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‘To Name the Unnameable is a Curse’: Silence as an Enunciation of Trauma in Yvonne Owuor’s *Dust* (2014) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019)

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Various studies have interrogated the language of silence as a powerful tool of communication. This paper adds to such studies by interrogating silence as an enunciation of trauma in Yvonne Owuor’s texts *Dust* (2014) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019). Focusing on the characters of Akai and Ajany in *Dust* and Munira and Ayaana in *The Dragonfly Sea*, this paper is a critical interrogation of how these characters use silence to narrate their traumas. The characters under interrogation embody silence as the language of trauma in this postcolonial nation. They seem plagued by the memories of the traumatic experiences they undergo and this hinders their ability to use speech to articulate their pain. The paper starts with an introduction that covers an overview of related literature and then goes on to explore the binaries between lack of verbal speech, oppression, resistance, and trauma as espoused by the female characters. This paper also analyses the depiction of violence and silencing of the female characters by the men in their lives and on a larger scale, the silence enforced by state machineries and its metaphoric function in this post-independent country. Therefore, interpreting silence offers a multiplicity of meanings and different layers and convergences of meanings upon which it may be interpreted. It also discusses breaking that silence, a signifier of healing. The study is based on Literary Trauma Theory and trauma theory tenets as advanced by the following trauma theorists: Cathy Caruth, Dominic LaCapra, Judith Herman, Maria Root, Alan Gibbs, and Laura Brown.

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INTRODUCTION

Silence has been discussed as a powerful communication tool in literature. Ordinarily, silence is the absence of sound or speech but as Jaworski (1992) writes in *The Power of Silence*, “Silence, like touch, is highly symbolic, and its meanings may similarly be multifaceted and difficult to interpret” (p. 13). In this paper, we examine the functions of silence by looking at the social-cultural background where speech is expected but is not forthcoming. We rely on this background to interpret the use of silence in enunciating trauma.

Silence may therefore symbolise different things, for example, the inability to speak about taboo subjects, silence out of fear of the consequences of speaking, dissociation or disapproval, deep reflection, or reliving traumatic experiences. The silence of the characters under study is not just stupid silence (in which one remains mute because they lack something to say). In some instances, it can be read as contempt silence (disapproval towards what is said). In *Dust* (2014), the narrator comments that “Odidi had understood why silence is the language of last resort” (p. 15).

This paper also looks at the lack of enunciated verbal communication, locating it within a

continuum of forms; voluntary silence or being muted/silenced. We also examine non-verbal bodily gestures that might suggest partial silence and communication devoid of speech but communication nonetheless. As Glenn (2004) argues in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, “speech is not only surrounded by silence but consists most of all in silence [...] Silence and language work together, each shaping and generating the other” (p. 4). In this context, silence is treated as the lack of speech, speech lapses, and pauses, which can be said to have manifold meanings. For instance, it can be said to symbolise defiance and resistance. While this silence enables these characters to feel safe, it is also a symbol of their trauma.

It is worth examining the circumstances in which silence may also be interpreted as a response to oppression, that is, as a flight from power. All the characters under interrogation in both texts choose silence in the face of oppression. They flee from dialogue they cannot otherwise control. Speech and silence overlay each other in their intersection between oppression and freedom. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) argues that “The oppressed, having internalised the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom” (p. 45). From this

perspective, silence and oppression can be examined together as transecting continuums and positioned within the historical and social contexts in which both texts are set. Therefore, deciphering the complexity of linking them is necessary for this analysis.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990) asserts that “perhaps there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, [and] how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed (27). We can draw from this argument to determine how the female characters’ silences are a resistance to power which might disempower them if their weaknesses are uncovered. On the one hand, their silence symbolises their powerlessness and on the other, it empowers them since by their silence, they draw boundaries and sometimes prevent them from more exposure to harm. As discussed below, their silence is also partly the inability to verbalise their traumas. They are unable to assimilate their pain and name it, linguistically speaking. Their voices are muted and suppressed.

