Subhash Jaireth’s *To Silence* is a rare specimen of fiction. It consists of the fictional autobiographies of three real historical figures: Kabir, the fifteenth century Indian poet; Maria Chekhova, the famous Russian writer Anton Chekhov’s younger sister, and Tommaso Campanella, a Calabrian philosopher, astrologer, theologian and poet. Here Subhash Jaireth fuses historical truth and imaginative elements in such a riveting manner that the reader will swing between a feeling of truth and a sense of fictionality during reading and have a pathetic provocation to believe that the events of the lives of these three are true, not imaginative creation using information from history. And this play of fictionality and non-fictionality has made the text more charming.

Kabir, Maria Chekhova and Tommaso Campanella, the three historical personalities from three continents and of three different periods, are the speakers here. They, with a deeper understanding about life and living, narrate the events of their lives when death is at their door. The first one as a Sufi presents his struggle in his mystic life against religious orthodoxies and materialism of the society; the second one as a woman with a creative faculty talks about her sorrow in a torturous time during World War Two and the third one as a priest tells about his perilous nonconformity in Inquisition-ravaged Italy. Their first-person narrative resembles soft and silent interior monologues flowing like gentle brooks with opaque waves. To my mind, between these two *sadhus* (religious personalities), the presence of Maria is dangerously attractive because she seems to talk about the universal human condition in a world of injustice and unrest. For this reason her stories clutch the heart horribly and a strange anguish stings it mercilessly.

Among the three parts of *To Silence* the life and times of Kabir comes first. He has been a weaver and has strong family bonds with parents and after that wife, son, Kamaal and daughter, Kamaali. From a very young age he has to listen to a call inside his heart and gradually he responds to that call and becomes attached to his own Guru in a world of beautiful suffering. Yet the path which he has taken is not easy to follow. Jaireth shows through Kalu, the only disciple of Kabir, how he breaks the boundaries of clearly-defined religion like Islam and Hinduism and creates one of his own — the religion of soul. We come to know that Kabir believes that God is one and the same whether he is called Allah or Karim or *Ra-am*. He hears all, so no need to shout five times loudly from minar, nor he is not hungry or thirsty, so no need to offer him foods in the temple. If anybody wants to feed him he can feed the poor. Again, he believes that there is no need to carry beads or threads for muttering the names of *Ra-am*. When human beings are in the womb, there are no religious signs to maintain. In these ways and more Kabir goes against the ritualistic religious tradition and points out the gaps in religious orthodoxies and baffles both Muslims and Hindus simultaneously. Before his death when both Muslims and Hindus claim him as their priest, he rejects both through a trick. He leaves the village at night and decides to leave his dead body for vultures and wild animals to be consumed. Thus he does not accept cremation or burial and invents a third one. Kabir has to struggle against the materialistic and utilitarian tendency of his son, Kamaal, also. He is too generous to forbid Kamaal to record his songs and thus preserve his name from any corruption and extinction. But at last nature serves him right by blurring the writing by the liquid droppings from pigeons on the fig tree.


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The second narrator here is neither a mystic nor a nun, but a lady who as the sister of Anton Chekhov becomes a chronicler of her time. In a period of two world wars and the October Revolution she leads a long life of 90 years, burdened with memories and regrets. She herself is a teacher and later on after the death of her brother she becomes the director of the Chekhov House Museum. What is most touching in her narrative is the pressure of the time of severe genocide committed by Adolf Hitler in different various concentration camps during World War Two, such as Treblinka in Poland, where near and dear ones of Maria have been forced to death in the gas chamber. Her memories come back again and again in her lonely life in Yalta. She has a very good relationship with Anton, but because of his silence over the issue of her marriage, she cannot decide whether she should be married or not. In such a lonely life Egorushka, the four year old son of Olga S, proves a blessing to her. He represents the true delight of lovely life in a war-ridden melancholic atmosphere when everyone has become intimidated and diminished. She has somehow escaped the cruel grip of murderous time, but for that she harbours regrets. She thinks that a ‘But’ was treacherous word in her life, and for this word she has kept silence and has not spoken up like other Jews who were caught and sent into the gas chambers. So she hates the word very much and cries often, but finds no solace.

The last orator is Tommaso Campanella whose stream of consciousness is set in a period of his life when he gains freedom from life-long captivity under the patronage of the Pope Urban VIII. He is very depressed and dejected and takes long walks to come to terms with himself and the events taking place in Rome in the name of religion. Like Kabir he follows his own reasoning and does not accept Aristotelian or Copernican revelations about the universe. Moreover, he had a profound relationship with his Lord in his own way. He blames himself for the sin of sodomy with Pietro, ‘a ten year old boy of immense beauty’ (100) that he has committed in a moment of frailty in his life. Besides this, another sin also chases his conscience all through his life, that is, he has seen a rape scene, but has not done anything to save the girl. In his fictional autobiography one matter is very interesting to read, that is, his long letter to Galileo, the greatest astronomer. This intimate expression of Tommaso in the letter opens in front of us his progressive attitude towards the universe and its hidden truths.

I feel at this juncture I should say a few words about the meaning of the word ‘silence’. As I have understood the text, silence has three different meanings to these three different personalities. For Kabir, the Indian Mystic, it is a blessing. He chooses silence himself as canopy to gather omens from Ra-am and to respond to His call through words formed into songs. He even does not want to preserve his songs in any written form because he has conceived that writing process is perishable as any living creature and only transmitted spoken words can survive. And the words are important, not the person who first utters the words. For Maria Chekhova, silence is a burden. Bearing the history of an inhumane and cruel time in her heart she suffers day and night, but cannot find any solace except crying over the phone while talking with Olga, Anton’s wife. Having known too much about a vicious time she cannot endure her crestfallen existence and regrets that she is not dead with her all relatives in Treblinka. On the other hand, for Tommaso, silence means oppression which he wants to end through uttering words. But words seem to him excuses to cover his sin. In spite of this he wants to confess and say how like ‘driftwood’ he has been ‘carried
away by the deceitful thoughts’ (91). With these various meanings the text really becomes very stimulating.

The book is written in plain and lucid prose with many philosophical and epigrammatic sentences that soothe the heart and hearing at the same time. Easily its ideas about beauty, grace, sin, fame, silence, injustice and so on qualify it as a source of philosophical reasoning. As a result, *To Silence* is really a pleasant fiction to enjoy. Let’s try a first reading!

Umme Salma