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But, Why Aren't We Listening? *When Silence Speaks*

Pushpa Joseph FMM
Dept. Chair of Christianity, University of Madras
Chennai

Abstract: Interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of humanity as self-sufficiency. Human beings are social beings. Without interrelation with society and with the cosmic world, humanity cannot realize its oneness with the universe. It is social interdependence that enables humans to test their faith and to prove themselves on the touchstone of reality. Feminism as a movement, ideology and a way of life also emphasizes values like mutuality, co-responsibility and partnership leading to a genuine interdependence between men and women. Building on this theme of interdependence, feminism from the grassroots argues that stories of women's agency and resistance are crucial in understanding the globe. In a world of growing interconnectedness we are coming to realize more and more that women's destinies are tied up with men's, the dalit woman's freedom is inextricably bound to that of the Brahmin woman. Feminism thus emphasizes the significance of the relational and the narrative self, that can only exist and persist through relations with others and as a being that can cause change, can be recognized and can tell its story.

The author shows that behind the facade of imposed silences there are life-giving testimonies of power emerging in and through the dynamic gestures of the powerless. Transforming these gestures into hope-filled visions is the task of the Christian theologian. Such a task demands our collective attention in the interest of liberating and empowering listening.

Keywords: Feminism, story, silence of women, silent resistance, text and intertextuality, narrative, intertextual interpretation, dialectics of power and powerlessness, overt resistance,

For us, a language is first and foremost someone talking. But there are language games in which the important thing is to listen, in which the rule deals with audition. Such a game is the game of the just. And in this game, one speaks only inasmuch as one listens, that is, one speaks as a listener, and not as an author. - Lyotard[1]

1. Introduction

My mother has always been and still is the uniting bond, the interconnecting link in our family. Four years back, in 2003, when I lost my beloved sister in a road accident she moved over to Goa from our home in Calicut to look after my nieces who were just four and eleven years then. This summer my mother suffered a devastating cerebral hemorrhage, which rendered her unconscious and totally helpless, but only in human eyes. The world around me sighed in despair, their gestures communicating hopelessness and pity.

For me, my mother in bed, unconscious and almost struck by a paralysis of the body, never appeared as a sign of helplessness. In the couple of months that passed by, I started sensing, even as she lies with her seemingly fixed and unmovable body, the aura of strengthening energy surrounding her very person. A new mode of communication emerged between us, a silence louder and more apparent than other silences that I have encountered, a speechlessness that reverberated with meaning. Her eyes, her body, nay her whole being, started to vibrate divine messages, even when I was far away from her physically. I began consulting her during moments of difficult decision-making. In the past two months of her seemingly unconscious state I have communicated with her much more than in all the forty plus years of my existence as her much loved daughter. Her new mode of being weaves a novel thread of connectedness not only within my family but also between friends and well-wishers who, prior to this event, I did not know existed. Her circle of connections is large concurring with her large-heartedness. It is as if even in sickness she continues her sacred mission of interlacing a matrix of interconnectedness between people.

I often wonder why people around her, the doctors and nurses included, cannot capture the healing power of the silence that emanates from her being. It seems as if the force of silence has been

stolen from us by this industrial and technological civilization. As I begin to write this paper it is the healing, uniting and interconnecting power of this stillness that strikes me almost urging me to place my thoughts and feelings on record. I am reminded of other instances of rich silences that spoke a new language. In this paper I analyze three such events that vibrate and resonate with meaning as they use silence as a channel for creating human and cosmic networks.

The contribution of this paper has to be contextualized within the general theme of this issue of *Jnanadeepa:* "Inter-human Relationships in an Interdependent World." Interconnectedness has become the buzzword everywhere with the recent revolution in communication and information technology. We live in a very relational world, where very small events in one part of the world can have a huge impact on another part. In fact, growing population, international migration, easy inflow of capital and so on in the last couple of centuries have hugely increased the level of global interdependence compared to older times, making us more and more influenced by events happening far from us in time and space. Interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of humanity as self-sufficiency. Human beings are social beings. Without interrelation with society and with the cosmic world, humanity cannot realize its oneness with the universe. It is social interdependence that enables humans to test their faith and to prove themselves on the touchstone of reality.

