

Patriarchy and Silence: Ethical Strategies of Trauma Transmission in the fiction of Atwood, Lahiri, and Shamsie

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Abstract: This comparative study investigates how female protagonists in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* employ ethical strategies of trauma articulation within patriarchal constraints, encompassing voiced testimony, undecodable silence, and graceful rupture. Grounded in Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as unspeakable and belated, Felman and Laub's ethics of testimony, Heriyati et al.'s analysis of silence as resistance, Eveno's fault lines of transgenerational rupture, and Foucauldian discourse theory, the article examines how Grace Marks, Gauri Mitra, and Hiroko Tanaka navigate trauma's ethical complexity. Grace's institutional testimony mobilizes a listening community, transforming personal atrocity into a public witness and subverting patriarchal silencing through legal and psychiatric power structures. Gauri's reflective silence embodies an undecodable resistance to normative gender roles, and her individual fault lines evade ethical judgment. Hiroko's graceful silence transmits massive transgenerational trauma across geopolitical ruptures, resisting commodification and verbal articulation. These ethical strategies reveal trauma's ambiguity beyond the binaries of speech and silence, highlighting literature's capacity to witness unwitnessable atrocity and fostering critical gender awareness. The study advances feminist-postcolonial trauma scholarship by mapping diverse survival strategies against patriarchal oppression and expanding pedagogical approaches to trauma narratives.

Keywords: Atwood, Caruth, Ethical witnessing, Feminist Post-colonial trauma, Lahiri, Patriarchal oppression, Shamsie, Silence resistance, Transgenerational trauma

1. Introduction

Patriarchal structures have historically silenced women's traumatic experiences, rendering their survival strategies invisible within dominant discourses of motherhood, wifehood, and ethical normativity. This study examines how Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013), and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) articulate female trauma through distinct yet interconnected modalities: voiced testimony, undecodable silence, and graceful rupture. The female protagonists Grace Marks, Gauri Mitra, and Hiroko Tanaka of these three novels navigate patriarchal constraints by employing these ethical strategies of trauma transmission, subverting erasure and challenging simplistic moral judgments embedded within patriarchal and postcolonial frameworks. Central to this analysis is Caruth's concept of trauma as an "unspeakable" and belated phenomenon that defies immediate linguistic representation. Trauma manifests not only as a psychological wound but also as a historical catastrophe that resists direct registration, demanding indirect witnessing and belated articulation. Grace's fragmented nightmares and partial testimony, Gauri's profound silence, and Hiroko's transgenerational reticence exemplify this unspeakability.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's ethics of testimony frame survivor narration as an ethical act emerging before a responsive "listening community," enabling suppressed trauma to surface. Grace's institutional testimony mobilizes legal and psychiatric frameworks to subvert patriarchal silencing. In contrast, Gauri and Hiroko embody the limitations of testimonial ethics; their silences expose trauma's narrative impasse when testimonial acts are absent or insufficient.

Heriyati et al. (2020) reconceptualize silence as imposed erasure and active refusal, functions as strategic resistance mirroring trauma's unspeakability. Grace's intermittent silences, Gauri's reflective silence resisting normative gender roles, and Hiroko's graceful silence transmitting transgenerational trauma reveal trauma's ambiguity beyond speech and silence binaries.

The metaphor of "fault lines," adapted from Marianne Hirsch and elaborated by Jehanne Eveno (2024), captures trauma-induced disruptions fracturing intergenerational and diasporic transmissions of identity and memory. These ruptures obstruct coherent life narratives, as seen in Hiroko's Nagasaki-induced silence, Gauri's layered silences related to political violence and personal dislocation, and Grace's testimonial bridging following Mary Whitney's death.

Foucauldian discourse theory situates Grace's trial and psychiatric evaluation within institutional mechanisms that discipline female subjectivity. Legal and medical discourses produce "truth" through surveillance and confession, thereby regulating subjects within patriarchal power structures. Grace's performative madness exemplifies a

liminal space that enables subjugation and strategic resistance. Gauri's and Hiroko's silences evade such institutional capture.