The Dragonfly Sea by Owuor (2019) follows the story of Ayaana as she transitions from childhood to adulthood on the little-known island of Pate. Ayaana’s mother, Munira, is impregnated by an unnamed man who abandons her and when her family also rejects her, she moves to Pate. The island is however not very accommodating of Ayaana and Munira, and Ayaana deeply troubled and bullied for lack of a father, adopts Muhidin as her father. Their lives change when China claims Ayaana as a Descendant, and she is sent to study in China.

Dust by Owuor (2014) starts with Odidi Oganda being gunned down while on the run by

the police in the streets of Nairobi. What follows is the intricacies of a grieving family; his sister jetting back from Brazil, his mother disappearing into the wild, and his ex-policeman-turned-cattle-rustler father bringing his body back to the Northern drylands of Kenya. Odidi’s death sparks a citadel of secrets and memories long buried in the family residence, Wuoth Ogik, and in the country. The novel traces Kenya’s history dating back to the MauMau rebellion against British colonial rule.

In *The most Powerful Thing, You’d Say Is Nothing at all: The Power of Silence in Conversation*, Ibrahim and Muhammad (2021) discuss the power of silence in dialogue. They classify types of silences, their functions, and how they can be mis(interpreted). They argue that due to ambiguity, interpreting silence depends on the context. This is important for this study as it will help us to situate silence in its nexus between suppression and defiance. Similarly, Green et al. (2021) in “*Silencing Touch and Touching Silence?*” explore dimensions of silence, and argue that silence is context-dependent and that it is often a reflection of power dynamics and “emergent reflections that resist verbalisation” (p. 6).

In *Fugitive Pieces*, which examines the victims of the Holocaust, Michaels (1998) argues that “[n]o act of violence is ever resolved when the one who can forgive can no longer speak, there is only silence” (p. 161). She proposes that silence symbolises trauma. This is especially important in this study as it will be instrumental in navigating the change of character when the female characters come to voice and narrate their traumas.

While discussing Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird in Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction*, Horowitz (1997) proposes that Kosinski “utilises the perspective of a mute

protagonist to put words to something usually kept outside the boundaries of language” (p. 71). She contends that the protagonist, who was rendered helpless by the holocaust catastrophe, can only communicate his experience outside of the linguistic system. In other words, he struggles with language and is unable to articulate his trauma through it. Njovane (2020) also argues in *Colonial Monuments, Postcolonial Selves*, that silence is symptomatic of trauma.

These studies are important in navigating the question of silence as the language of trauma, especially since previous studies on Owuor’s novels have largely focused on narrating the nation through fiction. The characters under study seem plagued by the memories of the traumatic experiences they undergo and this hinders their ability to use speech to articulate their pain.

Theorising Trauma

This paper uses Literary trauma theory, specifically the ideas advanced by Cathy Caruth, Dominic LaCapra, Judith Herman, Maria Root, Alan Gibbs, and Laura Brown. Lacapra (2001) describes trauma as a “disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence, which has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and are perhaps never fully mastered” (41).

In *Wounds and Words*, Schönfelder (2013) argues that trauma demands a mode of representation that textually performs trauma and its incomprehensibility through, for example, gaps and silences, the repeated breakdown of language, and the collapse of understanding (p. 115). This means that language use, or lack of it, is important to understand and situate the traumatic

experiences of the female characters under investigation. Through the lens of Trauma Theory, the select female characters’ silences and their interplay with trauma can be interpreted.

Trauma theory is used in understanding the effects of traumatic events on the characters, some of which render the victims silent and unable to articulate them. The traumatic experience, Caruth (1991) argues, “isn’t absorbed or experienced completely at the point of happening (p. 4) and it thus haunts the victim long after it has happened. This type of trauma that stems from a singular event is referred to as “punctual trauma”.

However, to capture everyday events that are traumatic, we shall also employ Maria Root, Alan Gibbs, and Laura Brown’s concept of “insidious trauma”. According to these theorists, this tenet helps to understand the effects of traumatic events that form part of the victim’s daily lives, including physical and sexual abuse, cultural atrocities, natural calamities, and emotional abuse. It also includes what Gibbs (2014) terms the “colonial experience, which is a key marker of insidious trauma” (16). This colonial experience, and the resulting trauma, are transmitted through generations.

