

Silence: A Modus Operandi in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*

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“We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass- grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence. We need silence to be able to touch souls” -- Mother Teresa

The concept of silence as a pro-active tool has been adroitly exploited in the Indian context by none other than the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. According to Gandhiji, “suffering rinses our spirit clean”; it is through the intense suffering of our soul that we realise the suffering of others. How can one know the miseries of the blind, until one has experienced that situation oneself? And what was Gandhiji’s weapon to bring about a change in his adversary? The answer is quite simple; it is passive resistance or satyagraha. But if we explain this concept in a broader sense, satyagraha can be seen as Gandhiji’s *silence* to the violence imposed on India by the enemy. It was this suffering through silence that brought him victory. If he had dared to fight violence with the same weapon, he would have failed to give an opportunity to his enemy to see themselves through the prism of silence and suffering and thus to understand the gross immorality of their violence. He endured the suffering through silence and it brought about a change in his adversary because they felt guilty of hurting a man who caused them no physical harm. This reinforces the belief of humanistic psychologists that an individual is innately good but it is mental and social problem which makes them deviate from their natural tendency. All we have to do is to give human beings an opportunity to realize their innate humane quality. Silence and suffering is thus perhaps the most potent weapon which can lead us to true self-realisation and it is exemplified in the novel *The Chosen*. The novel analyses how silence can act as a technique or a way in understanding one’s own self; and how it acts as a succour to the suffering of one’s own heart and acts as an alternate to words in expression of one’s innerself. One can also study how silence employed by major characters created a psychological impact and acted as a substitute to words within the context of the novel *The Chosen*.

Silence - a potent weapon for self-realisation

Chaim Potok’s novel *The Chosen* brilliantly exemplifies the concept of silence and suffering as a pro-active tool towards self-realisation. It narrates the story of a father and a son where the father deliberately imposes silence between himself and his son so that his son will never go astray through worldly possessions and knowledge; instead he hopes the silence will help him to cultivate the other deeper, inner sense of perception. In other words, the imposed silence is intended to mould his son into maturity. It will force him to turn inward and thus develop a better sense of his soul, a greater empathy for others and a better sense of the world and his role in it.

Each individual may adapt different methods to bring about this realisation in another person. But as we delve deeper into the matter, we realize that the curing agent is none other than “silence (or passive resistance) and suffering”. The father character Reb Saunders uses the weapon of silence to prepare his “brilliant minded” son Danny Saunders to know the worth of pain and suffering; “... the Master of the Universe blessed me with a brilliant son. And he cursed me with all the problems of raising him. Ah, what it is to have a brilliant son, a Daniel, a boy with a mind like a jewel...I saw him reading a story from a book. And I was frightened. He did not read the story, he swallowed it, as one swallows food or water. There was no soul in my four-year-old Daniel, there was only his mind. He was a mind in a body without a soul...” (pg 263) Reb Saunders closed his eyes and whimpered on his son’s pathetic situation.

As Danny was even a small kid Saunders knew his son bore an intelligent mind but it was a mind devoid of compassion for others. When Danny was four, he read a Yiddish book about a poor Jew and his struggles to get to Eretz Yisroel before he died. The book contained the description of the suffering he endured which could stir any ordinary reader’s mind but Danny *enjoyed* the story, he *enjoyed* the last terrible page, because when he finished it he realized for the first time what a memory he had. He looked at his father proudly and told him back the story from memory, and his father cried inside his heart to God; “what have u done to me? A mind like this I need for a son? A *heart* I need for a son, a *soul* I need for a son, *compassion* I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, *that* I want from my son, not a mind without a soul!”(264). With that instance Saunders realized that he must strive hard to cultivate a compassionate mind in his son and he choose a seemingly callous method – silence to teach his son those humane qualities. From that day he never spoke with Danny other than while studying Talmud. He taught him that words distort what a person really feels in his heart. “He told me once he wishes everyone could talk in silence”(pg 72) said Danny to Reuven. But Danny couldn’t realize what his father was trying to communicate with his son through his silence. Saunders wanted his son to listen to his soul to realize his own goodness that lie deep within his heart but concealed by his sharp brain. He wanted his son to rip open that heart over his mind by suffering through silence. “My father believed in silence. When I was ten or eleven years old, I complained to him about something, and he told me to close my mouth and look into my soul. He told me to stop running to him every time I had a problem. I should look into my own soul for the answer. We just don’t talk, Reuven.” (pg 160) said Danny to Reuven.

