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Writing Silence: Refiguring Victimization and Agency in *My Mother's Daughter*

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ABSTRACT

Through the gendered lens, silence framed as a complex phenomenon is a site of power struggle, which privileges men the authority to 'speak', set against their female counterparts who are rendered 'silent.' The juxtaposition between 'voice' and 'voiceless' stems from the narrative of exploitation and gendered violence through the patriarchal monopoly of exclusionism tactics on women as the marginalized 'other.' In recent times, feminist scholarship has brought a new understanding of silence, voice, and agency. The dynamics of silence, or being silenced, can be viewed from multiple-layered perspectives, ranging from the coercive imposition of silence (by men to women) to the emerging discourse on the deliberate choice to remain 'silent,' or to "talk back" or "talking back" by women (hooks 5). In this paradigm, silence is an enforced tool employed by men in regressive attempts to disempower women's identity and their autonomy/ agency through victimization and oppression. The strategic silence employed by women necessitates a paradoxical formation of a language of its own, coded with a female voice or narrative. This paper aims to delve deeply into the treatment of silence by mapping Neikehienuo Mepfhu-o's *My Mother's Daughter* from a gendered standpoint. It seeks to study victimization, oppression, voice/voicelessness, and agency through instances of silence in the text.

Keywords: *Gendered Lens; Silence as Strategy; Domestic Violence; Victimization; Oppression; Agency.*

Introduction

Can silence be inherently muted? Is silence a form of language for suppressed women? These intriguing questions serve as a starting point for exploring and re-examining the complex phenomenon of silence. For most feminists and non-feminists alike, 'silence' and 'speak' appear to stand at the opposing spectrum, determining women as either disempowered or

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having agency. Jane L. Parpart's long years of commitment and association with the gendered study on voice, silence, and agency, cross-examines its trio relationship, prompting her to ask some serious questions:

> In such a world, can we assume that masculinist privilege can be openly challenged only through 'voice'? Do we need to consider other forms of voice/agency/empowerment? Can silence be more than simply disempowerment and lack of agency? Can silences, partial truths, and secrets provide a basis for developing survival strategies, reassessing possibilities and limitations for action, and even organizing to protect and/or challenge the status quo? (Introduction: Rethinking the Power 8)

These challenging rhetorics are important to consider while contemplating systematic interrogation on the power politics that permits who can 'speak' and who remains 'silent'. Progressively, feminist scholarship on victimization, oppression, and the female agency has realized that this dichotomy needs re-evaluation in association with the voice/voiceless equation since abused women have faced the ordeal of enforced silence, or maintained either a strategic silence or negotiated/confronted silence in enduring circumstances such as serious domestic violence, rape, etc. The construction of new meanings enables a space to probe the notion of silence since it is within this paradigm that female victimization and agency are furiously debated or contested. Parpart scholarly interest stems from her argument on the "uncritical identification of silence with disempowerment, and voice with agency/empowerment" ("Choosing Silence" 2). Offering a counter-discourse to the man-centric discourse, she gives her critical view:

> While keenly aware that a willingness to speak out and name oppressions and oppressors is a critical factor for challenging injustices, especially gendered injustices, I believe the assumption that voice equals agency needs to be rethought ("Choosing Silence" 1).

Parpart indexes strategic silence as a "coping mechanism" that can help to "create space for reflection, for healing, and for re-thinking one's position, values, and identity" and a "platform for strategizing and organizing resistance to oppression". She further adds, "Silence can also work with voice, not silence as the powerless 'other', but as another kind of power…They remind us that silence and voice are often interwoven; both are powerful, one spoken, the other unspoken" ("Introduction: Rethinking the Power" 5-6).

Similarly in her seminal work titled *Unspoken: The Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn locates the "terminology for gendered power differentials" of masculine and feminine within the "sites

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of strength and weakness" (xx). Glenn reviews the general census of silence being (mis)understood as "inarticulate" which is analogous to subordination or muted group by the "dominant group in a social hierarchy", resulting in disenfranchisement which ultimately "excludes them from the formulation, validation, and circulation of meaning", and thus, silence "becomes the language of powerless" (25). Countering this perspective, she argues that silence is "deliberately unspoken" (336) and is a conscious choice, emphasizing that it is encoded with meaningful thoughts, ideas and strategies to counter patriarchy and male hegemonic power and control. Overriding claims such as "word has supremacy over silence" to Thomas Mann's "Speech is civilization itself" and George Steiner's argument that "silence is nothing", Glenn finds these 'claims' as one-sided male perspectives, and therefore problematic (qtd. Mann and Steiner in Glenn 3). Extending her argument on the presence of silence and the absence of words, she is convinced that "it is silence that reveals speech at the same time that it enacts its own sometimes complementary rhetoric" (3).

In collusion with Parpart and Glenn's critical works on silence and agency, Margaret R. Mahoney urges "avoiding overemphasizing on victimization" to women in conflict sites since the "emphasis on the dangers of victim-talk" can be "misleading". She strongly advocates that feminists' zeal to protect women has harmed "our own cause and our own gender by constructing women as victims". Mahoney further mentions two important points that need to be considered:

> …first, the abuse of women and its consequences must be explained without defining the woman herself by the experience of abuse; second, the woman's perceptions and the context of her life must explain the reality of this woman's experience in a way that locates her experience within patterns of systemic power and oppression (59).

