Furthermore, Rana and Reddy (2019) also agree that Divakaruni has given voice to diasporic Indian women in her works. These women, shaped by their Indian childhood, have exceeded traditional boundaries, leaving them conflicted between old and new attributes. 'The Maid Servant's Story' specifically reveals that Indian women's restraining status is similar whether they are in India or America, forcing them to live in peripheral existence (Girase, 2014).

According to Cixous in Western cultures, women have been traditionally placed on the side of negativity, passivity, and powerlessness. In her view, the only way for women to break free from these repressive structures is 'to affirm their difference, and to challenge phallogocentric discourse' (Cixous, 1989). The silencing and marginalizing of women is a huge concern and this can be widely explored when reading a literary text.

Similarly, Bell Hooks calls for the articulation of marginalised voices and the self-affirmation of the oppressed groups:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is the act of speech, of 'talking back', that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (Hooks, 2015)

Gender issues of violence against women such as insinuation, molestation and raping are prevalent in the short story. Women are depicted to undergo social abuse which are initiated by their own employers and close relatives such as their mothers, and husbands (Tiwari & Khan, 2016). Similarly, Mufidah and Roifah (2020) also point out that women experience domestic violence and psychological pressure from their spouses and families. Their roles in the collection of short stories are primarily to be housewives and serve their husbands.

Kaur (2015) contends that the suffering of the protagonists in the collection of short stories are mainly caused by gender discrimination as the female characters' identity and resistance are defined by their gender. Sharma and Gupta (2016)

state that the short story exposes the hypocrisy of men. The husband in the story comes from a respectable, upper class background who, in the absence of his wife, tries to molest the maid servant. He assures the maid that 'no one would know about it.' Here we can ascertain an instance of male dominance and power over women.

The study by Bai (2017) asserts that characters' conflicts in the short stories stem from a hostile environment as their husbands are disinterested and uncommunicative. The wives perceive this failure as a result of the men's insensitivity leading to their seclusion and introspection.

As 'The Maid Servant's Story' is set in a close-knit Asian community, there are specific requirements and regulations which should be adhered to by the community members. If one fails to do so, in the form of committing certain acts of wrongdoing or transgression, one would face the risk of being punished and made to feel ashamed, forced to harbour certain secrets as well as being ostracised and gossiped about by other community members.

Overview of important concepts

In the West, shame is connected with emotions such as guilt, embarrassment and anger or linked with stigmatised identities as well as psychopathology and depression (Caparas and Hartijasti, 2004). As stated by Scheff (2003), shame is a major component of an individual's moral conscience, which signals a moral transgression without the use of thoughts or words. Pettersen (2013) further states that this emotion may arise in individuals experiencing situations or problems which threaten an interpersonal relationship as well as those who feel that they have failed to live up to other people's social and moral expectations.

One particular aspect of shame as a result of being sexually active can be seen in a particular character in this story, notably Manisha. She is an Indian lecturer living in the United States and she seems to be proud of her free and easy relationship with her professor boyfriend Bijoy. However, deep down she is still being controlled by certain cultural limitations regarding shame and sexuality.

As for secrets, these can be referred to as a form of information control, in which certain information is being controlled by an individual who purposely conceals the information (Vangelisti and Caughlin, 1997). When we talk specifically of family secrets, these can be defined as the deliberate concealment of information by one or more family members who are affected by the information. These family secrets may include a wide variety of issues related to the family such as sexual abuse which is evident in this short story.

In terms of gossip, scholars have defined this as an activity which many people engage in, involving the exchange of information with evaluative content about absent third parties (Foster, 2004, Wilson et al., 2000). Beersma and Van Kleef (2012). state that gossip is often described as an 'exclusively self-serving behaviour' with the intention of manipulating other people and influencing them, often in a 'malicious' and negative way. Interestingly, Keltner et al (2008) argue that gossip also functions as a mechanism to control the behaviour of dominant individuals by pressuring them to adhere to specific social norms. Additionally, Awwad states that from the structural functionalist perspective, gossip is utilised to unify the community and establish stability and order, which is vital for the survival of the family and society. In this view, gossip is used by certain community members to spread an unpleasant story about a certain family's honour; in other words, to remind the family that their social and prestigious status is being jeopardised (2001). Gossip as a form of social control is certainly evident in this short story, in which the servants of the household are described as talking about particular individuals who have crossed certain boundaries in their community.