Feminism as a movement, ideology and a way of life also emphasizes values like mutuality, co-responsibility and partnership, leading to a genuine interdependence between men and women. Building on this theme of interdependence, feminism from the grassroots argues that stories of women's agency and resistance are crucial in understanding the globe. In a world of growing interconnectedness we are coming to realize more and more that women's destinies are tied up with men's, the dalit woman's freedom is inextricably bound to that of the Brahmin woman. Feminism thus emphasizes the significance of the relational and the narrative self, that can only exist and persist through relations with others and as a being that can cause change, can be recognized and can tell its story[2]. The self it affirms is constituted by social interaction in the telling of its story and this social interaction can have both language and

silence as its medium. However, feminism revolutionizes silence, by affirming the paradox that silence has to be heard, otherwise it is of no use. Feminism affirms that women must be freed from the trap of silence, and in order to move out of this cage, feminism makes noise with the pregnant silences of women in order to call the world to a new kind of listening. It is in as much as we listen with new ears and look with the eyes of a seer and prophet that we build a united world of relationships and life-giving interactions.

Just as my family and I were initially deaf to my mother's silence, we as humans have not understood the richness in the silences of the impoverished men and women of our country and the world. My experience of communion in the tranquillity of my mother's being challenges me to hermeneutically analyze the rich silences of other women that impart an empowerment that forges revolutionary bonds. In this paper I propose to analyze three rich instances of silence which are significant events proclaiming the power in the mutuality and partnership that invest women's lives. I will analyze them from a feminist perspective in order to uncover and explicate the treasures feminism holds for the future of humankind.

2. Speaking and Listening

In her influential yet much criticized essay entitled "Can the Subaltern Speak"[3], feminist and postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak makes a fundamental distinction between speaking and talking. For Spivak, a speech act is a transaction between the speaker and the listener. Often, the subaltern makes an attempt at self-representation. However this act of representation is not heard. The hegemonic listener does not recognize it, because very often the subaltern's representation does not fit into the official institutional structures of language. This failure of the fulfilment of the speech act is what Spivak calls "not speaking."

Speaking demands a simultaneous activity, the activity of listening. Spivak forces us to take in for a critical questioning the discomforting answers or the lack of it, to the question "Can the subaltern speak?" What must we, as Christian theologians and as the Church, do to hear and recognize the continuing *han* of the *minjung* or the non-verbal sighs of Asian women or the groanings

of the *Dalits*? As Christian theologians Spivak's query is important. I believe that her question has become more important with the advent of global capital and the war on terror unleashed by the Empire because it adds various shades to the reality of interconnectedness.

The concern to 'hear the unheard voices into speech' is a task entrusted to the feminist, the theologian and anyone who has received a mission within the Church. What is being emphasized by this is the responsibility each of one us has as people who have been commissioned. Responsibility, for Derrida, is composed of 'response' plus 'ability', that is, the ability to respond, to hear, whereby it is a play of listening and speaking. This would entail listening to that which has been silenced in speech. However, even as I emphasize the responsibility of the Christian theologian to represent the "silenced majority", I simultaneously feel the need to warn against the attempt of the Christian intellectual to 'recover' the 'voice' of the silenced, for fears that this would end up being a 'logocentric' project. Moreover, I suspect that the Christian intellectual faces the danger that in the very act of representing, i.e., speaking for and speaking about the subaltern she/he risks reproducing the subaltern's silence. This failure on the part of those in authority to listen was evident in the post-Tsunami scenario when people who lost not only their homes and fishing boats but also their entire livelihood were disgusted at the 'we know how to help you attitude' of the government and the non-governmental organizations who as a matter of fact were queuing to help out. Quite contrary to this, people from the Tsunami hit areas wanted to be heard. Herein is a plea to the Christian theologian to unlearn his or her privilege and to learn from below, whereby instead of *speaking for* the subaltern, we must learn to *speak together with the subaltern.* This would be a practice of subversive listening that creates conducive conditions for the "invisible", the "unsaid" to emerge. Such an approach, I think, shifts the focus from the traditional logocentric strategies of resistance to the possibilities of subversion through a listening that transforms the power dynamics between the active speaker and the passive listener and is a crucial aspect of the politics of rupturing hegemonic discourses.