A man is born into this world with only a tiny spark of goodness in him. The spark is God, it is the soul; the rest is ugliness and evil, a shell. The spark must be guarded like a treasure, nurtured and must be fanned into flame. It must learn to seek out other sparks, it must dominate the shell of evil. Anything can be that shell- hatred, jealousy, laziness, brutality and genius. And Danny’s shell was his “brilliant mind”. He possessed a photographic mind, “a gift from God” and recites pages of Talmud (Jewish law) as a human machine. “I look at a page of Talmud, and I remember it by heart. I understand it, too...I can do it with *Ivanhoe*, too” (pg 69) says Danny. Here lies Saunders mission to change this photographic mind of Danny to a mind overflowing with love and concern for others. Like Dr. Faustus Danny’s mind craved for knowledge, ignoring the pain of humanity, the more he studied more he became miserable. He finds studying only the sacred text of Talmud, a principal activity of orthodox Jewish males is too limiting.

He secretly goes to a public library to read classical Western literature as well as books about Psychology and Jewish history which is forbidden by the tenets of his religious sect. And the most outrageous thing he does to his community is his attempt to study German, Hitler's language, to study Freud. Though Saunders comes to know about Danny's secret venture into library reading secular books, he remains silent. Saunders knew he would never change his son by any reproach, guidance or philosophy. He knew his son was bright enough to retaliate any suggestion put forth by anyone to justify his point.

No one can win Danny with words but only with silence. Saunders as a father and a great scholar understands this malady and the only key to this predicament he found was to discontinue talking with his son and to cultivate a generous soul. "what can I do?" he asked softly, "I can no longer speak to my son. The Master of the Universe gave me a brilliant son, a phenomenon. And I cannot speak to him...You gave me a brilliant son, and I have thanked you for million times. But u had to make him *so* brilliant?" (pg159)

Reb Saunders figured out Danny's intense yearning to know about world and its mysteries augmented day by day. He feared that his son would end up with a miserable death like that of his brother, who ventured after worldly knowledge closing his eyes to his Creator and His creation. His brother was like Danny with sharp and brilliant mind. He was proud, haughty, impatient with less brilliant minds, grasping in its search for knowledge the way a conqueror grasps for power. His mind could not understand pain, it was indifferent to and impatient with suffering. It was even impatient with the illness of its own body. He left to study in Odessa for higher studies and died in a gas chamber. Saunders anticipated this same fate would happen to Danny if he is not raised carefully.

Saunders himself was brought up by his father in silence. When he was a child, his father used to wake him up in the middle of the night, so that he would cry. He would wake him and tell him the stories of destruction of Jerusalem and the sufferings of the people of Israel, and he would cry. For years Saunders suffered this routine. Once his father even took him to visit a hospital packed with the poor, the beggars, to listen to them talk. "My father himself never talked to me, except when we studied together. He taught me with silence. He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul"(pg 265). When his people asked why he was so silent with his son, he said that he did not like to talk that "*words are cruel, words play tricks, they distort what is in the heart, they conceal the heart, the heart speaks through silence.*"

As Saunders grew up he grasped the impact of his father's silence on his character and mind. He was able to build on a generous and compassionate heart in himself without going astray like his brother. Saunders hoped that this method would benefit his son also to develop a "pure soul" and imposed it on him. And gradually Danny too began to understand that there is a buried meaning underlying in this deliberate silence of his father. As he grows up he feels that he can listen to silence and learn from it. He understands that it has a quality and a dimension all its own. He senses that it talks to him and he feels himself "alive in it". Without any external aid or counsel from his father he identifies the pain of the world with the help of his father's silence. With great enthusiasm Danny explains to Reuven what he has learned from silence; "...it has a strange, beautiful texture. It doesn't always talk. Sometimes-sometimes it cries, and you can hear the pain of the world in it. It hurts to listen to it then. But you have to."(249).