These modalities challenge reductive binaries of speech and silence, revealing trauma's ethical ambiguity and the strategic deployment of voice and silence as survival mechanisms. This comparative framework advances feminist-postcolonial trauma scholarship by illustrating the literature's negotiation of patriarchal silencing through diverse narrative forms and enriching pedagogical strategies for trauma narratives. This study examines how female protagonists in Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Lahiri's *The Lowland*, and Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* confront trauma within patriarchal and postcolonial systems through Grace's mediated testimony, Gauri's resistant silence, and Hiroko's transgenerational ruptures. These modes reveal trauma's ethical ambiguity beyond speech and silence. The "fault-line" metaphor exposes fractured identities across generations, while Foucauldian discourse situates institutional power in shaping and silencing testimony. All of these narratives expand feminist-postcolonial trauma studies by affirming silence as an ethical and resistant form of articulation parallel to voice and testimony.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Trauma as Unspeakability and Belated Witness

Trauma is fundamentally characterized by its inherent unspeakability and temporal disjunction, conditions that defy immediate linguistic representation and coherent narrative integration. Cathy Caruth (2014-2015) conceptualizes trauma as an event that is not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but returns belatedly through repetitive intrusive memories and nightmares, disrupting the survivor's identity and consciousness. This belated return underscores trauma's resistance to direct articulation, rendering it an "unspeakable" phenomenon that demands indirect modes of witnessing and narrative mediation. Heriyati et al. (2020) extend this understanding by emphasizing trauma's mimetic structure, wherein silence and fragmented speech mirror the traumatic experience's incompleteness and opacity. In literary contexts, such as the protagonists studied here, trauma manifests as recurrent psychic fissures—Grace Marks's fragmented nightmares, Gauri Mitra's reflective silence, and Hiroko Tanaka's transgenerational reticence—each embodying trauma's temporal and linguistic elusiveness. This framework foregrounds trauma as a rupture in temporality and memory, necessitating ethical and narrative strategies to address its disruptive presence.

2.2 Testimony as Ethical Awakening and Dialogic Process

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's (1992) theory of testimony situates the survivor's narration of trauma as an ethical and dialogic act that emerges in relation to a responsive

“listening community.” Testimony is framed as a rare but transformative awakening that confronts trauma’s “impossible narration,” enabling suppressed memories to surface through relational dynamics between speaker and listener. This process is not merely a recounting of events but an ethical engagement that demands recognition and validation to facilitate healing and social acknowledgment. In *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks’s institutionalized testimony exemplifies this dialogic awakening, in which legal and psychiatric frameworks create a mediated space for her fragmented voice to be heard, thereby transforming private atrocity into a public witness and subverting patriarchal silencing. However, Felman and Laub also acknowledge the limits of testimony, especially in cases where the scale or nature of trauma precludes such articulation, highlighting the ethical tensions when testimonial acts are absent or insufficient, as reflected in the silences of Gauri and Hiroko.

2.3 Silence as Complex Resistance and Semiotic Absence

Silence operates beyond the mere absence of speech to embody a complex, semantically rich form of resistance that parallels the unspeakability of trauma. Heriyati et al. (2020) articulated silence as both imposed erasure and active refusal, a duality that challenges perpetrator impunity and fosters empathetic engagement with the ethical dimensions of trauma. This reconceptualization positions silence as a strategic modality through which trauma survivors negotiate their subjectivity and resist normative discourses that demand vocal articulation. Within the narratives analyzed, silence assumes varied ethical functions: Grace’s intermittent silences punctuate her testimonial discourse; Gauri’s reflective silence embodies an undecodable resistance to patriarchal gender norms and ethical judgment; Hiroko’s graceful silence transmits massive transgenerational trauma while resisting commodification and verbal articulation. These silences disrupt conventional expectations of the female voice and agency, revealing silence as a deliberate and potent ethical strategy rather than passive absence.

2.4 Fault Lines: Transgenerational and Geopolitical Ruptures

The metaphor of “fault lines,” adapted from Marianne Hirsch and elaborated by Jehanne Eveno (2024), captures the radical disruptions—physical, emotional, and communicative—induced by trauma that fracture the transmission of identity, memory, and life narratives across generations and geopolitical spaces. These ruptures, intensified by displacement and historical violence, obstruct coherent transmission and continuity, producing fragmented subjectivities and ethical complexities in trauma representation. In *Burnt Shadows*, Hiroko’s Nagasaki-induced silence exemplifies a transgenerational fault line fracturing maternal bonds and cultural memory; in *The Lowland*, Gauri’s layered silences correspond to discrete traumatic ruptures related to political violence, familial

abandonment, and personal dislocation; and in *Alias Grace*, the death of Mary Whitney constitutes a pivotal fault line enabling testimonial bridging. The fault line metaphor foregrounds trauma's pervasive and enduring impact, emphasizing the spatial and temporal dimensions that complicate trauma's ethical and narrative articulation.