That there is no easy way out of this paradoxical dilemma is being hinted at by Preman Niles in one of his articles. Niles narrates the experience of Kosuke Koyama, the Japanese theologian, who once tried to explain John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word" to his colleague, a Buddhist monk. The monk, without any qualms at the middle of the theological lecture stopped the theologian and commented, "Christianity is a very noisy religion." Winding up his narration of the story, Niles poses a rather thought-provoking question: "How can a noisy religion that gives rise to a noisy theology communicate to one for whom the Ultimate is Silence."[4]

The logocentrism of Christian theology is not only redundant to the pregnant silence of the Buddhist monk in question but also arid to the people in the margins whose expressions of loss, pain and struggle are often through ritualistic performances enveloped in silence. In order to be able to hear these stories a shift in theologizing needs to take place. Feminists call this a transformation from the dry logocentrism of theology to the *experience* of the poor and marginalized as the starting-point of all theology. Feminists also affirm that such a shift will help us to take cognizance of the range of voices and capture the performative strategies women employ not often with the intention of making their voices heard but more often with the dire need of subsistence. Such a transformation of theology will expose the "enormous and effervescent realm of 'hidden transcript' of activity contesting domination"[5]; transcripts which capture voices not expressed within any version of a public or dominant domain. These hidden yet dynamic transcripts containing life and blood strokes of a compelling nature highlight indeed with urgency the limitations of mainstream models in capturing their testimonies about the violence and oppression against them. In order to be able to truly listen, a shift in theologizing needs to take place, a shift from logocentrism to experience.

3. Capturing the Silent Resistances

Resistance as a phenomenon and as a concept has obtained a new interest in the social sciences as a way of exploring the subjectivities and agency of subaltern groups. A significant aspect of such research has been the attempt to explore ways in which the

material and discursive features of domination and subalternity are related. In other words, much of the attempt of scholars both in the Asian and Western context have been to investigate the manner in which the notion of resistance can be used to understand the subject-hood of the marginalized. There are two kinds of resistances that women engage themselves in – material everyday resistances and the resistance aimed at negating the discourses that legitimize their continued subjugation. Given the stark conditions of domination in which rural women are entwined and the oppositional practices with which they confront these conditions, Scott insists that subaltern resistance is not (a) organised, systematic and cooperative, (b) principled or selfless (c) having revolutionary ideas, and (d) embodying ideas or intentions that negate the basis of domination itself. Scott opines that to expect subaltern resistance to be systematic and organized from a logical perspective is to "fundamentally misconstrue the very basis of economic and political struggle conducted daily by subordinate classes in repressive settings."[6] Scott develops an alternative conceptualisation of everyday resistance as anonymous, disguised, opportunistic, cautious, compromised, often unorganised, micro-practices – which he argues are more productive, safer and potentially as oppositional as the grander gestures more commonly accepted as 'legitimate' resistance. While I agree with Scott's observation regarding the subtle factors and therefore the complex nature of subaltern resistances which cannot be 'contained by the grander gestures,' I maintain that a general statement regarding subaltern resistances as not having revolutionary ideas, or not embodying ideas that negate the basis of domination does not really capture the radical, contextual, dynamic nature of indigenous resistance strategies. The three texts of resistance or silent defiance that we will deal with in an internarrative or intertexual analysis does in my opinion differ with Scott's observation.