This paper also employs LaCapra’s theoretical approaches, ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ to interrogate grief, one of the traumatic experiences some of the female characters undergo. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra (2001) explores the psychological responses to loss - Melancholia and mourning. He argues that while mourning helps one get past the event, melancholia makes the victim “re-experience it through dreams, hallucinations or flashbacks – an unconscious effort to muddle through the experience” (p.

22). The victim cannot differentiate between the moment lived through the experience and the present moment. Only by working through their grief is one able to separate the experience from their present and move on.

These trauma tenets will enable us to explain the characters' silence to the traumatic experiences they experience and how the silence is a pronouncement of their trauma.

Verbalised Silence

Silence in both *Dust* (2014) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) is enforced by layers of oppression at the familial and national level, marginalisation, and the characters' dependence on relationships. As Patterson (1992) argues in *The Shriek of Silence* "that which is human is that which speaks, the process of dehumanisation, on the other hand, is a process of rendering silent" (p. 12). Silence is therefore used by the oppressors to dehumanise the female characters under study.

Dust (2014) interrogates Kenya's condition through the lives of the Oganda family members. The family's dysfunctionality mirrors that of the nation, whose secrets are well kept, just like the family's. Odidi's death and the arrival of Isaiah Bolton jolt the family out of the citadel of secrets and its arbours and force them to confront them. These haunting secrets include; the skeleton at the red cave, which Odidi and Ajany discovered by mistake; the twins' death, which had been kept secret; and the country's secrets, which have been kept by the family patriarch, Aggrey Oganda.

Akai's silence permeates the narrative, and even when she speaks, she is said to have "rendered words as they were made to be—soldier verbs, constructed for action and war" (p. 76). She does not answer or refuse Hugh's demands, and neither does she respond to his

insults. Her silence can be read to be emanating from her disempowered, dehumanised, and inferiorised position that Hugh has put her in using words to threaten and intimidate her into submission. Her silent response, which is passive-aggressive behaviour, is therefore a form of 'speaking back' to Hugh, a symbol of power.

Hugh's silencing, an auditory symbol of control, is a form of oppression. Akai's silence is thus a signifier of restraint, marking speech impermissible. However, Akai carries more traumas than Hugh is responsible for. The pain of losing her children and especially the difficult circumstances under which they die cause her such immense pain that she is unable to name it. More than anyone else in the text, Akai speaks the language of silence. Undone by Hugh's abuse and the melancholy she experiences after the loss of her children, Akai is unable to narrate her experiences within the linguistic system. Language becomes inadequate to understand, process, or express her trauma. She never discusses Bolton or her dead children, not even with her husband, Nyapir, with whom she shares part of the trauma. Akai, unable to linguistically allocate words to her pain finds it easier to wander than confront it.

Drawing from colonial repression, Hugh suppresses Akai linguistically. He screams at her "shut up, cow". (p. 345) even though Akai was only "shivering, pouting and snarling like a mad cat" after he paints her in the rain. Akai's shivering, pouting, and snarling are involuntary reactions of prolonged exposure to low temperatures. That he asks her to 'shut up' can be interpreted as an order to her body; it is an absurd silencing of not just her voice but her whole being. He refuses to acknowledge her ability to function as a human being, to be uncomfortable. He reinforces his superiority in

the relationship and renders her voiceless. He reduces her to an object, a painting. When Akai tells him about the twins, he attempts to kill her in order to silence her forever. This suppression is mirrored in *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) through Munira who suffers the same fate at the hands of a man from Singapore who calls her 'a black boring prostitute' and 'foolish' (p. 162). Just like Hugh does to Akai, the man inferiorises her and treats Munira as the 'other'.

Matei (2013) contends in *The Meaning of Silence*, that Akai and Munira seem to have adopted ideal feminine behaviour "which asked women to adopt a submissive, obedient, and passive position" (p. 61). In this position, women are denied the power of speech. Matei also discusses that this silence is "not only about refraining from the actual speech, but also about enduring violence and pain" (p. 62).

Ajany's silence is noted right from the moment she is born. Galgalu, after urging her to life from Akai's womb, "had understood her stupefied silence when she saw the world she had come to" (p. 37). Her first 'world', her mother, rejects her, refuses to nurse her, and abandons the young Ajany in the wild from where Galgalu retrieves her.

