

FICTION

# Not All Stories Have a Finale

MARZIA RAHMAN



A Sonata has three major parts: exposition, development and recapitulation.

Can a story be written in a sonata form? What if the strings are broken before reaching the last note?

Will there be a story then, a happy ending? Or, is the story doomed forever, with no chance of a finale?

**Things We hide in the Middle of the Night**

Lying side by side late at night, we counted cracks in the walls, some smaller, some larger, a few jagged.

“You hide things from me,” I said.

“What?” he asked in a sleepy voice.

“You are facing trouble at work?”

There was no response. Did he fall asleep? Or did he deliberately choose to stay silent? I hated his ability to fall asleep fast when I couldn’t sleep for days. I hated his choice of gifts he picked up for me randomly, without an occasion. I hated his face, taut with tension. Somedays I hated myself for carrying so much hatred.

“Did you talk to your father?” I asked, “The bank manager called again.”

“No,” a reply came this time. “I don’t want you to worry about money,”

“What do you want me to do?” I grumbled.

“You know what I want?” he came closer and whispered into my ear. I closed my eyes, wishing it was summer and I was somewhere else.

“I want to start a family,” he mumbled, kissing my neck.

*I sighed. I don’t want a baby. I don’t feel guilty for not wanting a baby. For wanting things, I am not supposed to want; and he is not supposed to know.*

We made love below the gaping cracks in the walls.

**LET’S IMAGINE**

**WE HAVE** a life together, filled with a few happy lyrics and some random fights.

Let’s imagine us waking up together; the early morning light seeping through the window, caressing us with its warmth.

Let’s imagine us watching the rain, listening to George Michael songs, or walking in some half-deserted street in a late winter night.

Too much of such imaginations can be tiring. You demand truth. I find it easier, playing make-believe.

With a husband, snoring next to me, I imagine a little more every night.

**THE LAST NOTE**

“Shouldn’t it be called hypocrisy to live with a man you don’t love?” he asked.

“It’s called compromise,” I replied. “Arranged marriage.”

“It’s not how a marriage works,” he said.

“It works just fine.”

“Can’t you leave him?” he suddenly asked, lighting a cigarette.

I stayed silent and watched the smoke swirling in the air. Fading fast.

“And do what?” I asked.

“Move in with me,” he said.

I stared at him with a thudding heart.

He waited.

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POETRY

# Embroidery

BY MITALI CHAKRAVARTY



Pink cherry blossoms, born of the whiteness of snow and the redness of blood, bloom in April.

An embroidery frame of silk with red cascades of flowers, that on trees stay pink, forms a gateway to a garden I had known long ago, a garden born from centuries of sweat of incamadined hands

scabbed by fantasies, sculpted to perfection. Jade plants stand cold, watching koi ponds with water lilies and hyacinths, redolent, sheltered from sorrows by weeping willows. Who will wipe the lament of the gnarled gardener bent, burdened with timeless lush scapes of bowed obedience to languid, luxurious lives?

Red was the colour that stormed, stomped the rich. Did peace ride vermilion? The Buddha no longer sings.

*Mitali Chakravarty writes for love and harmony and in that spirit has founded the Borderless Journal.*

# Silence, a Cross-dresser from Medieval Europe

SOHANA MANZOOR

I came across Heldris de Cornuälle’s *Silence* in 2011, a hundred years after its discovery in 1911. Dated to the early thirteenth century, the old Arthurian romance narrates the story of Silence, who is perhaps one of the earliest cross-dressers in literature. The only daughter of the Count and Countess of Cornwall, Silence was reared as a boy because of a law decreed by the king. As a girl, she could not inherit her father’s property, and hence her parents hid the truth about her sex. As a result, Silence or Silentiuss experienced numerous adventures that would have been impossible for her had she been reared as a girl. Her story seemed intriguing to me because it opened my eyes fully to the problems a woman faces in patriarchal society, where she is continuously treated as less. Even if she proves to be as capable as a man, as Silence does, she is not appreciated.

Throughout the tale, Silence is referred to as a “he,” and acts as a young man, earns fame as a minstrel and valiant knight. In a strictly gender structured society, Silence achieves much through her role as a male, but when her real identity is revealed, she is stripped of her manhood and is restored in the woman’s domain. From an action-packed world of chivalry and heroism she is thrown into a world of silence and obedience, where she becomes the Queen of the old king Evan, who is also her father’s uncle.

