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It is Silence that Remains All-Pervasive: An Interpretation of *The Ox* by H. E. Bates

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Abstract: *The Ox* by Herbert Ernest Bates is a poignant short story. It recounts the tragic life of a very simple woman (Mrs. Thurlow) who is a silent self-sacrificer for the sake of her own family while her husband (Mr. Thurlow) shows total negligence in the family's financial matter in the pretext of his being hurt in the warfare. The research seeks to point out how silence has played a pivotal role in the story *The Ox*. So, here in this article the role of silence in its different aspects as well as its manifestation in the story has been interpreted in connection with the characters and their associated situations. Mr. Thurlow is totally silent in the matter of familial well-being. As a result, Mrs. Thurlow silently bears her life of sorrows and sufferings without any complaint. And her silent sufferings lead to the silencing of all her feelings and also her dreams. Likewise, her husband, her sons, her brother and in a way her society do not feel too much concern regarding the condition of the destitute woman. The paper also includes the significance of the title in association with the concept of silence and the symbolic interpretation of the cycle's stopping its service. Then, the article also shows how Mrs. Thurlow's hard toil and sufferings and the consequent loneliness and silence reflect her absurd existence.

Index Terms - The Ox, self-sacrificer, silence, sufferings, absurd existence.

I. Introduction

H. E. Bates short story *The Ox* deals with the tragic life of a very hard-working woman Mrs. Thurlow (Lil). Married to an irresponsible husband she has to work hard in the expectation of her two sons having a better future than that of their own. So, from morning to night she is busy doing cleaning, washing, farming and many other works. But, at the end, her sons also betray her as they do not want to return to their state of misery and are ready to embrace their new life of wealth, prosperity and materialistic happiness. It can be noticed that silence is a dominant factor in the story. The story represents the silent suffering of a destitute woman. Mrs. Thurlow silently works as she becomes habituated to her life of misery and sufferings. Then she silently bears with her husband's (Mr. Thurlow) stealing the money (above fifty-four pounds) which is the result of her hard toil for fifteen years. Though she asks her husband about the money for a number of times she is not harsh or straightforward in her questions to him. She also remains silent in the matter of Mr. Thurlow's committing murder and his subsequent death by trial as her only concern lies with her saved money with which she hopes she will raise her sons' status. But it should be noted also that after her husband's hanging, she becomes silent inwardly on the need for money and begins to question its importance. And at last, also she maintains her characteristic silence when she finds out that none of her near and dear ones really cares for her. And the story also reflects the silencing of all feelings in Mrs. Thurlow after a series of misfortunes and sufferings. Not only in Mrs. Thurlow, the role of silence can be seen also in other characters including Mr. Thurlow, Mrs. Thurlow's sons and her brother along with his family members. Even her bicycle which has been her

only companion in her arduous journey of life becomes silent in the matter of providing service and do not seem to go along with her. So, silence has a very important role in the framing of the story *The Ox*.

II. Scope of the Research

The Ox is a famous short story by H. E. Bates, and a number of studies have been conducted regarding this story. But the role of silence in the story has escaped their attention. Thus, this article seeks to explore the pivotal role played by silence in shaping the nature of the characters and their associated situations they are placed in. While making an analysis and interpretation of the role of silence, the paper also introduces textual quotations as well as those taken from other writers.

III. The Title of the Story and Its Association with the Concept of Silence

There are differences in opinions expressed by the readers and critics regarding the appropriateness of the title of the story *The Ox* as some are of the opinion that the title of the story should not have been *The Ox* as the word is used in association with a woman. But, it can be said contrarily that probably the writer wants to see her from a gender neutral perspective as the interest of the writer principally lies in a human being who silently suffers without a complaint and embraces her life of hard toil though in particular he seeks to present the sufferings of a destitute woman for whom no concern can be noticed in the patriarchal society. So, the purpose of the writer is to present the silent suffering of a human being without overtly being gender specific. There might be another possibility in not using the word “cow” in the title. Probably he wanted to be gender specific but not in the sense that Mrs. Thurlow is a woman, rather he wanted to present her as an individual with some of the male traits including strength and courage to face challenges of life. It can also be seen that Mrs. Thurlow has lost all her feminine charms as years of hard toil has hardened her too much and she bears all the sufferings with man-like silence and impassivity. So, the writer uses the term “ox” in order to lay emphasis on Mrs. Thurlow’s very traits that are generally associated with the male, and not female. That she endures her burdensome life of sufferings impassively and without a word or complaint is reflected in the very title of the story. Thus, the general theme of silence has some connection to the title of the story.