Ajany and Odidi grow up surrounded by silence, memory and solitary life brought about by lack of relatives. This silence does not respond to their need to know: who are they? Who are their relatives? Why does Akai not seem to love Ajany? Why doesn't she refer to Ajany by her name? Why does Akai disappear into the wilderness? To make up for this and quench her sister's curiosity, Odidi makes up stories about relatives who never turned up. He told her of "ogres who emerged from petrified silences" (p. 17)

Akai and Ajany's silence, placed within the realms of socio-political context is a representative of the silence imposed on citizens by the state apparatus. The narrator comments:

National doors slammed over vaults of secrets. Soon the wise chose cowardice, a way of life: not hearing, not seeing, never asking, because sound, like dreams, could cause death. Sound gave up names, especially those of friends. It co-opted silence as an eavesdropper; casual conversations heard were delivered to the state to murder (Owuor, 2004, p. 42).

Verbal speech or sound, in this historical time, is said to be a cause of death in the sense that those who speak up against state killings are also killed. The 'wise' choose silence and have to pretend not to hear, see and never ask questions. The communal trauma of such citizens, especially espoused by Nyapir is passed down to Akai and Ajany. As the narrator further comments; "parents had partitioned sorrow, purchased even more silence, and promised a "better future" (p. 30). Their silence is a symbol of the silence of the entire nation in the face of atrocity. Their silences echo that of the nation.

Nyapir and Akai's silence over the scars of the historical traumas they carry with them is implanted and deeply affects their children, Odidi and Ajany. There is also the silence over Hugh Bolton's skeleton at the red cave. "From that day (they found the skeleton), their days were stuffed with choked fear, suffocated by the family habit of silence" (Owuor, 2014, p. 47). When Ajany seeks to find out who 'a Bolton is' her question is met with a silencing to never speak about it, which leaves her with more questions. This suffocation with the silence manifests itself in the nightmares she has. The

mystery of the red cave and Bolton's signatures in the books at Wuoth Ogik haunt her. She dreams of an unseen child's wails and the skeleton (which she refers to as Obarogo). The narrator further comments. "Silence would never explain why and how Akai Lokorijom, their mother, came to be the naked, potent, pregnant subject of Hugh Bolton's art." (p. 66). By refusing to answer Ajany's questions, and failing to narrate their traumas means that they remain unspoken and unprocessed, for the Oganda household, as well as the entire country which they symbolise.

Akai and Ajany's silences, although decades apart, espouse what Merwe and Madikizela (2007) expound in *Narrating Our Healing* as, "When people are overwhelmed by a traumatic experience, there is a silencing of the senses [...] [and this] silencing is more than a lack of words; it is also a lack of understanding of what has happened to them". (p. 33). Ajany is unable to process her nightmares after the visit to the red cave. She has no capacity, both mentally and linguistically, to unpack the meaning of the skeleton. Similarly, Akai, who first seeks Bolton so as to experience the world through him, has no understanding of his abuse of her. She neither questions nor reiterates, neither does she even defend herself from his beatings.

By choosing silence, Nyapir and Akai enhance the secrecy surrounding their familial and the country's trauma. Although the country has marked fifty years since the MauMau oath of secrecy, Akai and Nyapir are afraid of a 'curse' if they name the 'unnameable; if they narrate their traumatic experiences to their children. The reality of historical trauma that Akai and Oganda carry gives birth to intergenerational trauma and complicates the narration of their children's individual traumas.

Ajany's thoughts about her "disappearing mother, heaving silences, and the desire to vomit out a nameless anguish" (Owuor, 2004, p. 52) points to the impact of the unspoken trauma, which, because it is cloaked in silence, is said to be a nameless anguish. This is a profound definition of silence as the language of trauma. Nyapir tells her, "We bury evil with covenants of silence. ... For the good of the country. ... We know, nyara, that to name the unnameable is a curse". (72). Ajany is thus tied up and implicated in her parents' historical and domestic traumas. They inherit the Kenya Nyapir talks about when he says that for him, Kenya died when Mboya was killed.