As the concepts of shame, secrets and gossip are evident in this short story which is set in a close-knit community, we shall use the three concepts to divide this paper into three sections. The first section will focus on the characters' silence or lack of verbal responses as an effect of them feeling ashamed or embarrassed due to a particular wrongdoing or transgression. In the second section, I will explore the characters' silence or lack

of verbal responses about certain secrets regarding their families or themselves. As for the third section, this will look at the characters' silence or lack of verbal responses about gossip disseminated by other people in the community. This approach is useful as it allows us to examine the different ways silence is represented in relation to the three concepts in the overall context of the thesis.

METHODS

The data for this study was gathered from the short story itself, such as particular words, phrases, sentences and dialogues from the chosen text. Therefore, qualitative approach was employed so that the analysis could be conducted comprehensively. Additionally, qualitative research is a useful method for gaining insight and understanding about an individual's perception of events and circumstances (Niswiadomy, 2017). This design is useful for describing and analysing the data as the focus in qualitative research is to analyze reports of experience or on data which cannot be adequately expressed numerically (Hancock et al; 2009)

Creswell (2012) mentions that data collection in qualitative research includes in-depth interview, document analysis, observation, and audiovisual materials analysis. In this study, we focused on document analysis as we analysed the data from the literary text.

In order to analyse the moments and scenes of silence connected to the ideas of shame, secrets, and gossip in the text, we utilised the postcolonial feminist approach as the story focused on women living in a postcolonial society. According to Ashcroft et al. (1989), women 'share with colonized races and people an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression'. Like colonised people, women have been deprived of an independent voice or space throughout history. The selected text portrays Asian women or women of Asian origin who cannot express their situation to the world. They can be described as voiceless, powerless individuals. This group of women was infamously discussed by Spivak in her essay about the subaltern. The term 'subaltern' which means of

'inferior rank' was first used by Antonio Gramsci to define particular groups in society who may be subject to the hegemony of the ruling elite (Ashcroft et al, 1989).

Each representation of silence related to aspects of shame, secrets, and gossip experienced by the main female characters was analyzed and scrutinized based on the postcolonial feminist approach. As stated by Weedon (2008), writing from women of minority ethnic groups is a craft partly developed from a desire to give voice to a marginalised and traumatic experience of migration. This is aligned with Divakaruni's comment of her characters in the 'Arranged Marriage' anthology: the women, who have been uprooted from their birthplaces and transported to Western countries, have to deal with a sudden change in their world view (Zupancic, 2011).

The analysis was conducted in several phases. Firstly, the researcher read the short story carefully and repeatedly. The second step was identifying the data related to the research questions. The researcher wrote down notes to specify the representations of silence related to shame, secrets and gossip existing in the text. The data were collected from the main female characters' perspectives, dialogues, feelings, and behaviors. The third step involved scrutinising the data and removing the data which were not closely related to the research questions. The fourth step was categorising the data into data type and reference. After that the data were analysed using the postcolonial feminist approach. The researcher conducted descriptive analysis to describe the data and this was followed with supporting theories to further strengthen the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representations of silence involving shame

The root word for 'shame' in Greek, as stated by Bond (2009) is *aidos*, which refers to genitalia or private parts. Additionally, Bond also states that a different root word for 'shame' originated from the Indo-German word *kam/kem* which means to cover oneself. The original meanings of the word as shown above indicate that

the existence of shame is connected to feelings of embarrassment about something sexual or private, or a particular secret that an individual decides to hide or cover. Using the meanings above as a guide, I will examine the characters' silence or lack of verbal response in facing shame due to a sexual wrongdoing or transgression.