IV. The Bicycle as a Symbol and Its Silence in the Matter of Providing Service

The Bicycle of Mrs. Thurlow represents her repetitive agonized life from which she cannot have liberation. It reminds the reader of the cycle of her troublesome life that though she thinks will be relieved from as she finds hope from expectations that her two sons will have bright future but actually lands onto another cycle of troublesome or burdensome life. So, the bicycle symbolizes Mrs. Thurlow’s life of continual sufferings along with hard toil and her stoic endurance of it. It represents her hard and silent struggle to find her way amidst the difficulties and obstacles in the life’s journey. Her journey by the bicycle down and up the hill signifies her silent resolve to endow her life with a meaning through securing for her sons their comparatively bright future. But towards the end of the story the bicycle which used to symbolize Mrs. Thurlow’s life continuum changes its role as she notices a puncture in its tyre. It is as if the bicycle tries to point out the fact that Mrs. Thurlow no longer needs its service as the remains of her hopes are shattered at last. The bursting of the tire of her bicycle suggests the fact that the last and if any sense of hope remained for her it has been totally destroyed from the time onwards.

V. Silence of Mrs. Thurlow

Silence finds its best manifestation in the character of Mrs. Thurlow. Each day from morning to night she works hard to earn money as much as possible as her husband is irresponsible towards the family members and totally neglects the family’s financial matter. While she earns money for the sake of the family, she remains utterly silent in the matter of her husband Mr. Thurlow. Far from creating pressure on her husband, she is not even ready to utter a word against him. She maintains silence even in specific situations. On several occasions Mrs. Thurlow tries to say something to her husband but then restrains herself from uttering anything. She remains equally silent when she learns from her sons that they are not ready to return to her as they feel very comfortable in their new place with their uncle and his family members. Though at first Mrs. Thurlow breaks the silence and tries to protest saying that it is her right to take her children with her, emotionally she completely breaks down as she says nothing realising the futility of her any further attempts of protest after feeling the sense of betrayal of her sons. Thus, Mrs. Thurlow works hard for the sake of her family especially in the expectation of the bright future for her two sons and suffers inwardly without the utterance of any word. But then after her husband her sons

also betray her as they are too much concerned about their own happiness, prosperity and future and are not willing at all to think of their mother who has been a self-sacrificer for the sake of them. So, Mrs. Thurlow bears all these misfortunes of her life silently and without any complaint. And there can be a number of interpretations regarding her silence almost in every matter. As is mentioned earlier, somehow Mrs. Thurlow has possessed an ox-like strength and endurance in her nature and after years of hard toil she has been accustomed to her state of misery and has no motive to raise any complaint. Perhaps, Mrs. Thurlow's continual sufferings have left her hardened in such a manner that she has forgotten to express her feelings. She is at a loss to express even her sorrows. Thus, sufferings and hardships have silenced her emotional faculties. So, her silence reflects her ox-like passive endurance of sufferings as well as her stoicism in leading her burdensome life like a beast of burden.

VI. Silence of Mrs. Thurlow Regarding Her Own Future

The only mission of Mrs. Thurlow's life is to find her mental peace seeing the happiness of her two sons. With this aim in mind, she has been working by the sweat of her brow. Then a time comes when she becomes habituated to her miserable and troublesome life. And hence mentally she remains absolutely silent regarding her own future. As is said by the narrator of the story – "Staring down at a succession of wet floors, working always for other people, against time, she had somehow got into the habit of not thinking about herself" (Bates, *The Ox* 120). She works hard doing washing, farming, cleaning for other people and that also not for her own happiness but for her sons. So, she has no time to think about her own well-being and inwardly remains totally silent regarding her own future.