One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, by turning inside oneself and by finding one's own soul. And it is important to know of pain and suffering. It destroys our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others. It makes us aware of how frail and tiny we are and of how much we must depend on God. Though for years Danny was bewildered and frightened with his father's silence, he always trusted him and never hated him. And when he was old enough to understand, he realised that his father was trying to cultivate the humane qualities of compassion and sympathy for others through pain and suffering with the aid of silence. His father's silence caused pain in his soul which lead to introspection and he suffered uncomplaining without finding remedy to this distress. But eventually through his suffering he recognized a soul in himself, a soul which could help him to realise his whole purpose as a human being to love and share the sufferings of his fellow beings. Here Saunders effectual weapon- silence played its part in moulding his son's character and personality which created in him an untainted soul and helped him to realise his true self.

Silence -a surrogate to words in *The Chosen*

Chaim Potok's working title for *The Chosen* was *A Time For Silence*. Silence is present throughout the novel, although its importance is obscure until the novel's resolution. Potok often inserts the word "silence" in the text, leaving us to figure out its meaning. For instance, in Chapter 4, Reuven notes that a "warm silence, ... not in the least bit awkward" passes between him and Danny. At first glance, this use of the word "silence" seems unrelated to the mysterious silence between Danny and his father. But later, we learn that silence, like words, can help people better understand each other.

Reb Saunders reveals his reasons for his silence toward Danny in the last chapter. By depriving Danny of a certain physical stimulus, Reb Saunders forces him to cultivate other senses of perception. In other words, the imposed silence forces Danny to mature. Danny's experience with silence parallels Reuven's experience with physical blindness and his silent suffering in the hospital, forcing him to turn inward, and thus develop a better sense of his soul, a greater empathy for others, and a better sense of the world and his role in it. Yet Potok does not completely endorse Reb Saunderson's treatment of Danny. When Reuven meets Danny, he is not accustomed to silence. "You and Your father with his crazy silences and explosions,"(244) Reuven flings at Danny.

Reuven's relationship with his father is based on a constant, easy flow of conversation; as a friend, David Malter is a good listener and offers sound advice. As a result, Reuven thinks of silence as something strange, dark, and empty, and he considers Reb Saunders's silence toward Danny inexplicable and cruel. At the end of the novel, after Reb Saunders explains his silence, Reuven and his father continue to wonder whether its benefits outweigh its drawbacks. But they understand that it was the appropriate way of communication employed by Saunders to educate his son which could speak more than million words "A father can bring up a child anyway he wishes... what a price to pay for a soul" (244) says David Malter.

Danny and David Malter do not speak after their encounter in the hospital until the very end of the book; Reuven and Danny have silence imposed upon their friendship by Reb Saunders; David Malter imposes a kind of silence on Reuven by refusing to explain Reb Saunders's way of raising Danny; Reuven imposes a silence on Reb Saunders when he ignores the Saunderson's requests for conversation; and there exist a

silence between Reuven and Mr. Meritt which communicates their intense pain on knowing Billy's unsuccessful surgery which results in his permanent blindness.

Again, Potok shows that silence exists everywhere, in many forms, and has as much meaning in a relationship as words. But all this deliberate or indeliberate silence between the characters had its purpose. The silence between Saunders and Malter showed their mutual respect for each other in dedicating their life for their people more than their antipathy towards each other on religious views. Malter's silence on Reuven's enquiry on Saunders' deliberate silence on Danny explains Malter's reluctance to reveal the motive of Saunders which could be unveiled eventually by Saunders himself and he wanted his son to understand its impact by himself observing Danny and Saunders. "It's for Reb Saunders to explain... I cannot explain what I do not completely understand. I cannot do it with my students, and I cannot do it with my son." (257) justifies David Malter. Reuven's silence on Saunders' invitation to his home explicated his resentment on Saunders' callous method between his son Danny and himself. "I didn't want to see Reb Saunders. I hated him as much now as I had when he had forced his silence between me and Danny." (257) narrated Reuven.