In *The Dragonfly Sea* (Owuor, 2019), Wa Mashariq attempts to rape Ayaana. The event, which leaves her with physical and emotional scars, is responded to by both mother and daughter through silence. "They would both pretend that there had been no Thursday evening" (Owuor, 2019, p. 142). When Munira walks into the sight of her daughter's torn dress and the creature – as he is referred to henceforth –nearly mounting Ayaana, she pours hot caramel on him, which accidentally spills on Ayaana's thighs as well. Later, after the man leaves, it is reported:

"Get up", Munira told Ayaana, rather than I'm sorry. "I'll burn the dress", she said, rather than I'm sorry. She said, "You can't afford tears", rather than I'm sorry. "Go and clean yourself. I'll wipe this room. Have some milk. There's more on the stove." She said all this rather than I'm sorry (Owuor, 2019, p. 142)

From this excerpt, Munira speaks to Ayaana, partly giving her instructions; which she uses to mask her silence about the attempted rape. The narrator insinuates that she says everything rather than the one thing she should have said

'I'm sorry'. Speaking about it and apologising for it would be an acknowledgment that it happened, something that she is possibly running away from. She cannot find words to articulate it. And perhaps it triggers memories of her own rape ordeal in the hands of Ayaana's father, memories cloaked in silence and which she cannot confront. Holmes and Bateman (1995) explain Munira's reaction in *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* by stating that "unacceptable memories, phantasies, wishes, thoughts, ideas and aspects of painful events are pushed back into the unconscious through repression, along with their associated emotions" (p. 29). Repressing such memories is the psychological defence mechanism that Munira employs to shield herself from her pain.

Munira also seems to have repressed the memories of Ayaana's father. When Ayaana asks her what her father looks like, she says she cannot remember. The memory of him seems to have been too painful for her that in addition to adopting silence, she has expunged his memory from her conscious mind so as to forget about him.

What Ayaana finds in China, and China's treatment of her is too painful for her to speak about, even to her mother. She is silent about Koray's abuse and the realisation that she is treated as an 'artefact'. When Koray and his family hold her in Istanbul against her will, she does not speak about it. When Koray asks her if she is happy, she says "I am happy to be here" (Owuor, 2019, p. 307). She responds to his maltreatment, largely with silence. The conversations she has with her mother can be mistaken for dialogue but the words Ayaana speaks are only meant to mask her terror and fear. The omniscient narrator extracts the thoughts she does not voice and reports;

I wish you were in Pate, Mother; I would come home to you tomorrow. Learning about the sea is not the same as being with the sea... I gave my body to a man I fear; he is trying to swallow my soul whole. I am not Chinese, Ma-e, and I never shall be. My heart is drifting in waters that have no name. I am also afraid of shadows (p. 358-9)

In her thoughts, she addresses her mother directly but loudly, she says 'I am well'. Just like she cannot explain the depth of the sea – a poignant symbol in the story, she cannot explain the depths of her feelings of sorrow, fear, regret, and sadness. She does not belong in China and she cannot express that.

Silence as a Metaphor

In *Dust* (Owuor, 2014), Akai and Ajany's silences are also a metaphor for the silence the nation has inflicted upon its citizens. Their silence is also the silence of those who cannot speak after taking the MauMau oath and after the killing of Tom Mboya. The narrator notes that "When those associated with Tom Mboya and his name were hunted down like vermin, there was silence". (Owuor, 2014, p. 272). This silencing of citizens by state machinery is implemented by the likes of Petrus Keah who says "*All my life I've been enforcing silence by chopping off noisy human parts*". (p. 184). The weight of this silence is carried by characters like Nyapir, who passes it on to Akai and Ajany. He narrates these experiences to Ajany towards the end of the narrative, proving true Caruth's (1991) assertion in that "the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others...history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (p. 24). Nyapir narrates the experiences of the country's history, fifty years later, which is heavily characterised by violence

and murders. Passing it on proves that the memory of these traumas is communal, not personal. This silencing thus signifies oppression at both the familial and national levels.