The desire to locate a site of resistance is the defining characteristic of any marginal group - be it dalits, prostitute women or rural women in any context. Foucault expresses this concisely, in the well-known dictum, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."[7] This desire is to be seen in relation to their determination to forge for themselves an identity in

opposition to the hierarchy or paternalism of dominant groups. Scott rightly opines that resistance in these texts is not necessarily an overt act of confrontation but one that can be retrieved and accessed through attentive listening.

The following section proposes to analyze two subaltern narratives or two situations of "performative resistance" by women in marginal contexts and a Scriptural text from the Gospel of Mark. As events that have been narrated and circulated, written and published, read and discussed, they have assumed the stature of texts. Some texts have an evocative power and can engage in a fruitful dialogue with people. The ensuing dialogue may result in a world of innovative and promising possibilities. When such an interaction happens, new meanings are produced and the text becomes not only a meaningfully structured discourse, but also one that becomes the harbinger of hope and good news.

4. Narratives, Texts and the World of Inter textuality

4.1. The first text: The narrative of the chipko movement

On 26 March 1974, a group of peasant women in the Reni forests of Garhwal Himalaya, under the leadership of Gaura Devi, the head of the local village women's organization, succeeded in chasing away timber felling contractors through *a simple ritual of hugging the trees*. In course of time this event became a milestone in the evolution of the world famous Chipko movement. A number of activists with remarkable philosophical richness and social commitment have devoted their lives to this movement. Today this movement of peasant women has extended from the North to the South, and collaborates with other movements.

4.2. The Second Text

The second text or linguistic event that I propose to analyze here is a lesser known event and act of resistance. It is from the world of women in prostitution[8].

Pushpa[9] came to Madras in 1989 trusting a lady who promised to help her in her misery. She was only 28 then and had lost her husband

in an accident. Her in-laws pushed her on to the streets with her 2 daughters and a son. The 'kind' lady who promised help brought her to a home in Madras where she ran a brothel. Between tears, Pushpa related, "See where I have landed? If my brothers or sisters had helped me, I would not have been here. In fact I had even registered my name in the employment exchange. In addition I had also worked for some time as an attendant in a medical college. Only after I came here did I come to know that the 'kind' lady ran a brothel inside her house." Pushpa sent her children to Kerala, to one of her sisters' homes. "As I sent money regularly, my sister had no problem in keeping them with her," she narrated. "Believe me, I haven't gone to see my children at all. I continued to work as a prostitute, as I needed money for my children's education. Having sinned once, I couldn't come out of it. If my family had supported me when I was in trouble, I would not have come to Madras or entered this profession." "Sister," she cried, "Please don't think that I felt happy selling my body. No, I did not. I tried working as a maid in several houses, but there too I had to face the advances of men. I cried a lot on the first day. It was very demeaning and sad for me to be arrested by the police and sent to jail. I tried to kill myself several times by drinking poison and taking sleeping pills. I even poured petrol on myself. Tell me, what is the use of living a life like this? I do not have anybody. I have not seen my children since 1990. I couldn't be present when my daughter was getting married. Still, I went there and saw my daughter's marriage ceremony from another room. Only my sister knew I was there."[10] As if to conclude her story with a befitting benediction she told me something very touching. "I am Pushpa. When I was a child my father used to lovingly bring flowers for me everyday, saying that he loved his "Pushpam" very much. Now this Pushpam's body is a mass of eroticized flesh. My father, who died when I was a teenager, will weep if he sees his Pushpam's body being mutilated. But I cannot give my children a good future if I do not deface myself. I have to break my body for the sake of my children. God alone understands my pain. Every morning I offer one flower to God as a symbol of my pure self."

4.3. The third text

Mk. 15:37, "And Jesus cried with a loud voice and gave up His Spirit."

Narratives are for marginal communities what texts are for the elite. These accounts resound with meaning, spill over their own limits, point beyond themselves and therefore have implications for our present situation. They become a springboard or a medium for recovering the lost identities of the silenced through the process of repetitive performance.