2.5 Foucauldian Discourse: Power-Knowledge and Institutional Mediation

Todd May's (2006) interpretation of Foucauldian discourse theory situates trauma testimony within institutional power-knowledge regimes that discipline, categorize, and regulate subjectivity. Legal and medical discourses function as mechanisms that produce "truth" through surveillance, classification, and confessions, thereby shaping the conditions under which trauma narratives emerge. Grace Marks's trial and psychiatric evaluation exemplify this dynamic, where her performative madness and mesmerism-induced testimony are mediated through institutional frameworks that both constrain and enable her voice. Madness, conceptualized as existing "outside the province of truth," occupies a liminal space that destabilizes normative reason and becomes a site of both subjugation and strategic resistance (May, 2006). In contrast, Gauri's and Hiroko's silences evade such institutional capture, existing beyond dominant discursive formations and challenging Foucauldian mechanisms of control. This framework elucidates the complex interplay between institutional power and survivor agency, highlighting how trauma narratives are negotiated within and against structures of patriarchal authority.

3. Literature Review

Trauma representation in postcolonial and post-atrocity literature reveals the tension between narrating and silencing experiences that resist coherence. Drawing on Caruth's notion of trauma as "unspeakable" and belated, and Felman and Laub's ethics of testimony, recent scholarship frames survivor narration as an ethical dialogue in which listening enables the resurgence of memory. In postcolonial settings, however, testimonial acts confront institutional and cultural silencing shaped by colonial power and patriarchal discourse. The narratives of *Alias Grace*, *The Lowland*, and *Burnt Shadows* exemplify these tensions through their female protagonists. Grace Marks's courtroom and psychiatric testimonies transform private trauma into public witness, exposing how institutional and patriarchal structures mediate female voice. Gauri Mitra's and Hiroko Tanaka's fragmentary narratives, by contrast, foreground the limits of testimony amid displacement, ethical uncertainty, and geopolitical rupture. Silence here functions not as an absence but as ethical resistance and a mode of survival, articulating trauma through quietude, gesture, and withheld speech.

The metaphor of "fault lines," derived from Hirsch and expanded by Eveno, further illuminates how trauma fractures identity, memory, and intergenerational transmission

in diasporic contexts. These ruptures—emotional, temporal, and spatial—manifest in Hiroko’s transgenerational pain, Gauri’s layered withdrawals, and Grace’s haunted recollections. Finally, Foucauldian discourse theory clarifies how power-knowledge regimes classify, supervise, and normalize trauma narratives, especially within legal and medical systems. However, madness and silence, as seen in Grace’s performative resistance, destabilize institutional truth-making and reclaim agency from disciplinary control. Collectively, these texts reveal trauma as a site of tension between voice and silence, memory and erasure, submission and resistance.

4. Methodology

This study employs a comparative literary analysis of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* (2013), and Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* (2009). These texts were chosen for their shared engagement with female trauma in patriarchal and postcolonial contexts, exploring testimony, silence, and rupture as interlinked modalities of survival. The comparative framework enables the examination of how trauma’s ethical and representational tensions unfold across legal, familial, and geopolitical terrains, tracing the movement from individual suffering to transgenerational inheritance.

The analysis draws on an integrated theoretical model synthesizing trauma theory, testimonial ethics, studies on silence, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and Jehanne Eveno’s (2024) fault-line matrices. These conceptual tools map emotional and communicative ruptures that fracture identity and memory, revealing how trauma reshapes voice, agency, and resistance. Through close textual reading supported by key theorists Caruth, Felman & Laub, Heriyati et al., and May, the study identifies how Grace Marks, Gauri Mitra, and Hiroko Tanaka negotiate power, silence, and institutional control. This methodology illuminates trauma narratives as sites of ethical negotiation rather than transparent confession, foregrounding literature’s capacity to articulate the unspeakable within feminist-postcolonial discourse.

5. Textual Discourse

5.1 Grace Marks: Testimonial Voice within Patriarchal Institutions

Grace Marks’s trauma articulation in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* exemplifies the modality of voiced testimony operating within legal and psychiatric institutions that both discipline and enable survivor agency. Her narrative emerges through a mediated testimonial framework, in which fragmented recollections and silences intermingle with explicit speech, producing a complex ethical negotiation of trauma’s unspeakability and patriarchal silencing.