VII. Silence of Mrs. Thurlow's Husband, Her Brother and Sons

Mr. Thurlow in the story is an irresponsible man who totally neglects the family's financial matter on the pretext that he has been hurt in the warfare and feels pain as he has undergone an operation on his head. As a result, the total responsibility of the financial matter and looking after the sons goes to Mrs. Thurlow. Then he furtively takes the money that was saved by his wife through her fourteen years' hard toil. But the catastrophe comes when the sons also reject her and refuse to return to their mother. When she asks her brother that she has come to take her sons back with her, he remains silent only saying that they are not ready to return to her as they are very happy and are feeling very comfortable in his house. Her brother, a master carpenter, is a materialist who wants to take the boys for his business purpose. So, he does not care a straw for his sister. Again, her sons also remain silent on the matter at first, but then the elder one breaks the silence by saying only "Here,... We want to stop here" (Bates, *The Ox* 136) to her mother. And the younger one replies in the affirmative. Thus, the last remains of her hope are also gone as her sons also betray her faith upon them because they do not want to return to their life of misery and sufferings and seek to embrace their new life with all its wealth, prosperity and happiness.

VIII. Silence of Mrs. Thurlow's Society

The Ox relates to the life of a woman who lives in the patriarchal society. Probably Mrs. Thurlow prefers to remain silent as she is the only female member in her husband's house. Perhaps, inwardly she knows very well the fact that nobody will listen to her state of misery as she belongs to a society that is essentially male-dominated or patriarchal. Her mother and sister-in-law remains silent with regard to her condition as they also have internalised the patriarchal norms that do not bother at all about a woman's state whose irresponsible husband was convicted and executed for committing murder. So, the story deals with the patriarchal society that maintains its silence in the matter of the plight of a woman whose life can be characterized only in terms of a series of misfortunes and sufferings. The policemen also totally ignore her questions on her saved money not realising that it is not for herself but for her sons that she becomes desperate regarding the loss of money. So, though there are some people who are sympathetic towards her, somehow, there is almost nobody who cares for a destitute woman like Mrs. Thurlow.

Her condition in the family as well as within her society or surroundings can be compared to that of Icarus who falls into the sea and dies almost unnoticed and ignored by others that finds its reference in W. H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beau Arts" while mentioning the picture of Brueghel - "In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster" (Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts*). Mrs. Thurlow faces tragic end ignored by the wide indifferent world.

IX. Silence of the Narrator

Like many modern short stories *The Ox* by Bates has an open ending. The narrator of the story remains silent on the afterward events. So, the readers remain in a state of suspense as to the later course of events after the story ends. They are not told what would happen to Mrs. Thurlow. It can be she would continue her life of hardship doing hard toil with her bicycle as her only companion. So, she would return to her house on the hill and lead her quiet life of unrelenting endurance. Thus, it may also be that Mrs. Thurlow feels a little satisfied thinking of her discharge of responsibility towards her family members through hard toil though at the same time she feels deep sorrow. As Albert Camus in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* says – “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*). But there can be another interpretation of the ending. It is also probable that after her rejection by her sons she would not be able to last long. Certain lines of towards the end of the story require attention in this regard. The narrator says, - “Whereas, coming, she had seemed to be pushing forward into the future, she now felt as if she were pushing forward into nowhere” (Bates, *The Ox* 137). Though she thinks that “it’ll last me” (Bates, *The Ox* 137), it seems that the cycle which is the symbol of her troublesome journey of life will stop providing its service (as there is a puncture in its tyre) and she also would not live long. Again, the narrator says, - “She had for one moment an impression that she would never reach it” (Bates, *The Ox* 137). So, the ending of the story may suggest that Mrs. Thurlow feels deep shock after hearing the decision of her sons and as a result she becomes totally silent and it seems that she would not be able to bear the loss associated with the loss of her optimistic faith. Thus, the story *The Ox* is open to interpretation inviting conflictual viewpoints from the part of the readers and critics.