Nyapir receives the Head of State commendation which he reveals acknowledged his “discretion – which mostly meant, *Keeps secrets*”. (Owuor, 2014, p. 108). This post independent country embraces the language of silence – burying its evils and the resulting traumas. It is this history, together with the country’s languages –English, Swahili, and Silence – that the children, Odidi and Ajany inherit. However, memory – another language mentioned as an afterthought, enables Nyapir to remember and narrate these evils. The narrator comments “Because there was silence, he tried to memorise names, never speaking them” (p. 234). Nyapir is a confirmation that although the state machineries silence by killing those who dare speak up, it cannot silence the memories of the witnesses.

Njovane (2020) treats the silences in *Dust* as a historical symbol for the Moi Era following Kenyan independence – this era is characterised by authoritarianism and torture of citizens who dare speak against the state’s excesses. Akai, for instance, is a colonial subject while Hugh is a colonial master. When Hugh uses physical and verbal abuse as tools to inferiorise and dehumanise her, he denies her agency and she thus she chooses silence as a safe response, thereby not provoking him further. As Ruth (1988) argues in *Understanding Oppression and Liberation*, she seems to have “internalised oppression . . . where people come to believe in their own inferiority and their powerlessness to change things” (p. 435).

The dysfunctional Oganda family espouses the use of silence as one of its official languages,

just like the country Kenya painted in the novel. When Isaiah gets into the family, “he is unaware that a family’s citadel woven from infinite secrets has just been breached” (Owuor 2014, p. 66). Musali also proves this state silencing when he tells Ajany, “this thing of mahonour *ama* patriotism, man — you must be practical. . . . Which Kenya did Odi grow up in? That *jama* could be so, so, so stupid, y’know?” (p. 170–171). In this Kenya that he talks about, silence is a way of life, it is practical, and it determines if you live or if you’re killed. Odidi broke this silence when he went up against forces of corruption and he is killed for it. The nation seems to have cursed itself with this silence.

Gaps and Silence: Elliptic Speech

Silence can also be analysed outside the borders of voice or lack of it thereof to capture the gaps in utterances; evasions, omissions, and uncomfortable silences, that can be used to express unspoken trauma. These manifest by interruptions in speech pauses incomplete sentences, overlaps, and repetitions. *The Chicago Manual of Style* (1993) argues that “ellipsis suggest faltering or fragmented speech accompanied by confusion, insecurity, distress, or uncertainty speech accompanied by confusion, insecurity, distress, or uncertainty” (p. 75).

Yvonne Owuor’s use of ellipses as a narrative strategy is deliberate in narrating trauma as French (1992) contends in *Silences* that “uncompleted statements seem to direct toward a point. That the point is never made suggests that it cannot be decently made” (p. 42). In other words, they point to the unspeakable and they must be scrutinised. Equally, Bal (1997) notes in *Narratology* that in the narrative, the unspoken event is so painful that it might be better to keep silent, resulting in an ellipsis (p.

70). Similarly, in his analysis, *'Narrating the Nation: Images of Kenya Through Individual and Collective Narration in 'The Dragonfly Sea'* Yego (2020) argues that the ellipses Owour employs are gravestones of trauma (p. 81).

In *The Dragonfly Sea* (Owuor, 2019), after the attempted rape incident, Munira warns Ayaana that they must be careful because Wa Mashariq were vengeful as they had not gotten what they wanted. *"If Muhidin...Ayaana began the thought before extracting it and rubbing it out. It lurked anyway inside her heart (p. 145). Ayaana does not say the thought out loud because it is too painful for her, as it means acknowledging losing both Muhidin and her mother's protection. With Muhidin locked up on terrorist suspicions, it can be assumed that she feels defenceless, especially because Wa Mashariq had paid her mother.*

While in China, Muhidin disappears again, causing Ayaana indescribable mental anguish. She does not hear what Koray says to her beyond random words "emotional paralysis...delusional...irrational... She observed his mouth move: "accept...fate...submit to life..." (Owuor, 2019, p. 373). She does not tell Koray or her mother (for she only moans when her mother calls) of her sorrows which the narrator captures as "Topologies: painful, heartbroken, bitter; sorrow, wounded, separated; anguish" (p. 373). Ayaana's difficulty in narrating her trauma is compounded by the fact that she is still processing her traumatic experiences.