5.1.1 Trauma and Madness as Unsettling Power

Grace's trauma is marked by a belated and fragmented return, consistent with Cathy Caruth's (2014-2015) conceptualization of trauma as an event that resists immediate linguistic integration and manifests through repetitive nightmares and psychic fissures. Her recurrent hallucinations and somnambulistic episodes, such as visions of Mary Whitney's death and famine-related suffering, embody this unspeakable trauma, disrupting her identity and narrative coherence.

As interpreted by Todd May (2006), Foucauldian discourse theory situates Grace's madness as an unsettling power that exists "outside the province of truth," destabilizing normative reason and enabling both subjugation and strategic resistance. Grace's amnesia and performative madness function as protective mechanisms within the patriarchal legal and psychiatric apparatus, allowing her to evade full culpability while simultaneously challenging institutional authority. Atwood (1996) writes, "They wouldn't know mad when they saw it in any case, because a good portion of the women in the Asylum were no madder than the Queen of England. Many were sane enough when sober, as their madness came out of a bottle, which is a kind I knew very well" (p.22). Her madness, akin to Shakespearean "foolish and wise" madness (May, 2006, p. 27), unsettles medico-legal power by exposing its arbitrariness and creating a liminal space where trauma's unspeakability can be negotiated.

Thus, Grace's madness is not mere pathology but a form of resistance that complicates institutional attempts to discipline her subjectivity. This resistance is evident in Grace's sardonic observation that many women confined to the asylum are "no madder than the Queen of England," and that their supposed madness "came out of a bottle" (Atwood, 1996, p.22), exposing how institutional diagnoses misread and criminalize women's suffering. It enables her partial control over the conditions of her speech, allowing trauma's belated return to be articulated selectively and strategically within an oppressive framework.

5.1.2 Institutional Mediation and Ethical Witnessing

Reflecting on sexual and emotional vulnerability, Grace tells Dr. Jordan that "some call it love, and others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through," and concludes that "beds are what we sleep in, and where we dream, and often where we die" (Atwood, 1996, p. 132). Her reflections on sexual intimacy further reveal how trauma, desire, and indignity converge in the female body. This mediation aligns with Felman and Laub's (1992) ethics of testimony, wherein the survivor's narration emerges dialogically before a responsive "listening community." Her reflections on sexual intimacy further reveal how trauma, desire, and indignity converge in the female body. They wanted to show how dangerous we were, but also how well they could control us, as it made them

appear more valuable and skilled ” (Atwood, 1996, p. 23). 23). They wanted to show how dangerous we were, but also how well they could control us, as it made them appear more valuable and skilled” (Atwood, 1996, p.23). In Grace’s case, the courtroom and asylum function as institutionalized spaces those facilitate a form of ethical awakening, enabling suppressed traumatic memories to surface and be acknowledged publicly.

5.1.3 Fault Line of Mary Whitney’s Death

The death of Mary Whitney functions as a pivotal “fault line” within Grace’s trauma narrative, marking a radical rupture that fractures her psychic continuity and enables testimonial bridging. As Eveno (2024) articulates, fault lines denote physical, emotional, and communicative disruptions that impede the coherent transmission of identity and memory across temporal and spatial axes. Mary Whitney’s death is the initial traumatic event that catalyzes Grace’s fragmented nightmares and somnambulistic states, embodying trauma’s belated return and unspeakability (Caruth, 2014-15). This rupture fractures Grace’s surrogate family structure, symbolizing loss that is both personal and reflective of broader historical violences, such as famine and immigrant displacement.

Within the institutional testimonial framework, this fault line serves as the narrative hinge around which Grace’s fragmented testimony coalesces. It enables her to indirectly articulate trauma, mobilizing legal and psychiatric mechanisms to bear witness to otherwise silenced histories. The death’s testimonial function foregrounds the ethical complexity of trauma transmission: it is neither fully present nor absent but exists in a liminal space of partial articulation and mediated recognition (Felman & Laub, 1992).

Grace’s engagement with this fault line exemplifies trauma’s ethical ambiguity within patriarchal institutions—her testimony both reveals and conceals, bearing witness while navigating the constraints of carceral power-knowledge regimes. This dialectic underscores the capacity of the literature to represent trauma as a fragmented yet potent site of ethical witnessing and survival strategy.