5. Intertextual Interpretation

With the aim of listening to their non-verbalized resistances, intertextual exchanges are made to take place between the matrices of the three texts

1. The hugging of the trees by rural women
2. Daily symbolic offering of Pushpa and
3. Mk. 15:37, "And Jesus cried with a loud voice and gave up His Spirit," which denotes the 'powerlessness' of Jesus in his death and suffering.

Philip Wickeri in delineating for us the contours of a kenotic mission which is founded on a kenotic listening, draws our attention to this "kenosis of God who emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" as he suggests that for us Christians "mission begins with powerlessness, not power." Such a kenotic mission can take place only to the extent that we receive and take part in the invitation to be listening partners in a dialogue with other people, which if it "does not make you different, then it is not dialogue and you are not involved in mission."[11]

Kim Yong-Bock in his article, "The Bible Among the *Minjung* of Korea: Kairotic Listening and Reading of the Bible," describes new ways of reading the text by an involved 'kiarotic' listening and dynamic interaction with the context. The context for Yong-Bock is the 'power in powerlessness' of the *Minjung* as they respond actively to the 'kairotization' of the Biblical text that occurs in God's time of fullness. This kairosis, Yong- Bock affirms, takes place through social

events and the contingencies of history/herstory that invests the process of kairotization with life and blood corporeality. A kalrotic listening therefore calls us to humbly lend our ears to the events in people's lives that have kalrotic significances for them.

The three texts of our 'intertextuality exercise' are events that emphasize the kairotic moment in the lives of our protagonists and thereby in their corresponding communities. All three are body related experiences, which contain in them a dialectic of powerlessness and power. In this dialectic the protagonists of our narratives are related.

5.1. The Dialectic of Power and Powerlessness

(Sovereign servant vis-à-vis Subjugated Servant)

Even though Pushpa was silenced by the cruel system of prostitution, through her constant ritual of offering her "pure" body to God she projects her subversive agenda. Though her space in society and culture is limited she employs her creative subjectivity in the sphere of ritual and religiosity. Her female/feminist agency with its 'autonomy in religion making' seeks to nullify the patriarchal powers that punish her. And she finds recourse in a nature offering that for her not only represents her self but also claims God. Claiming God also means being claimed by God. A mutual claiming of this nature is very much part of the gospel stories too. For instance the woman with the hemorrhage claims Jesus by daring to touch his garments. Jesus' response to her comes as a gift; he claims that he has been transformed through this dialogical encounter with the "powerful woman" who rendered him "powerless" for Jesus says, "Power went out of me."

The exchange of agencies that transpires between Jesus and the woman with the hemorrhage is synonymous in many ways with the exchange that happens daily between Pushpa and her God. It echoes in significant ways Lewis Hyde's description of the act of gift-giving in his study of so-called primitive cultures. In his book entitled *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Hyde writes, "The bonds that gifts establish are not simply social; they may be spiritual and psychological as well. There are interior economies and visible

economies... Gift exchange is the preferred interior commerce at those times when the psyche is in need of integration."[12]

Pushpa's performance in a daily act of spiritual homage can be seen as having in effect two types of significance. Firstly, such an ordinary yet sublime ritual was her way of manifesting resistance to a society that considered her spoilt, impure and loose for being a prostitute. Her belief in a God who takes a preferential option for the poor urges her to offer a pure flower to God as a symbol of her body, which in turn reinforces her faith in herself. Through her routine observance of the flower offering she contests the notion that she is naturally or essentially impure. If she is unchaste it is also because societal structures have forced her into prostitution.

Likewise she also confronts the tendency in society and culture to associate her identity with the feminine body considered a sexual commodity. In other words, she challenges the notion that treats women as synonymous with body, and prostitutes as mere eroticised flesh or sensual objects. Accordingly, if the body of the woman is violated, her entire self becomes spoilt. Furthermore, society considers her impure, but she trusts that God will not consider her impure. This reveals that she is constantly trying to adjust in creative ways with society's imprint of spoilt on her body. While she manifests no intentions of giving into society's stamp, she also resists such an appellation and challenges society to look into its tactics of evading responsibility for its wrong doings. This is also evident in a sharing of another prostitute, "We may be prostitutes, we may be ostracized by society – but we are human beings. You may not believe it, but like you people, we are also capable of feeling joy and grief. Like you, we also laugh when we are happy. Like you again, our cheeks also are flooded with tears when we are lashed by bitter sorrow. Surely you will not grudge these equal rights of humble women like us...."[13]