According to Bose and Varghese (2001), in South Asian culture, the concept of shame is known as *sharam* in Hindi and Urdu. The concept is an 'ideological mechanism' which limits the female sex's mobility and social interactions, specifically with males who are not their relatives. Furthermore, it is closely linked to female sexuality and specifically to the covering of the female body. Wilson (1979) elaborates that the concept of *sharam* is pervasive among Indians and Pakistanis:

Its effects can vary from never looking a man in the eye or never arguing with a man, to wearing a Burkha. Few women brought up in India can truthfully say that they have never felt *sharam*. For the unwary it is a feeling as infectious as embarrassment or flirtatiousness. It can be very enjoyable, amusing and romantic (because it means that a relationship with a man must deepen through glances, smiles and phrases with hidden meanings). But inevitably it robs women of their strength and power and cramps their personalities

Bose and Varghese further state that the male counterpart of *sharam* is called *izzat*, which generally refers to pride, honour or self-respect (2001). The concept of *izzat* is affected by the lives and actions of the women in the family. As is argued by Wilson, 'A woman can have *izzat* but it is not her own — it is her husband's or father's' (1979). This informs us that unbecoming behaviour, especially by a female family member, has a negative influence on the family's honour and good name. Additionally, Bose states that although it is shameful in Asian cultures for both girls and boys to have sex outside the marriage, women seem to bear a heavier burden as more shame about the sexual act is attached to the girls (2001). Such embarrassment about the sexual act when it is committed by women can be seen in a few examples from the short story.

One particular aspect of shame as a result of having failed to live up to people's social and moral expectations can be seen in a particular character in this story, notably Manisha. From the beginning of the story, we are told of the indifference shown by Manisha's mom, despite the young lady's many efforts to win the latter's love and attention. As a grown-up university lecturer, Manisha seems adamant to get her mother's response towards events happening in her life. When she informs her mother about Bijoy's career as a psychology professor in California, the latter only responds that 'he must be a most interesting man' (p.112). At that moment, Manisha is described as wanting to say something 'brutal' to shock her mother from her indifference '*You are right, Mother, he is very interesting -especially in bed.*' However, she later decides to swallow her words as such a response would not bring any good to her relationship with her mother. This is because having premarital sex is still frowned upon in many Eastern societies.

Her relationship with Bijoy appears to become more physical and sexual:

I let him kiss me, and when his lips pressed down on mine...his hands deftly insistent on my kurta buttons, I told myself it was what I wanted [...] A sailing into uncharted and amazing areas of experience that someone like my mother could not even imagine.

Manisha thinks of her relationship with Bijoy as something with 'no strings attached' (p.114) but at the same time, she seems to hear voices in her head saying '*Men don't do these things to women they respect.*' (114). She also neglects to tell her aunt that she is living with a man that she is not married to as she thinks it would 'distress' the elderly lady. Manisha may refer to herself as a liberated young woman but deep down in her heart, she is engulfed in shame as what she is doing is not the norm in the traditional Indian culture.

Representations of silence involving secrets

In the case of representations of silence involving secrets, these can be referred to as a form of information control, in which certain information is being controlled by an individual who purposely conceals the information (Vangelisti and Caughlin,1997). When we talk

specifically of family secrets, these can be defined as the deliberate concealment of information by one or more family members who are affected by the information. These family secrets may include a wide variety of issues related to the family such as incest, alcoholism, domestic violence, and others.

A particular instance of silence involving secrets in the text is when Manisha talks to her aunt Mashi about her plans of choosing a wedding sari. She informs Mashi that she would like an 'orange and maroon' sari for her wedding. Then she realises that she might have been thinking of her mother's wedding sari, which she remembers finding in the bottom of a trunk, seemingly hidden 'like a sordid secret' (115). Here, not only the secret is kept unknown from others, but it is also described in a sleazy manner which probably hints towards a disgusting event which occurred. When Manisha announces that she would like a saffron sari for her wedding, her aunt falls silent for a while. It seems a meaningful silence as a while later the latter rejects her idea in a quiet manner: "Oh my dear, not saffron, not that." Such a reply raises more questions for Manisha (and the reader). When Manisha's aunt further describes saffron as a 'sorrowful' colour and that it reminds her of something she refuses to elaborate on, the reader's curiosity is indeed piqued.

Another instance of silence involving secrets in the text is evident in the scene where a woman claiming to be the maid's mother comes to the mansion to take her home. The two ladies get into an argument and the maid refuses to be taken home, saying that the older woman had sent men to her room to get money. The household members are too shocked to say anything when they know this secret that they become silenced:

There was a sudden hush in the air, as before the *Baisakhi* storms that rip the sky open. The sister saw that the *darwan's* mouth had fallen comically open, and that the aunt's eyes glittered with victory. But the look on her brother in law's face she couldn't read.

