



When Silence Becomes a Tactic: Language, Voice and Withheld Expression in Lovelace's *Salt*

A. L. Sikha Mohan

*Ph.D. Scholar, PG and Research Department of English
All Saints' College, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala*



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Abstract

Language is considered a channel for communication, while silence represents a vacuum or powerlessness. But sometimes, silence holds the power to act against a system by itself becoming a strategic conscious act. Thus, it transforms into an agency but not an absence. Salt by Earl Lovelace is a Trinidadian novel that delves deep into analysing silence as a tool of power rather than a mere voicelessness or trauma. It works as a strategy to express the presence at the right moment, while silence functions as a tactic of survival, withdrawal and political awareness in postcolonial Trinidad. This study reveals how unspoken expression can be powerful in a system which is largely based on linguistic control. This study draws on postcolonial and cultural theory to analyse the role of linguistics in the work. In Salt, silence acts as a multi-dimensional phenomenon where it is not simply what is unsaid but what is deliberately left unsaid. It argues that silence serves as a potent strategy of resistance, survival, and identity in the novel rather than as a passive absence. The character used for this study in Trinidad's postcolonial setting uses silence to exhibit agency in a colonially traumatised society, defend cultural and personal identity, and oppose language dominance. Silence becomes a deliberate mode of communication within a political setup and cultural significance rather than a symptom of voicelessness.

Keywords: silence, language, strategy, power, identity

Silence has always been considered and treated as an absence. While language has always been a channel for communication, it also emphasises a presence or a power in the system. Meanwhile, the silence or being mute cannot be considered as mere voicelessness. It holds power, a power to effect a shift in the system and society. So this silence should not be left unnoticed. This paper explores the Trinidadian novel *Salt*, which was penned by Earl Lovelace. It reveals how unspoken expression can be powerful in a system which is largely based on linguistic control. In many Caribbean narratives, sound is central. It is visible in their music, speech, instruments, celebrations, rituals and whatnot. But what we fail to notice is that here the silence is

equally expressive. It also shows the presence of a muted active agent.

Salt is a novel of layered communication. It has floating words that have matter and also silences which speak volumes. Parallel communication between the powerful and the weak, the voiced and the voiceless, the centre and the margins, etc, happens within the narrative. In this novel, silence acts as a dynamic and complex force which configures emotional landscapes, channelling human relationships, preserving memory, and binds the characters to the rhythms of island life.

The element, silence, in *Salt* reflects and shapes the emotional terrain of the people as well as the Trinidadian community. This was very much visible when Alfred George used his silence in the quiet



moments after every political and communal disappointment, by sitting alone, which frames and shapes his inner turmoil through the absence of dialogue. Here, the absence is a preparation phase for an upcoming active presence. Thus, silence, which speaks volumes, has linguistic control just like language does. It's active rather than being passive: "And, just like that, it became clear to him what he would do to get the attention of the authorities. He would go on a fast, like Mahatma Gandhi. He had never fasted before. And up to that time, he had no idea of how he would go about it. The details would be drawn out of him by the reporter." (p.79)

The absence of language, activities, habits, routines, etc, never obstructs his active thoughts, which can storm out as power points. We can even witness a communal silence after moments of funerals and death, where the entire village enters a sombre state after someone dies- there is no more loud chatter, but only the soft sounds of movement. This silence is not just the result of grief, but it speaks to the shared acknowledgement of their bond. Caribbean sounds, laughter and music show a total shift here. The same but varied form of silence is portrayed after carnival festivities. Once the music, noises and laughing stop, a silence falls over the street- tired bodies, residues of the carnival and a sense of spent energy. Thus, it is very much evident that not only sound and music, but also silence plays an integral part in the festival's lifecycle. This holds a hidden sense of passiveness or, in other words, a breathing room, for the characters as well as the readers, a pause before the next wave of the storm. Here, we witness the life oscillates between noise and calm in island rhythms.

In *Salt*, Lovelace uses silence as an interpersonal language, too. There are several instances where couples and families withhold speech to avoid unnecessary conflict, thus making the silence a parleying ground for relationships. And these temporal silences perform as a fine language between people and the system:

He became angry with everything and with everybody, with his mother's surrendering faith, with the quiet submissiveness of his brothers,

with the accommodation of his father and the threat of the idea of himself settling into this little world outside the world. To hit back, he took off his tie. He grew his beard. He let his hair grow. He wanted to mash up the place. He set himself apart from everything and everybody, withdrawing his gentleness and understanding from those around him, as something they did not merit. He became abrupt, insulting, and felt a small triumph when he heard that people didn't like him. That was exactly what he needed, not to be accommodated, not to belong to their little world. (pg.55)"

The portrayal of silence as a connecting channel for the living characters with their ancestral presence is yet another element that is present in the novel. It doesn't showcase the void, but a reflection —a resonance —of the past. Their relationship with nature itself is subtle yet passionate. The character, Dixon, represents how people live close to their land and nature despite being exploited by their so-called bosses, who are nothing but the epitome of authoritarianism. His devotion to his work got him tagged as 'Work- Jumbie Dixon' (18) by his fellow men:

He knew where every key was, where the tools were, what field was to be pruned, what field needed to be reaped, what produce was sold and for how much and the condition of every animal. Sometimes on the single day of the week when he did not have to report to the estate, the overseer or Mr Knott or Carson the foreman would drive the jeep down the muddy trace deep in the Cascadu settlement to the place where he was renting to ask him some question concerning the estate to which he alone had the answer, his only profit, as far as May could see, that he could say to her and the world, victoriously, 'They can't do without me'. (18)

Here, the character engages in active listening to the environment and the land.

