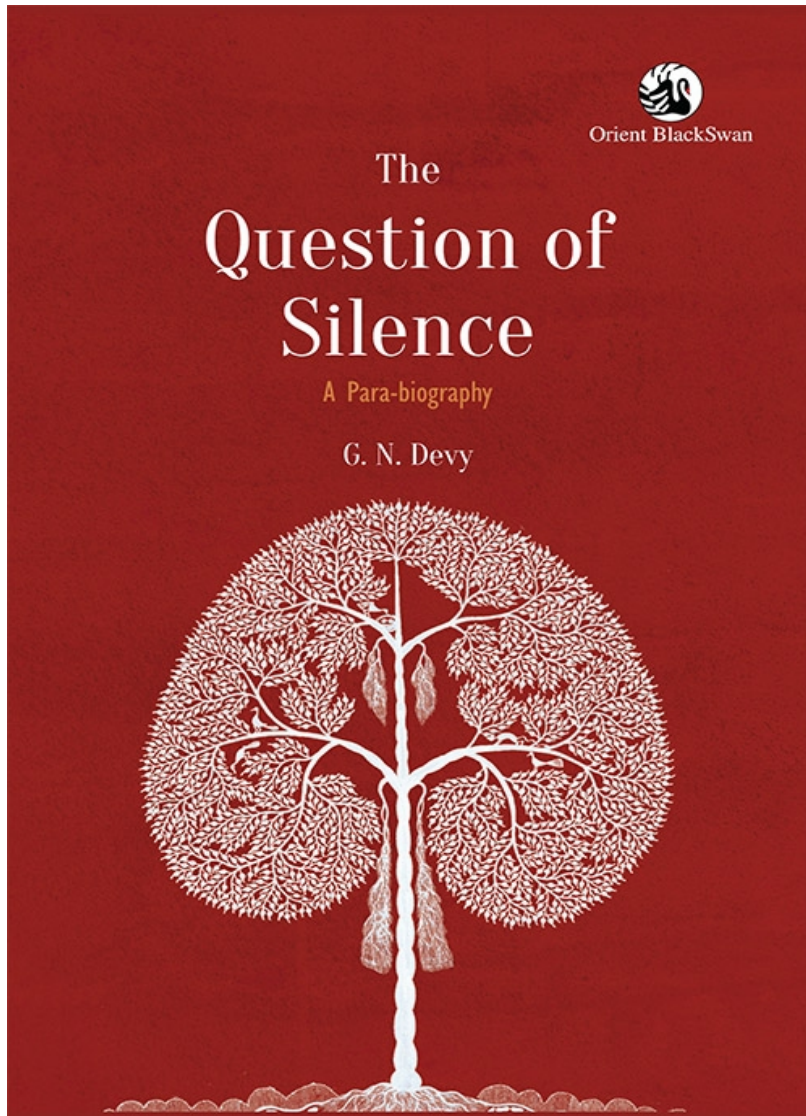


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merely there

By Jessica Sequeira.



G.N. Devy, *The Question of Silence: A Para-biography* (Orient BlackSwan, 2019)

In many traditions, silence is the end of questions, the moment one stops asking in order to connect with eternity. As G.N. Devy notes, in several Indian traditions “shanti”, or the state of mental and spiritual peace, occupies a special place. So Devy’s title immediately plants the question: What does he mean by the question of silence? It’s not about traditions of spiritual silence. Nor is “question” merely a rhetorical, argumentative word (like the “question of rights”, “the question of happiness”, or “the question of whether Krishna ought to have stolen the butter”), which would be disappointing, and turn the book into a sort of legal tract.

Luckily Devy's mind works in less linear ways, and makes surprising connections. The title, he tells us, is taken from a feminist Dutch film by Marleen Gorris, in which the stories of three women intersect in a crime, such that they are compelled to share a silence. This crime denotes a multilayered but perhaps not entirely negative complicity. Here Devy takes up a similarly convergent yet more nefarious intersection of silences, which likewise can be separated into three elements. The first is the silence of the indigenous peoples of India, whose culture and complaints alike are ignored by the State; the second is the silence of the indigenous languages, which are dying out without even being recorded thanks largely to a system that gives them no place, with dire effects for our understanding of other kinds of cognition; and the third is the general silence of isolation and alienation in our increasingly technological world, in which the visual is replacing verbal language.

For Devy, contemporary society faces this "three-faced silence, arising out of power dynamics, technology-driven social changes and neurological-evolutionary compulsions". This is a huge premise, and his book is a more personal look at this "Question", the crossroads of wide-ranging reflections in the form of a pleasantly miscellaneous collection of essays and interviews compiled over the last few decades. In this "para-biography", Devy is interested in studying his own thought processes and experiences: "It is not about silence. It is about my engagement with silence."