Secondly Pushpa also recounted to me the rehabilitative effect of this self-constructed spiritual performance of offering the flower. "It helped me," she illustrated with gestures, "even to forgive the 'kind' lady who cheated me into prostitution." In a lowered voice she continued her narration, "One morning I felt moved to visit her. She was sick and in bed. Prior to this special day, I was filled with

remorse and anger. But on that day when I went to her bedside I had different kinds of emotions in my heart. I sat beside her and stroked her hand. She looked at me with intense sadness. She couldn't speak. But her eyes spoke and her tears washed the pain of revenge in my heart. I felt like a bird in flight, so light and so free. After that we became close friends. We also started relating to other women in the same profession like friends. We support each other a lot and find immense consolation in this. Last year we went together for the convention of sex workers and it was very strengthening." This reconciliation helped both of them to create networks of women bonding among sex workers. Thus this execution of spiritual agency becomes one way of reclaiming her self through bonding with God and with other women who are marginalized.

5.2. Overt Resistance

The event of the Chipko women hugging the trees can be seen as a kairotic moment (God's moment of intervention/incarnation "sambvami yugé yugé") because simple rural women who were considered to be 'powerless and faceless entities' unite together in the simple act of 'hugging trees.' Ramachandra Guha, in his narrative of the chipko movement, underscores that these women were placing their bodies between the trees, that is, their extended bodies,[14] and the hackers who were ready with sharp axes. The sharp axes symbolizing the might of the powerful could at any moment go down on the backs of the 'hugging women' tearing their flesh into pieces. A critical theologizing has the ability of bringing into our awareness the "kairotic impact" of this moment both for the dominant Indian culture and for the lives of Indian women under the yoke of cultural codifications.

Firstly, various metaphors are used in the Indian context to describe nature and the universe, both the cosmic world and the world of humans. One concept that is frequently used is *lila.* Accordingly, creation is the divine play of God and the universe is a body or a stage in which God's play of continuous creation takes place. Creation is also seen as a feat that is accomplished by the self-sacrifice of God, for the Divine *lila* is also the divine mother who creates. In addition, *lila* is also seen as the divine play in which

Brahman transforms himself into the world, as a result of which the world is also seen as the extended body of God[15], *Brahman* is the great magician who transforms himself into the world and he performs this feat with his 'magic creative power' (*Maya*).

Secondly, though the dominant Hindu philosophy considers nature to be an extension of God, and therefore not something to be dominated over, its underlying philosophy of women as the ground and men as the seed buttresses the patriarchal codification of nature as synonymous with women as opposed to culture as representing men, which is a characteristic feature of all dominant cultures including Christian cultures. This is practically seen in the fact that women could not be possessors of land, because women themselves are 'the ground on which the seed (sperm) is sown.' Such an understanding has also informed the whole role of motherhood in India. Feminist anthropologists in India have discussed the problem of motherhood from the perspective of Indian women. A woman's procreative role was originally a source of power. However, it has been rendered powerless through its subjection to male domination. Considered a field in the possession of the owner of the seed i.e. semen, motherhood makes a woman susceptible to male domination. Maternal responsibility is used as an alibi to exclude a woman from power, decision-making and a participatory role in public life. Motherhood and mothering perceived as the bringing forth of new life and its sustenance, so essential to human survival, paradoxically becomes instruments of subordination. The feminist dilemma therefore is: how to retrieve motherhood as a source of liberation. This is different from the glorification of motherhood that equates it to self-denial. Even the status accorded to motherhood is conditional on her accepting motherhood as self-denial. In addition to this, rural women and poor urban women are deprived of nourishment, safe birthing, adequate antenatal care, child care facilities and so on. [16] In this regard it is befitting to quote Sherry Ortner who says, "Women everywhere must be associated with something that every culture devalues. There is only one that would fit that description and that is nature... Culture attempts to control and transcend nature, to use it for its own purpose, culture is therefore superior to the natural world and seeks to mark out or socialize nature.[17] In short, though the dominant Hindu philosophy considers the cosmos as God's body in addition to the fact that the creator God is mother, this has not fully

ensured the understanding of Indian women as people having their own rights and wisdom.