5.2 Gauri Mitra: Reflective Silence as Ethical Resistance

Gauri Mitra’s trauma articulation in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* exemplifies the modality of undecodable silence functioning as a profound ethical resistance against patriarchal and normative gender expectations. Unlike Grace Marks’ institutionalized testimony, Gauri’s silence embodies a refusal to conform to dominant discourses that equate female identity with motherhood and wifedom, rendering her trauma ethically ambiguous and narratively inaccessible. Her silence resists external moral judgment and testimonial commodification, foregrounding the limitations of testimonial ethics in capturing trauma’s complexity within diasporic and postcolonial contexts.

5.2.1 Undecodable Silence and Ethical Ambiguity

Gauri's silence operates as a complex, semantically rich mode of trauma representation, consistent with Heriyati et al.'s (2020) reconceptualization of silence as both imposed erasure and active refusal. Subhash recognizes Gauri's mourning: "She was mourning for Udayan, carrying his child. Subhash knew he was nothing to her" (Lahiri, 2013, p.139). This silence is "undecodable" because it defies conventional linguistic or literary frameworks that seek to interpret or judge female trauma through normative ethical lenses. Gauri's detachment manifests when she reflects that she "can no longer picture" her past life with Subhash and Bela in Rhode Island, whom they raised "as husband and wife" (Lahiri, 2013, p. 227). Gauri's refusal or inability to articulate her suffering verbally challenges the testimonial paradigm that privileges speech as the primary mode of trauma witnessing (Felman & Laub, 1992). This amnesia extends to her Rhode Island life, in which she can no longer have connections with her past existence with Subhash raising Bela "as husband and wife" (Lahiri, 2013, p. 227), embodying Caruthian unclaimed experience. This amnesia extends to her Rhode Island life, she can no longer have connection with her past existence of life with Subhash raising Bela "as husband and wife" (Lahiri, 2013, p.227), embodying Caruthian unclaimed experience. "The continuous movement sickened her. Gauri's subconscious seeks escape from her traumatic past, leading to emotional detachment from anything that recalls it. Her silence resists reductive judgments and defies normative female roles, revealing the limits of dominant ethical frameworks in addressing trauma. By embracing silence as a form of articulation, Gauri challenges the "ethical turn" in testimony, asserting its legitimacy and power as a means of expressing unspoken suffering.

5.2.2 Individual Fault Waves and Narrative Absence

Gauri's trauma unfolds through successive "fault waves" that fracture her life narrative and ethical identity (Eveno, 2024). The first arises from witnessing her husband Udayan's execution during the Naxalite uprising. The second emerges from abandoning her daughter Bela to pursue academic life abroad, as Subhash's retrospective gaze reveals the irony of their union—"Here he had looked at a photograph of Gauri... not realizing that he was to marry her" (Lahiri, 2013, p.307). The third appears in her later estrangement and denial—"Normally she told people she did not have any children" (Lahiri, 2013, p.348)—each rupture deepening her ethical invisibility and shaping a layered silence.

These fault lines disrupt the continuity of Gauri's identity and life story, creating an absence in the testimonial landscape where speech fails or is withheld. Unlike Grace Marks' mediated testimony, Gauri's narrative absence underscores the impossibility of fully articulating trauma within the constraints of her social and cultural milieu. "She's too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother" (Lahiri, 2013, p.137). Her silence, therefore, is not

mere muteness but a profound statement that “speaks more than words” (Felman & Laub, 1992), embodying the ethical and narrative impasses that trauma produces. External perception crystallizes: ‘She’s too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother’ (Lahiri, 2013, p.137), yet silence depth resists condemnation.