Devy is dear to an older generation of the literary left (a poet friend I asked about him said: "I don't read him, but my mother does"), and he has an invaluable stock of personal experience. He created the People's Linguistic Survey of India, launched in 2010 to register languages that the government has denied official recognition, providing context along with samples of oral songs and crucial terminology. Such work is inspired by a similar survey of languages carried out by the Irishman George Grierson from 1894 to 1928. Devy also created the Bhasha Research Centre and the Adivasi Academy, which promotes the culture of indigenous peoples in India. He has written many books in Marathi and Gujarati as well as English.

Devy's best known work is his 1992 work *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*, which won a Sahitya Akademi award. Starting from the fact that the Constitution of India recognizes only 22 languages, he explores the way that first the British colonialists, then the State, forcibly imposed certain forms of memory by law and custom, silencing others. The Indian Forest Act, set up in the time of British colonialism, laid legal claim over forests in India, permitting mining and the felling of trees for fuel and wood, along with other forms of exploitation in natural areas. The indigenous were hard-pressed to exert a legal claim, and to this day the displaced population amounts to millions of people, often shifted about mercilessly at the whim of private firms or government initiative.

Devy's argument is that this obvious physical control is linked to control of language. According to Devy, there are 1,500 languages in India not classified as languages. In the schooling system children learn English, Hindi and one "official" state language, but the other languages are completely left out of this dynamic. For Devy this is a more subtle form of clipping tongues. It is bad for humanity too, he

argues, since languages are linked to cognitive concepts, and the traditional and ecological wisdom in these languages will therefore be lost.

In *After Amnesia*, Devy traced the historical roots of such selective cultural memory, in which only certain traditions are remembered, preserved and extended. Whoever controls language controls a people. Since the British needed a justification to rule, they mostly ignored the many non-written languages from the centuries before they came, or dismissed them as folklore or ethnomusicology. Indologist scholars focused on texts, but these formed only a small part of pre-colonial Indian culture. Hence they came to the conclusion that between ancient Sanskrit literatures (such as the Vedas and Upanishads) and more contemporary English literature (Hardy and Wordsworth) there had been nothing worth talking about. The reality, says Devy, is that there were thousands of bhashas, local literatures that had not been written down.

All this affected how Indians saw their own history. The bhakti tradition, according to Devy, was less concerned with creating written products and criticism than with establishing a link between the poet and the divine, prioritizing techniques of attention, and erasing the difference between speaker and listener. But the British influence meant Indian elites (including Devy's beloved Sri Aurobindo, who modeled his poetics after Shelley) prized text and textuality over oral tradition and the subjectivity of the poet, and looked down upon or ignored altogether the rich line of bhakti songs treasured by the people. While both the British and the Indian elites held this alternate tradition in contempt, Devy emphasizes the richness of a culture that did not feel the need for a critical apparatus. Or, as he bluntly puts it in an interview in *The Question of Silence*: "My unease is with the fact that in India we developed a lopsided view of ourselves, our arts, our literature, and the worst among the opinions we brought in was that unfortunately Indians have not developed aesthetics (...) We forgot the fact that for a thousand years our poets decided that literary criticism is trash, it is not necessary."

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The Question of Silence continues to explore these questions of language in their rich and troubling intersection between the metaphysical, postcolonial and personal, and takes them further. New here is the discussion of the complement of amnesia, which is "aphasia", or speechlessness. More specifically, Devy writes about "social aphasia", what happens when indigenous populations as a whole remain silent, and when languages die out, unable to speak anymore. (Only one-tenth of Indian languages have survived, he says.) At the end of *After Amnesia*, Devy called for a kind of nativism that I found somewhat reactionary, though I could understand his recoil from an imposed cosmopolitanism. In this work he seems to have downplayed this element, and a slightly more resigned note has crept in as he describes what what sounds like a one-way process toward linguistic extinction, even if his continued passion for his work is obvious.

In this collection we get to know more about Devy himself as he describes his intellectual grapplings, in a wry and articulate coming to terms with his "questions". Devy completed a doctorate on Sri Aurobindo at Shivaji University, Kolhapur, followed by a master's on A.K. Ramanujan at the University of Leeds in England, a somewhat out of order academic path thanks to the way fellowships abroad are allotted. (Funnily enough, he observes that English students have so much time to think that

they have a hard time speaking fluidly, and develop a stutter.) He taught at a university level in India for a few years, then left the academy in order to work directly with indigenous populations. As he puts it, he consistently read a certain number of English pages per day until the age of 42, when he wrote *After Amnesia* and almost stopped reading entirely. This is when he decided to dedicate his life to the tribal populations of India.

For Devy, being Adivasi—that is, belonging to an indigenous tribal community—is more a mental frame than an ethnic identity. Hence his belief in “Reverse Anthropology”: “In anthropology people look at the Adivasis. It is my wish that the Adivasis look at the world.” To do so, Devy encourages spaces where the Adivasis themselves can study their language and culture. This is not Devy’s only reversal of conventional wisdom. He understands memory as linked to forgetting, which is sometimes good (when it replaces the desire for revenge, for instance) and sometimes bad. And here, as in his book *Of Many Heroes: An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography*, he inverts the idea of the single hero as prized by Carlyle, to introduce the idea of multiple smaller heroes.