Thirdly, the women, who hugged the trees as a sign of resistance, were rural uneducated women who are considered to be objects under the purity/pollution ideology of the caste system, challenge the very system, turn it upside down and become protectors of both the extended body of God, their own bodies, the bodies of their husbands and the body of the community.[18] This is an empowering moment of reclaiming the power of their bodies which patriarchy has rendered powerless. These women move the system closer to its own integrity, if only one inch at a time. Joan Chittister,[19] in her very refreshing and dynamic reinterpretation of the book of Ruth, makes an interesting cartography of the journey undertaken by Ruth and Naomi in view of their empowerment and liberation. In her words, "By pushing the system beyond its limits, by refusing to stand silently by, by claiming their part of the will of God, Naomi and Ruth provide a metaphor for what it means to be a woman."[20] These women of the Chipko movement too, just as the other women whom we encountered, in their very act of silent resistance provide a metaphor for women in our contexts. It is encouraging to note that with their combined action the sports company, the Transnational Corporation representing the powerful empire, had to abandon their project of felling trees. The Chipko movement currently has spread to many parts of India including Karnataka in the South and gained the status of a pan Indian movement manifesting the networking potential it has liberated.

Maria Arul Raja in his very fruitful and creative attempt to create a critical and intertextual dialogue between the dalit world of defiance and the matrix of defiance from the Markan Jesus, highlights the human sensitivity, communitarian inclusion and ethical priority of Jesus vis-à-vis the arid traditionalism, cultism and rigid ritualism of the Jewish religious codes and authorities. He also illustrates how such an intertextual reading is filled with cumulative transformative power not only for the community of dalits, but also for the ongoing process of theological encounter of the Christian community. Such a process, he argues, "should continue till the last veneer of every type of dehumanizing hierarchy is peeled away from the human memory."[21]

The subaltern woman has always spoken, she has spoken in alternative ways that have challenged and continue to challenge not only imperialist and casteist discourse but also us, who have been slow to or refused to hear and acknowledge when and how these voices have spoken. Even though we don't listen, the subaltern woman claims her power to speak not only for herself but also for the sake of all the women yet unborn. She opposes her oppression with the scant weapons at her disposal within the boundaries of her patriarchal community and, although it may not seem significant, it has an impact on the slow wheels of change.

6. Conclusion

We have encountered different shades of silences in this study:

- The silence triggered by sickness
- The silence imposed by cultural restrictions
- The silence of economic domination
- Silence as instigated by physical violence

We have also seen that, behind the facade of imposed silences, there are life-giving testimonies of power emerging in and through the dynamic gestures of the powerless. Transforming these gestures into hope filled visions is the task of the Christian theologian. Such a task demands our collective attention in the interest of liberating and empowering listening.

True hearing happens only in a context of rich silence. It is linked with the subjective experience of the theologian's and the community's encounter with the divine. As Jalaluddin Rumi the Sufi mystic sang, "To hear the song of the reed everything we have ever known must be left behind." There is a world of silence, which goes inwards energizing the self within to embark on the journey that goes outwards to enter into the lives of others. The accounts of silence and silent performances that we encountered in this article, be it the enrapturing silence of my mother or the embracing silence of the rural women, the healing silence of the woman in prostitution or the redeeming silence of Jesus on the cross, all of them call us to embark on an onward pilgrimage, thus enriching the self of the other as we enter into constructive partnerships. In the examples of the women

that we encountered it is evident that, though theirs is a speechless presence, it is not a message of helpless subalternity. In this context we as Church must not only ask the question: Can the subaltern speak? Instead, the question must be: if he or she has been speaking for centuries, why aren't we listening?