X. Sufferings, Loneliness, Devastation of Dream and Silence

Mrs. Thurlow’s is totally alone in her world of sorrows and sufferings. It can be noticed that there is nobody in her family who cares for her. Her husband has been careless from the very beginning, and her sons also do not seem to care for their mother. Her brother is only concerned with his business and gain. Thus Mrs. Thurlow’s only companions are her hard toil, pains, sorrows, sufferings and her bicycle symbolising her life. So, without any human being as her companion on her journey of life she feels completely alone in her universe of sorrows and sufferings. Continual pain and sufferings and its consequent loneliness and emotional aloofness leave her with the power of endurance. Then the time comes when she questions nothing. She becomes totally silent on the true advantage of life as she realises that the perpetual toil is what is meant by life to her. So, any possibility of her dreams in connection with her own life has been silenced since long. But then comes the catastrophe in her life. Her only source of hope and optimistic ideals i.e. her sons also drift away from her. It can be seen that her misfortunes has silenced her own dream and then also her dream associated with the well-being of her sons.

Mrs. Thurlow's condition may be compared to that of the poet who has lost his power of feeling after undergoing a number of sufferings in S. T. Coleridge’s poem. "Dejection: An Ode". But it must be noted that in the case of Mrs. Thurlow there is no loss of feelings apparently though it may seem. In reality, she suppresses her feelings. And this is clear at different points. For example, her deep sense of the loss of the money becomes very much explicit in the story and this same woman feels sad after her husband's death with such an effect that "She had some dim idea, heavily dulled by the sense of Thurlow's death, that the loss of the money was not now so great" (Bates, *The Ox* 135). And at last, the readers can easily see through the terrible shock she gets after her rejection by her sons.

XI. Silencing of Mrs. Thurlow’s Optimistic Ideals

The tragedy of Mrs. Tharlow’s life lies principally in the loss of her optimistic ideals and faith. As a mother she knows her responsibility towards her sons very well. Her irresponsible husband spoils her hopes by stealing her fifteen years saved money. But when she becomes aware of the lack of her sons towards her that becomes a bolt from the blue to her. So, the tragedy of Mrs. Thurlow is inherent in the silencing of her optimistic ideals by her surrounding people and situations. As is said in the story – “Nothing she could say would, she felt, give expression to the inner part of herself, the crushed core of optimism and faith” (Bates, *The Ox* 136). So, the essence of her tragedy lies not in her physical and mental agony, but in the defeat or silencing of her optimistic ideals.

XII. Silence and Mrs. Thurlow's Absurd Existence

Mrs. Thurlow's hard toil and silent suffering and the consequent loneliness reflect her absurd existence. In her attempts to do something for her family and thus to give some meaning to her life she continually tries her best and, but all her endeavours prove futile. Like Sisyphus of the Greek mythology, she leads her life of continual misery and hard toil. Being married to an irresponsible man she cannot find her peace. Then she begins to sense a ray of hope thinking of her sons' future. But again, she fails. Thus, her life is a succession of continual trials and failures. But according to Albert Camus's absurdism a person can feel a kind of satisfaction and hope even amidst hard struggles. And so, though Mrs. Thurlow experiences deep sorrows in her life she also feels satisfaction realising her care for her family members from the beginning till the end. Again, before realising her real situation, she "...lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification" (Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus, Absurd Freedom*). But then she realises that she "...was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which" she "was living" (Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus, Absurd Freedom*). Her tireless attempts to achieve something in her life and the ultimate failure accounts for the essential absurd situation of her life.

XIII. Conclusion

Thus, *The Ox* by H. E. Bates revolves round the element of silence. It plays an important role in the story involving the characters and situations. It is not very clear whether Mrs. Thurlow's silence is responsible for or at least a critical factor in her tragic end. But it can be said for certain that she is a victim of her surrounding people and adverse situations. And the fact remains that she through her experiences of life has learnt to be silent in almost every situation however crucial those may be. Also, she does not want to be boastful of her hard works as inwardly she believes that it is her responsibility to look after her sons and so keeps her sorrow to herself, remaining silent about her own miserable state. And probably she agrees with the proverb – "What cannot be cured must be endured" and so silently she endures every misfortune of her life. And at last, she is completely taken by silence as her only remains of hope also have been shattered by the decision of her sons.

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