5.2.3 Evading Institutional Discourse

Gauri’s silence strategically evades institutional capture and discursive regulation, positioning her outside Foucauldian power-knowledge regimes that govern testimonial production and subjectivity (May, 2006). Unlike Grace Marks, whose voice is mediated and constrained by legal and psychiatric institutions, Gauri inhabits a space beyond such institutional frameworks, where her silence resists classification, surveillance, and ethical judgment. Her academic life in the diaspora further exemplifies this evasion, as intellectual detachment and geographical displacement provide a buffer against patriarchal and institutional demands for confession or normative female performance. Lahiri (2013) illustrates Gauri’s isolation: she habitually listed Subhash as next of kin “having no other choice,” yet “there had never been an emergency, never a need to contact him” (p.345). This evasion complicates the ethical framework of witnessing, as the absence of a “listening community” or institutional interlocutor leaves Gauri’s trauma unwitnessed in conventional terms. However, this absence simultaneously asserts a form of agency and survival, where silence functions as a deliberate and potent ethical strategy that challenges the hegemony of testimonial discourse. Bureaucratic isolation underscores solitude: habitually listing Subhash yet recognizing “there had never been an emergency, never a need to contact him” (Lahiri, 2013, p.345). Gauri Mitra’s reflective silence thus embodies trauma’s ethical complexity and narrative opacity, revealing the necessity of expanding trauma studies to include silence as a legitimate and resistant modality of trauma transmission within patriarchal and postcolonial contexts.

5.3 Hiroko Tanaka: Graceful Silence and Massive Transgenerational Rupture

Hiroko Tanaka’s trauma articulation in Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* exemplifies a modality of graceful silence that navigates massive transgenerational and geopolitical ruptures. Her narrative embodies trauma’s unspeakability and belated return across multiple fault lines, resisting verbal articulation and institutional capture while transmitting trauma ethically through embodied absence and transhistorical testimony. This silence functions as a strategic survival mechanism within diasporic displacement and patriarchal constraints, foregrounding trauma’s ethical ambiguity beyond testimonial paradigms.

5.3.1 Massive Trauma and Communicational Fault Lines

Hiroko's trauma unfolds through successive "communicational fault lines" that fracture familial bonds, cultural memory, and identity transmission across generations (Eveno, 2024). The first arises from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, which destroys her family and Konrad, and initiates a rupture that hinders coherent transmission of trauma to her son Raza. Recalling the unimaginable, she describes how bodies near the epicenter "stuck to the walls and rocks around them like shadows," a memory she "buried" (Shamsie, 2009, pp.76-77). The Partition's violence, claiming Sajjad's life, and the Afghan jihad's threat to Raza constitute further fractures that render Hiroko's subjectivity fragmented and linguistically elusive. Hiroko's silence reflects trauma's belated and repetitive return (Caruth, 2014-2015), where the enormity of collective catastrophe defies integration into a coherent narrative or direct testimony. Her inability to verbalize the Hibakusha experience to Raza signifies the ethical and communicative limits of speech within massive trauma contexts. Hiroko's visceral memory captures this horror: "Those nearest the epicenter ... fat... sticking... like shadows," her dream burial embodying an unregistrable absence (Shamsie, 2009, pp.76-77). This silence is not passive but deliberate, preserving the integrity of traumatic memory while resisting commodification and the spectacle of "exotic" suffering. It embodies a transhistorical testimony that negotiates survival through embodied absence, transmitting trauma across diasporic and generational divides.

5.3.2 Silence as Strategic Survival and Transhistorical Testimony

Hiroko's graceful silence strategically navigates the ethical complexities of trauma transmission within patriarchal and postcolonial frameworks. Unlike Grace Marks's institutionalized voice or Gauri Mitra's reflective silence, Hiroko's silence transcends individual trauma to encompass collective and transgenerational suffering. This modality aligns with Heriyati et al.'s (2020) reconceptualization of silence as both imposed erasure and active refusal, serving as a potent form of resistance that challenges normative testimonial expectations. Her silence resists the institutional mechanisms of power-knowledge that seek to discipline and commodify trauma narratives, thus evading Foucauldian discursive capture (May, 2006). It also critiques the limitations of testimonial ethics (Felman & Laub, 1992) by embodying trauma's "impossible narration" through embodied absence rather than explicit speech. Her "graceful silence" deflects: "This is an Urdu lesson, Sensei," penning "ghum-khaur (grief eater)" (Shamsie, 2009, p.77), resistance via language/culture. Hiroko's reticence protects her subjectivity and cultural memory from erasure, enabling a form of ethical witnessing that is transhistorical and diasporic, transmitting trauma's legacy without succumbing to its consumption or dilution. This strategic silence foregrounds the embodied and affective dimensions of trauma

transmission, emphasizing survival and resilience over narrative closure. It challenges the privileging of speech in trauma discourse, asserting that silence can be equally, if not more, ethically potent in bearing witness to unwitnessable atrocities.