But what was the Medieval European society like? And what position did women hold there? In spite of much research on the Medieval Age, there are still areas that are grey, a good deal of information nonetheless missing. Yet it certainly looks like a grim world that fictions and movies tend to romanticize as a world of adventure and glory. The barrier between men’s world and women’s was strict, and therefore, while adventure and story were granted to men, women had neither. Men worked outside, engaged in battles, and travelled to distant places, while women got married at an early age, produced children for their husbands, and looked after the house. Hence, even though Medieval literature is full of adulterous and promiscuous women, in reality men had much more sexual freedom. A man charged with such accusations would

be laughed at and punishment would come only if he was caught red-handed. A woman, however, would be in danger of losing everything including her life. The best possible solution for her would be to spent the rest of her life in a nunnery.

There are, however, historical records of desperate women fleeing home in pursuit of adventure, mostly becoming hermits and saints. Though there has not been much research on women in disguise before the fifteenth century, in the stories of Joan of Arc, or, Saint Eugenia one can see how some women did defy social conventions. It was

not, however, an easy or accepted norm.

Neither a man, nor a woman, where is then the place of Silence in such a society? Being a female by birth, but raised as a man, Silence is actually a hybrid, a social outcast. According to Erika Hess, the function of a hybrid is to “disrupt and challenge logical thinking.” The cross-dresser Medieval Ages is identified as a kind of hermaphrodite as s/he has no fixed gender identity. Female transvestite or cross-dresser has garnered more attention than male ones simply because it has been seen as “a reaction

against male dominance” (Hess). Silence, for example, learns the skills of prowess, music, and becomes a great knight as well as a famous minstrel. As the defense of her country, she is respected throughout the land. Her success naturally calls into question the competence of all those biological men around her.

Yet Silence is conflicted and confused because she is unable to lead a full life. Throughout her life though Silence wins many battles, she keeps her mouth sealed about her identity as well as her desires. Ironically, her silence cries out her story—the

stark problems that every woman faces in a society that denies women’s right in order to preserve men’s. If she reveals who or what she is, her place in the world would be lost. Even when the Queen Eufeme accuses the man Silentiuss of rape, she keeps silent out of fear of being exposed.

Silence is an unusual entity because she is like no other man, or woman. She actually, is an anomaly—born a female, but being able to participate in activities that are denied to ordinary women. However, to gain that privilege she also has to become a

deceiver and a trickster, what Bloch calls a “bel semblant” wearing other’s clothes, and taking other’s name, defying nature’s rule and identity.” Naturally, such ambiguity provokes a lot of attention from those around her. The Queen Eufeme attempts to seduce her thrice, the King of France is enthralled, and Evan, the King of England in the end marries Silence. Yet again, we never get to know about the views and opinions of Silence. She always maintains decorum, and never reveals her own desires.

A most interesting episode in this romance is when Silence is ordered to capture Merlin

as a punishment for transgression. The very idea of catching Merlin is problematic because according to Merlin’s own words, no man would be able to entrap the powerful warlock. The Queen Eufeme thought that thus she would be able to avenge the man who dared to spurn her. As for Silence, she is so engrossed with her assignment that she forgets the prophecy that Merlin can only be captured by a woman. She captures Merlin to avoid death without realizing that it would actually bring death for the man Silence. Only too late the folly of imprisoning Merlin

dawns on her: “Why did I bring Merlin here? What a catastrophe!” While Silence is too preoccupied with hiding her secret, Merlin can barely suppress his mirth. The fact that Silence has been able to catch the wizard should be enough to tell everybody what she is. But instead, the King, as the head of a complacent society, asks Merlin why his prophecy about himself turned out to be false.

Another social hybrid, Merlin then questions the apparently perfect exterior of society, and within fractions of a moment brings about a scenario that probably makes little sense to its audience-- the beautiful and wronged Eufeme is exposed to be a lying harlot, the fearless, rapist knight turns into a lovely maiden, and the respectable nun among the queen’s women is revealed to be a cross-dresser man, a secret lover of the Queen Eufeme. The entire court is too astounded to speak, and we can suddenly see through the futility of practiced customs in human society.

Silence’s story points at stereotypical complexities in her society as well as the problematic role she has to play. First of all, she locates the issue with female inheritance. The other more serious dilemma regarding the capability of women in men’s world, is hastily hushed up by Evan. Silence was a male model of fictional heroism and was able to create a new model of female heroine. But even after knowing the complete story of her life, Evan is not willing to allow Silence a place or a “room of her own.”

One might ask, “Couldn’t there be a separate existence for Silence? Couldn’t she be a woman, and a knight too?” But the King Evan praises Silence for silence and obedience—the characteristic virtues in women appreciated by society. He may have saved her from the public gaze, but he only does so by stealing her identity. Hence it is difficult to accept that a woman like Silence can actually be silenced. As I close the book, I feel this ending could be the beginning of a new adventure in a silent world and only a woman could write it.

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