According to a study titled "My mouth is the keeper of both speech and silence...", or The Vocalisation of Silence in Caribbean Short Stories by Edwidge Danticat", written by Judith Misrahi-Barak,



silence is not just an absence but an intended element that shapes meaning in Edwidge Danticat's stories. The same applies here. For Lovelace, silence becomes a rhetorical strategy for revealing what logos cannot. As she says, "if silence is a tool of oppression, it can also be used as a tool of liberation, just as language and literature were once used in the imperialist scheme and reverted in the decolonising process."

As silence emerges in 'Salt' as an emotional practice, it also configures the level of narrative form. Lovelace's manipulation of rhythm and pause, along with lengthy narration that lacks dialogue, creates an aesthetic experience for readers, allowing them to take a breath and feel the pace. Here, silence is not just thematic, rather a lived experience for the readers.

Simultaneously, this study draws on post-colonial and cultural theory to analyse the role of linguistics in the work. At times, deliberate silence can be an act of resistance. The absence of speech there can be a resistance to the dominance of the colonial or the so-called legitimate tongue. Even the silence after the carnival, which we have already mentioned, can be considered not just as mere emptiness, but a deliberate turning inward. In the novel, when politicians make false promises of transformation and advancement, the villagers choose silence over causing chaos. Because they know the legitimacy of such dramas, they resist by falling into silence. Here, silence becomes a strategy rather than a lack of presence. Even women characters in *Salt* sometimes use their weapon of silence either to prevent a mess or to keep the harmony in relationships, or even against the patriarchal expectation. And sometimes the silence becomes a mourning and even an unvoiced rebellion:

He remembered her and his two brothers, Hubert and Noble in that little barrack-room there on the Fondes Amandes estate, their life lived in a waiting silence, everything a whisper, the fear to breathe, to open your mouth and breathe. All around them this noise of trees, of minds thinking, of grief, birdsong louder than the human voice. He remembered himself at the age

of four awakening to the silence of that world to hear that his grandfather Guinea John had flown back to Africa, to soft soft, the whole plantation quiet like a storm pass, not knowing then that the reason for their silence, their sadness, was their mourning for four men, the ringleaders of a supposed rebellion.

At times, silence acts as a psychological shield. It protects people from a loss of livelihood in certain contexts, as sometimes speaking the truth or voicing out can lead to bitter consequences. In the novel, at many points, we can see collective silence as a result of processing disappointment. Dixon's way of silencing himself from asking Mr. Carabon to cut down the immortal tree, which affects the health of his family and even his house, is an example of this. He is not ready to challenge Carabon or raise his voice against him despite the sufferings. But he promised to cut down the tree once he buys that land. There, he used the silence as a tactic to maintain his job and life in the land where he toiled for years and also to achieve his goal. Dixon tells his wife, "I tell you already: we could live on the land. We could grow things, but we can't cut down the trees. That is the agreement Mr Carabon make with me. We can live on his land, we could grow things, but we can't cut down the trees." (12). This shows how much he is loyal to the job and his word rather than seeking benefits or extra advantages for the hard work he does. His silence to his boss is nothing but a pause before the power, that is, the authority over the land.

The fear and traumas that were encountered in the past compel them to negotiate a bit to keep their position. This silence was there from time immemorial as a trauma response, which evolved as an outcome of slavery in the colonial Caribbean islands. Even in the post-colonial era, the residues of this trauma response still exist along with the hope for a just future.

Identity is yet another element closely knit with silence. Choosing silence over the dominant discourse highlights a distinct Caribbean identity. Considering the study conducted by Maialen de Carlos Sola, silence in postcolonial narratives often functions as a strategy of survival, where the unsaid



protects characters from further displacement while simultaneously erasing parts of their identity. (de Carlos Sola, 2023). The author points out the fact that silence in most of the post-colonial narratives works as a tactic of survival, even if it alters the real identity.

By exploring all these elements which are closely knit with silence, it is evident that silence in post-colonial narratives is multidimensional. It is not only individual, but also political, cultural, psychological, aesthetic and whatnot. Rather than analysing it as a passive state, silence in such discourse demonstrates an active strategy. Even in some cases, although we feel it otherwise, the individuals are not inherently silent, but are kept from voicing out by the vast societal framework. Literature is a medium that unfolds the active tactic of silence while it is being normalised by the dominant discourses. Thus, from depicting silence as an element of vacuum, an altogether shift is made about the withheld expression it carries in Earl Lovelace's *Salt*. Here, silence becomes a purposeful

mode of communication within a political setup and cultural significance rather than being a symptom of powerlessness and voicelessness.

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