5.3.3 Diasporic Displacement and Ethical Transmission

Hiroko's narrative unfolds within a diasporic and transnational context, where spatial and temporal dislocations intensify the ethical and communicational complexities of trauma. Her movement across Japan, India, Afghanistan, and the United States situates her within intersecting geopolitical fault lines that disrupt coherent identity and memory transmission. This diasporic displacement exacerbates the "fault lines" described by Eveno (2024), complicating the transmission of trauma and cultural heritage across generations. Within this context, Hiroko's silence operates as an ethical transmission that negotiates the ruptures of diaspora, displacement, and historical violence. It resists assimilation into dominant narratives of victimhood or testimony, instead embodying a resilient survival strategy that preserves cultural memory and maternal protection. Her silence becomes a form of ethical witnessing that transcends linguistic and institutional constraints, fostering a transgenerational dialogue that is necessarily fragmented and incomplete but nonetheless vital. "There was something she had learnt to recognise after Nagasaki, after Partition: those who could step out from loss and those who would remain mired in it. Raza was the miring sort, despite the inheritance he should have had from both his parents, two of the world's great forward-movers (Shamsie 146)." This mode of trauma articulation expands feminist-postcolonial trauma scholarship by highlighting the significance of diasporic subjectivities and transhistorical testimonies. The transgenerational fault manifests: Hiroko recognizes "Raza was the miring sort" despite forward-mover parents (146), rupture unbroken. It underscores literature's capacity to represent trauma as an embodied, ethical negotiation that challenges patriarchal and colonial erasures, enriching pedagogical approaches that attend to the complexities of silence, voice, and survival in trauma narratives.

6. Comparative Discussion

6.1 Contrasting Modalities of Trauma Articulation: Voice vs. Silence

The comparative analysis of Grace Marks, Gauri Mitra, and Hiroko Tanaka reveals distinct but interconnected modalities of trauma articulation that negotiate patriarchal silencing through voice and silence. Grace's voiced testimony in *Alias Grace* operates within institutional frameworks, employing legal and psychiatric mediation to transform personal atrocity into public witness. Her narrative exemplifies Felman and Laub's (1992) dialogic ethics of testimony, where trauma's belated return finds articulation before a responsive "listening community." Grace's way of speaking is broken and carefully

controlled, showing how trauma is often impossible to express (Caruth, 2014–15) and how speech is limited by systems of power and knowledge (May, 2006). Through her testimony, she challenges patriarchal attempts to silence her, even though she must do so within the rules set by institutions.

In contrast, Gauri's silence in *The Lowland* embodies an undecodable refusal to conform to the normative expectations of female speech, particularly regarding motherhood and wifhood. Her silence functions as profound ethical resistance that evades testimonial commodification and external moral judgment (Heriyati et al., 2020). The absence of a "listening community" and institutional interlocution renders her trauma inaccessible to conventional testimonial paradigms, foregrounding the limitations of speech as the primary mode of witnessing trauma. Gauri's layered fault waves (Eveno, 2024) produce narrative absences that resist coherent transmission, positioning silence as an active survival strategy in diasporic and patriarchal contexts.

Hiroko's "graceful silence" in *Burnt Shadows* transcends individual trauma to encompass massive transgenerational and geopolitical ruptures. Her silence functions strategically to transmit trauma belatedly across fractured familial and cultural transmissions, resisting commodification and verbal articulation (Eveno, 2024; Heriyati et al., 2020). This modality challenges testimonial ethics by embodying trauma's "impossible narration" (Felman & Laub, 1992) through embodied absence and transhistorical testimony. Diasporic displacement intensifies communicational fault lines, situating silence as an ethical transmission negotiating survival beyond institutional or normative discourses. Hence these modalities challenge the reductive binaries of speech versus silence, presence versus absence, revealing trauma's ethical ambiguity and the strategic deployment of both voice and silence as survival mechanisms within patriarchal oppression.

6.2 Ethical Ambiguity and Patriarchal Norms in Female Trauma Narratives

This study foregrounds trauma's ethical ambiguity as it intersects with patriarchal norms governing female identity, particularly motherhood and wifhood. Grace Marks's testimony negotiates these norms by revealing silenced histories of famine, infanticide, and surrogate loss, subverting dominant narratives that marginalize female suffering within colonial and carceral institutions. Her performative madness and mediated voice complicate simplistic moral judgments, positioning trauma as both vulnerability and unsettling power (May, 2006). Gauri Mitra's silence problematizes normative ethical frameworks by embodying resistance to prescribed female roles. Her abandonment of maternal duties and divorce elicit external ethical condemnation; yet, her silence resists such judgment by defying linguistic and literary decoding (Heriyati et al., 2020). This

ethical opacity challenges testimonial paradigms that valorize speech and confession, underscoring the limits of patriarchal ethics in encompassing complex female trauma.