Devy’s deep-held belief that language shapes cognition also means that he sees society as priming for a further radical shift in how it defines knowledge, as we grow increasingly seduced by images rather than words. Man and machine increasingly work together to create new forms of understanding, and those without the digital are left behind, another excluded population. “Future languages shall be more dependent on visual images than sound-symbols,” he writes. “Perhaps, a few hundred years from now, the nature of what we call ‘language’ will have changed altogether (...) In the imagistic universe of significance concepts like ‘past’ and ‘future’ will not mean much. Those will be times when all tenses will have the tendency to collapse together.”

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The last part of the book is oriented toward Devy’s own memories facing the imminent silence of death. He has some beautiful poetic images of his childhood in Bhor, a town in Maharashtra. Of teachers, he writes that: “Naturally, they all looked taller than they were, like trees do on winter evenings.” He describes his discomfort with being a Brahmin, and the way he feels closer to the Adivasis. He also evokes fascinations with Chaplin’s eyes, saying that “My early childhood train journeys with coal-hurt eyes and Chaplin’s eloquent heavily-kohled eyes stood in sharp contrast for me”, and with peacock feathers, describing how he would read using his “peacock feather eye”, “scanning the pages and avidly stocking everything in the mind of that feather, available to my recall whenever I required anything from it”. He runs through early influences, Vyasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Mira, Tukaram, Kabir, Tagore, Premchand, Freud, Yeats, Ghatk, Strindberg, Solzhenitsyn, Gaudi, Wilde, Karanth and a long etcetera. This comes off as more wondrous than showy, and speaks to the non-nativist, international variety of Devy’s own education.

He holds a special place in his heart for Gandhi and the “X-ray sharp questions” he raised: “Of course, I did not meet Gandhi in my life. He died two years before I was born, and so that possibility did not exist. But I met him through the son of Mahadev Desai, Narayanbhai Desai. I also met him through dozens of pale imitations. And I kept meeting him in tiny villages and far-flung hills, in remote camps

of nomadic communities, in Laxman's cartoons, at railway stations, in obscure schools and places that made the ordinariness of life the heart of its beauty and grandeur."

Now Devy has chosen to make his home in Baroda, in Gujarat. He describes its delightful laburnum flowers, but also the tensions between the modernizers and the people "merely there", many of them tribals who lived in ghettos and worked in construction, or else as performers with elephants and parrots or street sellers. He describes the slow mounting and manipulation of tensions into the riots of 2002, a stand-off between Hindus and Muslims. He doesn't hammer the point home, but he doesn't need to. The tragedy in these understated descriptions is the way that such rich diversity can be reduced to an artificial dichotomy.

Far more attractive than such clinging to one's own religious line are the narratives he mentions as another influence, the transmigrational fantasies of pan-kaya pravesha, or the "getting under another person's skin, the mind changing bodies and the body changing minds". This fascination with other lives helps explain why in *The Question of Silence*, he prefers to reach toward truth with para-biography, rather than autobiography.

I find so many others in me and myself in so many others. It is as if a vast thought engulfs us all, passes through all of us, allows us to have its glimpses and offers the possibility of one's learning the humility to accept that the self is but a temporary mark in the ever-flowing stream of some energy, some wisdom. The greater the humility, the clearer is the view of that stream.

As he writes in another essay, there is a different kind of amnesia, a forgetfulness that isn't cultural but of something larger:

I am free; neither pretending to be a Brahmin, nor any other that survives by hating the Brahmin. I am an Adivasi, I have been here all along, and will be here as long as this earth and the human species continue to be here. I am a thought, only a thought. I will not be reborn for I will never die. At the heart of that thought is an emptiness that I have been trying to understand for over half a century. Action, excitement, movement, ideals, success, failures, tears, emotions, dreams and fears try to fill that emptiness momentarily. Then it returns again to assuage, to pacify, to temper down, to console, to terrify, to unnerve. It meets you at every corner of life, in crowded streets, in hectic activity, in excited thought, in lonely books, in ancient meditations and in contemporary movies. It is everywhere. I mean everywhere is it. All that is seen and done and thought is but a loss of the memory of this emptiness, the presence of this absence being there all the time and beyond. I think I had been searching for a while for this little forgetfulness that makes what we call life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Sequeira is a writer and literary translator. Her works of fiction include *A Luminous History of the Palm*, *A Furious Oyster* and *Rhombus and Oval*, and she has published the collection of essays *Other Paradises: Poetic Approaches to Thinking in a Technological Age*. Currently she lives between Santiago (Chile) and Cambridge (UK), where she is writing a PhD about Latin American writers' engagements with Indian philosophy.

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