In *Dust* (Owuor, 2019), Ajany's speech is highly punctuated by ellipses. After finding the skeleton in the red cave, she tells Odidi 'Didi, I dream of ... of ... Obaro ... Oba ...'; "Odi ... Obarogo came. He wants my face". (p. 77). Ajany finds it difficult to use the name Odidi

had assigned the skeleton 'Obarogo' because of the nightmares she has of it. She fears that calling the ghost of Obarogo would mean calling it into existence.

Ajany's inquiries about Bolton from her father are also heavily elliptical. She tries to read his name on the books at Wuoth Ogik, "H-U-G-H, Hugg, Huff ... Baba, what's a Hug-g B-Bolton?" (p. 54). Bolton's name, a symbol of colonial oppression is one of the 'unnameable' things in the Oganda household. Invoking Bolton's name is akin to invoking a curse. Although they killed him centuries ago, Bolton's ghost still haunts Akai and Nyapir, and their children in the form of his skeleton. In response to Ajany's question, Nyapir snatches the book from her, shuts it, and orders her to go to bed. In so doing, he silences her and forbids any further discussion about Bolton. When Isaiah shows up at Wuoth Ogik, she tells Aggrey, "B-baba?" "... "His name's Isaiah Bolton.... His father ...; The photograph ..." (p. 67). These speech hiccups show the difficulty with which she utters these words. But later, when she comes to voice, she asks without faltering, "Who's Hugh Bolton? His books are in the house (p. 68).

Ajany tells Galgalu, "tell ... Baba I've gone to find Odidi". (p. 116). However, as she walks around unearthing Odidi's associates and former lecturer, she struggles to articulate it and stutters. She tells Odidi's former lecturer, "I'm ... uh ... looking for Odidi". (p. 142) and to Musali, Odidi's ex-best friend, she says, "Yes ... uhm ... Musali, was wondering about my b-brother?" (p. 159). Although she seems to speak and asks questions, this is clouded by her inability to accept her brother's death and express her grief.

With regards to her feeling of homelessness, Ajany confides in Odidi, although she does not

say it, “Let’s go, Odi... Thh-th-this ...” She grunted to a stop.” (p. 119). She cannot say that she does not feel at home that the narrator adds “What if she stayed? Instant nausea”. When Odidi convinces her that this is home, the narrator adds that she could do anything to feel as he felt. But she is unable to articulate her pain, her mother’s rejection, and her feeling of homelessness.

Bernardo serves to render Ajany silent the more, even after she leaves home. Her last conversation with Odidi is captured in one word or incomplete sentences, falters, and gaps.

“Odi ...” she murmured.

“He’s murdering you”.

“N-no”, she stammered.

“You’re not painting?”

How had he known? “Odi ...” ...Bernardo was home. “He’s here. Talk soon?”

Odidi, raspy-voiced: “Jany—”

She cut him off. “B-Bernardo”.

“That fungus. Leave him”. (p. 222-223).

Odidi compares her inability to paint to murder. Perhaps he understands that she paints the words she cannot speak. She does not articulate it; neither does she ask him how he knew she was not painting – which is true. Bernardo has suppressed and abused her to the point that she cannot openly discuss it with her brother. When she reaches her breaking point, she stabs him. She narrates to Isaiah, “I ... uh ... the knife ... uhm ...” No other way to put it. And there was an odd relief in speaking the truth aloud. “... stabbed him”. (p. 267). The odd relief pointed out here is the empowerment and freedom that comes with outing the trauma that marks the

beginning of the healing process. Ajany further points out that she stabbed him instead of leaving him because “He always finds ... found me” (p. 267). She falters between the past tense ‘found’ and ‘finds’ to indicate her fear of him and her helplessness. It also points to her unsuccessful previous attempts at leaving him. Using the past tense ‘found’ also shows that she is finally free from his control. These gaps are indicative of trauma.