The two-year long silence between Danny and Reuven, imposed by Reb Saunders, is also rich in communicative interactions between the two friends. "I hated silence between us and thought it unimaginable that Danny and his father never really talked. Silence was ugly, it was black, it leered, it was cancerous, it was death. I hated it, and I hated Reb Saunders for forcing it upon me and his son." (221) thought Reuven. But gradually it helped Danny and Reuven to understand how much they were dependant on each other and loved each other, and how awfully they missed each other's presence and comradeship especially in hard times. When Reuven's father was admitted in the hospital, he wished Danny's support and assistance. But even in silence Danny was able to communicate his feelings and concern for Reuven more powerfully than words. "The look on Danny's face, though when I saw him for the first time, helped a little. He passed me in the hallway, his face a suffering mask of pain and compassion. I thought for a moment he would speak to me, but he didn't. Instead, he brushed against me and managed to touch my hand for a second. His touch and his eyes spoke the words that his lips couldn't." (228) narrated Reuven. A loving silence often has more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.

Though silence appears grave generally, it is one of the pervading elements and a symbol that give insight into major character's psyche in the novel. Reb Saunders suffers in silence for his entire tribe slayed ruthlessly in the carnage plotted by Hitler. He gets succumbed to silence as he comes to know about the holocaust in Germany. He is always despondent and miserable. He couldn't talk as his suffering was beyond words could explain. "And Danny's father was forever *silent*, withdrawn, his dark eyes turned inward, brooding, as if witnessing a sea of suffering he alone could see" (183) observed Reuven. Saunders was worn-out and sometimes at the kitchen table he began to cry suddenly, and he would get up and walk out of the room, then return a few minutes later and resume eating causing fear and anxiety in his family members. The annihilation of six million Jews was something beyond his soul could perceive. He would always sit lost in thought and he "wept in silence" feeling the torment of his people in distant lands. He never gave outlet to his suffering other than through his silent lament while taking the meals. He must be weeping for his people who wandered without food or shelter and also

being smothered to death in concentration camps. His silence communicated how much he cared and suffered for his people.

The importance of silence, and its form as a path to the soul and medium of communication is seen prevailing all throughout the novel. There are numerous instances in the book where both Danny and Reuven both receive and process information in a non-verbal form. Silence is more eloquent than words (Thomas Carlyle). It communicates more than words through the realisation of character's inner voice. Perhaps if one find there is a silence between oneself and one's loved ones, it is time that we realised that he or she wants you to understand those unspoken words by yourself, listening to your soul and Potok has succeeded amazingly in explicating this fact in his novel *The Chosen*

Conclusion

The epigraph to Book Three of *The Chosen* is a quotation from *Talmud* that reads, "A word is worth one coin; silence is worth two."- *Talmud*, the book is a collection of Jewish laws, stories and teaching that explain Torah by which Reb Saunders raises his son Danny. In accordance with the teaching of the Talmud, Reb Saunders never speaks to Danny except when they are discussing the Torah. At the end of the novel, Reb Saunders explains that the purpose of this silence is to teach his son to have compassion in his soul. Ironically, silence "talks." Potok through the characters Reb Saunders and Danny Saunders unveils the worth of silence. It enables a person to ponder deeply the suffering of the world. By remaining silent, a person can hear other people's cries for help and understanding, a psychological process. A person who always blabber of his troubles pay heed only to his or her own words, but a person who is quiet listens the pleadings of others as that person hears the "pain of the world" in that silence and finds empathy in his soul for other sufferers.

By reason of employing silence in all all nook and corner in the novel *The Chosen*, one can assume that Potok is using silence as a 'modus operandi'- a way of performing a task or action in his novel. With the help of Silence, Potok makes his character Reb Saunders cultivate the humane qualities such as charity, humility, leniency and forbearance in his son. By substituting silence for words he communicates more evidently the feelings and doubts that plagued the mind of his characters. When Shakespeare used soliloquy to unravel the inner feelings of a character, Potok used silence to manifest his character's inner turmoil and apprehension.

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