Hiroko Tanaka's calm silence deepens the ethical complexity of trauma by carrying its weight across global and familial divisions (Eveno, 2024). Her quietness safeguards her identity and cultural memory, showing how silence itself can be a form of survival. This transgenerational silence questions systems that turn trauma into a commodity and offers a more sensitive way of witnessing rooted in diaspora and history. These narratives reveal how patriarchal ethics fail to grasp women's layered trauma, calling for feminist-postcolonial approaches that value both silence and speech.

6.3 Literature as Ethical Witness to Unwitnessable Atrocity

The primary texts demonstrate the literature's vital capacity to bear an ethical witness to trauma that resists direct narration or institutional recognition. Through varied narrative forms—voiced testimony, reflective silence, and graceful rupture—these works engage with trauma's unspeakability and temporal disjunction (Caruth, 2014-15), mobilizing literary strategies that evoke survivor subjectivities marginalized by patriarchal and postcolonial power structures. Grace Marks' mediated testimony creates a "hearing community" that enables ethical witnessing within institutional constraints, transforming private atrocity into public discourse and challenging silencing mechanisms (Felman & Laub, 1992; Heriyati et al., 2020). Gauri Mitra's silence foregrounds the ethical and narrative impasses of trauma testimony, compelling readers to confront the limits of representation and the necessity of recognizing silence as meaningful resistance (Heriyati et al., 2020). Hiroko Tanaka's graceful silence embodies transgenerational testimony that transcends linguistic articulation, illustrating literature's capacity to transmit trauma across diasporic and geopolitical ruptures (Eveno, 2024).

By mapping these ethical strategies, this study advances feminist-postcolonial trauma scholarship by emphasizing the literature's role in decoding complex survival mechanisms and fostering critical gender awareness. It challenges the conventional valorization of speech as the sole witness mode and advocates pedagogical approaches that address the nuanced interplay between voice and silence in trauma narratives. In doing so, literature emerges as a crucial ethical forum in which unwitnessable atrocities gain a mediated presence, expanding the possibilities of feminist and post-colonial witnesses beyond institutional and discursive limitations.

Conclusion

This study reveals the multifaceted ethical strategies through which female protagonists in Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Lahiri's *The Lowland*, and Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* negotiate trauma within patriarchal and postcolonial frameworks. By juxtaposing Grace Marks's

institutionalized voiced testimony, Gauri Mitra's undecodable reflective silence, and Hiroko Tanaka's graceful transgenerational rupture, the analysis uncovers trauma's ethical ambiguity beyond reductive binaries of speech and silence. Grace's mediated testimony subverts patriarchal silencing by mobilizing legal and psychiatric institutions into a "hearing community," transforming private atrocity into a public witness. Gauri's silence resists normative gender roles and ethical judgment, embodying a protective refusal that challenges testimonial paradigms privileging speech. Hiroko's silence carries deep geopolitical trauma across diasporic boundaries, resisting reduction to mere speech while preserving memory and survival. The idea of "fault lines" reveals how trauma fragments identity and memory across time, space, and generations. Using Foucauldian ideas of power and knowledge, Grace's trial shows how institutions shape what can or cannot be spoken. Together, these ideas show trauma narratives as ethical struggles within patriarchal systems. This approach broadens feminist-postcolonial trauma studies by valuing silence as an ethical and expressive form equal to testimony, urging readers to see silence not as an absence but as a meaningful strategy of survival and resistance.

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Authors Contribution

Mr. Mallikarjun Goud¹ contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, and investigation of the study, and prepared the original draft as well as the review and editing. **Dr. B. Krishna Chandra Keerthi²** supervised the research, validated the findings, and participated in the review and editing of the manuscript. We confirm that this article is original, unpublished, plagiarism-free, and not under consideration elsewhere. There is no conflict of interest between the authors or with any external parties. This article has neither been published previously nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. No funding or financial support was received from any source for the preparation or submission of this article.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

All relevant data are presented within the paper (no external datasets were used). This manuscript contains no pictures or tables.

Ethics statement

Not applicable. No human or animal subjects were involved in this literary analysis. All content is original and written by the authors based on their own research.

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