The family members' lack of verbal response regarding this news implies that they were experiencing a deep shock. It was unacceptable to

have a beggar woman working in the house as a maid, and to make it worse, the woman confessed that she had been exploited in prostitution. The aunt was the only one who seemed to be secretly pleased as she had earlier remarked that half of the beggar women could be 'prostitutes' (121).

Another instance of silence involving secrets can be seen in the sister's response after discovering that her brother in law, the master of the house, has been making sexual advancement towards the maid. The incidents occur in the garden and later when the wife is warded. Both incidents are noticed by the sister-in-law. However, she chooses not to reveal them to her elder sister because by doing so, she would only jeopardise her the latter's well-being, especially when the husband comes from an affluent family and going against him would affect the family's livelihood:

'He (the baby) was so defenceless. Without a father, he would be more so. And Khuku with her luminous, wondering eyes - she would lose all chances for a good marriage if the scandal of a broken home stained her life. And the wife herself, what future was there for a woman, no after how pressing the reason, left their husband's homes?' (156)

The younger sister decided to remain silent about the incident as she did not want to create problems for her sister, until many years later when she is persuaded by her niece to tell the story.

Representation of silence involving gossip

As for gossip, Foster (2004) and Wilson et al. (2000) have defined this as an activity which many people engage in, involving the exchange of information with evaluative content about absent third parties. Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) state that gossip is often described as an 'exclusively self-serving behaviour' with the intention of manipulating other people and influencing them, often in a 'malicious' and negative way.

Keltner et al. (2008) argue that gossip also functions as a mechanism to control the behaviour of dominant individuals by pressuring them to adhere to specific social norms. Additionally, Awwad states that from the structural functionalist perspective, gossip is utilised to unify the

community and establish stability and order, which is vital for the survival of the family and society. In this view, gossip is used by certain community members to spread an unpleasant story about a certain family's honour; in other words, to remind the family that their social and prestigious status is being jeopardised (2001).

An example of the representation of silence involving gossip is evident in the portrayal of the household members when they find out that the mistress has been teaching the maid, Sarala, how to read and write. The way the mistress reassures Sarala that their lessons would be a 'secret' and her husband would not know about it describe to us that the act of charity would not be well-received in the household. Soon enough, despite the 'closed' doors, the other family members discover what the mistress has been doing, as the author describes the news being disseminated in 'jealous whispers' to the master's aunt. The phrase 'whispers' indicate that what they are talking about is something which is not usually talked about openly. The author's approach in the narrative reveals to us that certain subjects are not dealt with directly; instead, gossip is being passed around as the version of the truth.

Another instance of the representation of silence involving gossip in the text is when the maid puts on the saffron sari which used to belong to the mistress of the house. The mistress had earlier insisted that the maid to wear the sari. We are told of how the cook's jaw dropped (131) and the *ayah* drew in her breath 'so sharply' when they saw the maid's appearance. This indicates that they are too shocked to say anything when they see the maid in that sari. This probably tells us that it is not proper for the maid to be wearing the sari belonging to the mistress. It is much later when the *ayah* mentioned something which was probably directed at the maid, using a proverb: 'when ants grew wings, the time of their doom had arrived.' (131). In this instance, the gossip is exchanged to others using a proverb. It is never directly mentioned and dealt with as it could present a threat to someone or a specific hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the representations of silence involving ideas of shame, secrets and gossip. Shame, secrets and gossip are inter-related concepts which appear to carry a much heavier weight in Eastern communities compared to Western societies. This is evident from the author's portrayal of the female characters who have been shamed, gossiped and harbored dark secrets in their lives. This paper was divided into three sections, with the first section exploring the characters' silence or lack of verbal responses as an effect of them feeling ashamed or embarrassed due to a particular wrongdoing. In the second section, I examined the characters' silence or lack of verbal responses about certain secrets regarding their families or themselves. As for the third section, this provided an insight into the characters' silence or lack of verbal responses about gossip disseminated by other people in the community.

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