Naming the Unnameable: Silence as a Form of Resistance

It is important to examine why these female characters remain silent in the face of oppression. By remaining silent, they keep their responses private to themselves, a significant act that separates them from the conversation. As Montoya (1999) in *Silence and Silencing* contends, their silence could signify different meanings. By examining the silences of subjugated women, Montoya states that when it comes to women of colour, silence could be “a product of oppression or it may be a means of resistance against oppression” (p. 344). Such silence could also be an escape offering a sanctuary to them. However, although silence can be read as a form of resistance in some contexts, it does not ultimately represent freedom from that oppression. In this regard, silence is still a defence to protect oneself from the oppressor. It is therefore not a badge of emancipation.

Many of the silences in both texts are undoubtedly a direct reaction to the situations in which these female characters find themselves and to each character’s unique experiences of restriction, devaluation, or violation. Although it may represent resistance, these characters willingly choose silence precisely because they experience oppression. When combined with self-reflection, the

silences can be agential and even transformative, but they also show the limitations of the types of resistance they represent.

As already discussed, some of their silences are enforced by their oppressors. For instance, In *The Dragonfly Sea* (Owuor, 2019), when Munira begs the man not to leave her, he says, “When you are snivelling, you are a bore. A boring black prostitute” to which the narrator comments that “She had heard him. She had wiped her voice. She rose from her knees and shut up.” (p. 162). Although she voluntarily wipes her voice and shuts up, the man enforces this by inferiorising her and calling her names. She is at his mercy, after all, she needs him to come back because her future depends on it. Besides, he wields the power in the relationship.

In *Dust* (2014), it is Odidi’s death and the appearance of Isaiah that finally drives Akai to narrate her trauma. She finally breaks the traumatic repression when she narrates her story to Ajany. Ajany also uses the word ‘madness’ to describe the sound of wailing inside her, although she frames it in the form of a question. “Akai-ma, how does madness come? Can it arrive with the sound of wailing? It’s inside”. ... “It cries. Like a baby”. (p. 355). The children, represented by Ajany, therefore, share in the nation’s inherited trauma. Ironically, although silence and secrecy are traumatising, knowledge equally traumatises them, although it marks the beginning of healing. Ajany finally gets to know who Bolton is and his haunting role in their family. She gets to know of her dead siblings whom she never met. She has to start grieving again, although this time, she knows the object of her grief and she can walk towards healing.

Coming to voice by the female characters is a resolution of the violence and the trauma it causes. Akai comes to voice when she narrates her story to Ajany. This helps both of them, the narrator, and the audience to work through their trauma. Akai tells her of her origins, “I became Turkana, but before that, I was Dodoth” (Owuor, 2014, p. 343) while Nyapir tells her about relatives, an uncle, and grandfather who went to Burma and never came back. She is finally able to situate herself in a family tree to belong. Ajany is also able to voice the historical trauma she carries, represented by Hugh Bolton’s skeleton. She says, “B-baba, when we were children, Odidi and I ... we went into the red cave and saw bones and a face” (p. 298). At that moment, she unburdens herself of the weight of the vow of silence she had taken with Odidi. It is as if by articulating it, she partially solves its mystery and the memory of it is no longer just hers to bear. Narrating their trauma offers the possibility of a space outside the confines of these traumas. Giving a voice to silenced experiences thus empowers the victim-survivor and even others.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that silence has been used in articulating trauma. Employing silence as a response to traumatic experiences is proof of the difficulties victims of trauma have in narrating their experiences. Their silence largely impacts and influences how they respond to their traumas – by repressing painful memories. However, all these characters are in the end able to narrate their traumas. They are in the end able to ‘name the unnameable’ but instead of it being a curse, it signals the beginning of their healing process.

Many of the silences in both texts are undoubtedly a direct reaction to the situations in which these female characters find

themselves and to each character's unique experiences of restriction, devaluation, or violation. Although it may represent resistance, these characters willingly choose silence precisely because they experience oppression. When combined with self-reflection, the silences can be agential and even transformative, but they also show the limitations of the types of resistance they represent.

Matei (2013) writes that by voicing their traumas, victims are empowered and are able to overcome their fears. Speaking sparks, resistance and defiance to being prisoners of their traumas. Narrating thus makes it possible for them to be transformed and restore their otherwise confiscated selves. For instance, by speaking about her relationship with Bolton, Akai liberates herself from the scars his memories create; she takes back the dignity that Hugh had stripped her of. She finally talks back to him.

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