



**Book Review: *Undying Echoes of Silence***

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*Undying Echoes of Silence*

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*Undying Echoes of Silence* (2013) is an extremely interesting novel and an eye-opener on many levels. The novel unearths a murder that was committed on 30 March 1957 at Paleri in Kerala. Originally serialised in the *Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly* and published by Current Books in 2009, the book was first written in English by Thachom Poyil Rajeevan during his stay in Iowa (United States) and later translated by him into Malayalam. However, the English version of the book published by Amaryllis appeared much later in August 2013. It is also adapted into a highly appreciated and award-winning film entitled *Paleri Manickyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (2009), which literally translates as 'Manickyam of Paleri: A Midnight Murder Story'. The book created a lot of discussion in Kerala during the days of its inception. The genre of crime fiction for a major period of the time has mostly been of the potboiler variety with very little literary merit, thereby, attaining the adjective of 'cheap' or 'popular'. In this regard, the genre in itself is a bit under-explored in the region because similar to Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (1998), the element of suspense although no less arduously etched, is far out-stood by the literary ambition of the novel.



Curiously triggered by the Manickyam murder case upon hearing it repeatedly from his father, the first person narrator of *Undying Echoes of Silence* intended to investigate it, which had gained the status of an unsolved mystery over half a century. In the 1950s, when Paleri, a village in the Kozhikode district of Kerala, was gradually transitioning from feudalism to democracy, the unnatural death of a young woman from the Thiyya community just twelve days after her marriage created an uproar in the entire region. Although investigations of such a mysterious death were initially carried out on the suspicions of murder, all accused were acquitted five months later. However, little did the narrator know that his general profession and this particular venture would actually result into a journey down his own memory lane.

The novel explores the fraught connection between caste, gender and landlordism in 1950s Kerala, which is significantly the period of the formation of the first Communist Government in the state. Also contemporaneously present are the disturbing questions of intrigue, greed, lust, depravity, sorcery, and superstition. The Manickyam murder case, as the narrator remarks, is truly an ‘anthology of many firsts’ – “The first murder in Paleri about which the police registered a case. The first torture death of a woman in United Kerala. The first murder case that the United Kerala Police inquired into. The first female death about which the investigation remained inconclusive. The first injustice, the first relentless act of violence that the unholy trinity of power, money, and politics swept under the carpet with the culprits walking scot-free” (Rajeevan 316). Hence, by tracing the murder fifty years later, the novel, on one hand, reveals the socio-political scenario of mid twentieth-century Kerala, and on the other, connects it to the contemporary and a more omnipresent truth, because the complex workings of the ‘unholy trinity of power, money, and politics’ are all the more explicit at present. To quote from the book, it “unravels the nefarious nexus between the police, criminal elements and the political establishment, and speaks of the predicament of women that remains the same despite socio-political changes in the third world” (back cover). However, the novel’s revisit to the planned art of deception, rape and murder also lets one visualise *karma* already taking toll on the artists within a mere fifty years.

What is riveting is that despite being a thriller murder mystery, it deeply delves into the philosophical debates around the feminine body and the aesthetics of death. In the 1846 essay “The Philosophy of Composition” Edgar Allan Poe asserts that the death of “a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world” (5). The novel recollects Sylvia Plath and Elisabeth Bronfen in this context. Sarayu Sharma, the friend and colleague of the narrator working in the Integral Solutions for Crime Detection (ISCD), quotes from Plath’s “Edge”: “The



woman is perfected. Her dead body wears the smile of an accomplishment” (Rajeevan 344). Although the description sounds disturbing amidst the crude violence in which Manickyam’s death took place, Sarayu’s explanation of it as the inescapable climax of events initiating long time ago somehow soothes the readers as death confirms the end of violation of her body. The German literary critic Bronfen further signifies the cultural alacrity over the female corpse when she observes in her book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (1992) that “because the feminine body is culturally constructed as the superlative site of alterity, culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women” (xi). Apart from these two, the novel also unmistakably reminds one of John Keats and Robert Browning (“Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Porphyria’s Lover”) in their representative efforts of preventing beauty from decay and making it a timeless memory by taking resort to death in variegated manners, whether obvious or queer. In accordance to that, Poe logically concludes that death was obviously the most melancholic of all melancholy topics according to the universal understanding of mankind, and it becomes most poetical when it “most closely allies itself to Beauty” (5). Manickyam’s death thus remains as an everlasting delicacy in everyone’s mind across centuries. The icing of the cake is of course the striking revelation in the final line of the epilogue which weaves the first page of the book with its last. One may at times feel lost amidst the simultaneous introduction of a number of new characters along with their vested interests and connections to the Communist Party. But the fact that the entire truth behind the murder and the identity of the actual murderers are not exposed until the fag end succeeds in capturing the constant attention of the readers.

Lastly, true to its title, *Undying Echoes of Silence* is beaming with silent sighs and untold tales of not the victims alone, but that of the culprits, the investigators, the naives, the corrupts, and the author as well. While the innumerable versions narrated by self-centred, aged, and oblivious people fifty years past the incident may lead to confusion and misinterpretation, the many conscious and subconscious silences on their parts - the hesitations, the fumbles, the half-said trails, the anxious expressions - that could be traced even half-a-century later, somehow connect all the versions and direct them towards the inevitable reality. Similar to Dr Menon’s postmortem of the body in the novel where what is saved is “not a life, but the truth behind the loss of a life” (Rajeevan 316), the book itself is the author’s postmortem examination where although the incident could not be prevented, the truth behind the entire menace is dug up and the silent echoes are gradually given voice. As the book approaches the end, it raises itself above the status of a genre of fiction and brings under serious consideration the conflicting symbiosis of the individual and the social life.



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