Notes

1. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Just Gaming*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1985) 71
2. Susan Brison, "Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory and Personal Identity" in Diana Tietjens et. al. (eds.) *Feminist Rethink The Self*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 4 – 50.
3. Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism & The Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (London: Macmillan, 1988). pp. 271-313.
4. D. Preman Niles, "The Word of God and the People of Asia," in Understanding the Word: Essays in Honour of Bernhard W. Anderson, ed. James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad, and Ben C. Ollenburger (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1985),281.
5. Joshua Price, Cf. Joshua Price, "Violence Against Prostitutes and a Re-evaluation of the Counterpublic Sphere" in *Genders*, 34, 2001 (online version on http://www.genders.org/g34/g34_price.html) 7.
6. James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, (New Have: Yale University Press, 1985)
7. Michael Foucalt, *The History of Sexuality: Vol 1. An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 78
8. There is a move to reject the appellation prostitute in favour of 'sex worker' with a view to emphasizing the recognition of prostitution as another form of work, i.e. 'sex work,' its hazardous nature notwithstanding. "Sex work per se is not the problem," they argue, "abuse, violence and criminality are the social problems." While I understand this move from the perspective of affirming the dignity of women in the trade, I am reluctant to call prostitution as work for a couple of reasons. Work by its very definition assures an atmosphere and space conducive for growth and well-being, whereas prostitution by its very nature is an inherently violent institution and offers no security for the women involved in the trade. An important question to be posed here is whether in an attempt to protect women in prostitution, they minimalize the systemic violence deep-seated in the system it self. In *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States*, the author, Rita Nakashima Brock emphasizes that to "use the term 'work' as if selling one's body for sexual use were the equivalent of typing someone's letter or serving someone food, masks too much to be useful much of the time." Hence I chose to use prostitution instead of the word

sex work and prostitute instead of commercial sex workers. Rita Nakashima Brock and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite. *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) (Catholic Religious Press, Gender Studies Award 1997).

9. Pushpa is her real name. I have asked her permission to use her name to which she agreed.
10. Interview of 3.01.2005
11. Philip Wickeri, *Scripture, Community, and Mission: Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles,* (Hongkong, London: CCA, CWM, 2002) 344
12. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property.* (New York: Vintage, 1979) 58
13. Sumanta Banerji, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000) 107
14. In the Indian understanding nature is our extended body.
15. Sankara the exponent of advaitic philosophy affirms that our extended body is the environment and it contains the never ending supply of energy and information that is available to us. There is no boundary between our body and our extended bodies. Each breath that we inhale and exhale is a reminder of the continuous conversation taking place between our physical body and our environment.
16. Maithreyi Krishnaraj, "Motherhood: Power and Powerlessness" in Jasodhara Bagchi (ed) *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, (Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1995) 34-43 (Reprinted 1997)
17. As quoted in Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, "Significance of the 'Body' in Feminist Theological Discourse" in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Volume XXXIII, No.2 December, 2001, 80-98 See 89. I also want to emphasize that this underlying philosophy is becoming a tool for cultural nationalists and conventionalists who pose as guardians of Indian culture to unleash terror on women, which is shown in the increasing rapes in the capital city and other metropolitan cities that are frequent highlights of the newspapers. The general argument is in favor of the abusers, who claim that it is men's duty to see that women dress the way tradition expects of them.
18. But the much believed notion in these cultures is that a son must light the pyre of the father only then the father will attain *moksha.*
19. Joan Chittister. *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life,* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000)
20. Joan Chittister. *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life,* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000) 25.
21. A. Maria Arul Raja, "Breaking Hegemonic Boundaries: An Intertexual Reading of the Madurai Veeran Legend and Mark's Story of Jesus" in Philip Wickeri (eds.), *Scripture, Community, and Mission: Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles,* (Hongkong, London: CCA, CWM, 2002) 256-265.

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