Mahoney situates her criticism on "two foundational dichotomies-victim/agent and stay/separate how they function in tandem to construct paradoxical choices and positions for women in violent relationships" (Hirsch 6). Re-evaluating these problematic dichotomies in violent relationships, in particular domestic violence, clearly unfolds the dicey equation of the "law's tendency to treat the stay/ separate dichotomy as analogous to victim/agent exacerbates the false opposition of each and leads inevitably to the question: Why didn't she leave?" (Hirsch 6). Acts of deliberate violence, suppression, and the systematic infringement of women's rights and dignity often leave debilitating traces in enforced silence. The impact of

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this silence, both physically and psychologically, is immensely profound. The feminist projects of Parpart, Glenn, and Mahoney have heavily invested in studying the notion of disempowerment, victimization, voice, silence, and agency of women through class, gender, culture, social, political, economic, and legal contexts. Their extensive research methodologies and findings critically illuminate these contested phenomena and have made defining contributions to the ongoing critical discourse, making way for redefinition or reviewing women's voice, agency, and autonomy.

This paper focuses on the nature of enforced silence, strategic silence to breaking the silence in the context of gendered violence as experienced by several (Naga) women in My Mother's Daughter, 2019 (awarded the Second Gordon Graham Prize for Naga literature 2019 in fiction category), written by Neikehienuo Mepfhu-o, a contemporary Naga woman writer. Through the gendered lens, the paper seeks to study the notion of voice and agency, to review the changing perspective of abused women viz-a--viz oppression in domestic violence, and to trace the obstacles and challenges women face to fight through systematic oppression. Last but not least, this critical discussion aims to argue that battered women of gendered violence are not devoid of agency. These critical underpinnings are important to underscore the 'gray zone' as a complex site where women navigate their daily struggles for survival and reclaim power to make their own choices.

I argue that the nuanced politics of silence is one domain that has overlooked the alternative reading to 'silence' in the Naga literature written by women, of women, and for women. True to the statement that literature holds as the mirror of society, women-centric Naga literature has powerfully portrayed female characters in dilemmas wrought by obstacles and sufferings at the hands of patriarchy and its hegemonic tendency to invisibilize the women folk. The thematic reading of the female characters' experiences of dehumanization and marginalization leans on the classified ascription to 'female voicelessness' as disempowered/disembodied. Echoing Edwin Ardener's words, the women's mutedness is "because it does not form a part of the dominant communicative system of society" (Ardener in Gleen 25). From one reading, Mepfhu-o's My Mother's Daughter also dwells with the female characters who are rendered enforced silence and relegated to a perpetual state of victimhood. My paper, however, underscores an alternative reading 'to silence' and 'to being silenced' without undermining the severity and struggle women undergo in the process. Thus, this counter-discourse attempts to

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engage in the new dynamics of the power of silence. It aims to closely study oppression and appropriate the notion of 'victimization' and 'agency'. To usher a re-reading of silence within the context of gendered violence in Mepfhu-o's novel, the paper will be relying on the theoretical conceptual ideas of Parpart, Glenn, and Mahoney. It intends to trace, to borrow Partpart's words, the "many subtle strategies" resiliently employed by the female protagonists to improve their lives; to explore "the possibility that silences and secrecy" as "essential strategies for negotiating gender relations" (qtd. Kandiyonti 1998 and Mohammed 2002 in Parpart 1); lastly, to review "silence/secrecy as empowered choices/agency for women in an often masculinist dangerous, and conflict-ridden world" ("Choosing Silence" 1).

The Politics of Silence in The Narrative Structure of *My Mother's Daughter*

My Mother's Daughter is a narrative of real-life incidents of domestic or intimate violence experienced by a section of unfortunate Naga women and young girls. Domestic violence is a taboo that permeates only in whispers and secrecy since they are personal matters in the Naga tribal society (and beyond). Mepfhu-o's purpose in writing this book comes from a conviction to talk about the prevalence of domestic violence in Nagaland in which "most cases are unknown as it goes unreported" (x). Structurally, the novel is divided into two parts that narrate the lives of four generations of women. It is narrated by the two protagonists, the mother and her daughter. Taking into account the first person pronoun 'I', the voices of the real battered women come alive when the female protagonists open up to narrate their horrifying experiences of abuse and torment meted out against them during severe domestic violence. There is an operation of dual narratives that powerfully distinguishes the visible world controlled by men and the invisible world occupied by women. This dual narrative style strategically coalesces the women's interior voices in parallel with men's audible voices. Such coalescence entails two sides to a story: one that is democratically read, one that is listened to, and one that is heard to determine an informed understanding of the characters and their world. The narration categorically runs on a mission: to make known the invisible world of women often shrouded in humiliation, suffering, and shame. Mepfhu-o holds no bar as she discusses the serious issue of intimate violence and poignantly sums it up thus:

> …it is time to remove the notion that when a woman talks back or when she does not behave in a way she is expected to, it is justified even if she gets beaten…However, I do not think anyone 'deserves' or 'asks' to be beaten, dragged across the floor, which have scars to show, be punched in the face, have a

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> broken nose, get critically injured in the head…to sleep in a storeroom for months, to be thrown out of the house…to let their young sons and daughters shout forced derogatory remarks…These things should not be justified under any circumstances. Nobody has the right to assault or abuse anyone. (xv)

In a strategic move to collapse the real abused women with the fictionalized female characters, the experiences of gendered violence are powerfully mediated by being written about by the author most delicately and respectfully, censoring any element of sensationalism. Intentionally, the characters are nameless as it serves the purpose to focus on the acts of atrocity against the women while safeguarding their true identity. The book functions as the 'female enabling space', allowing a free narration flow without being mitigated by male harassment to narrate otherwise. The women are rehabilitated from 'being silenced' to speaking about their traumatic experiences through this female space. The deliberation to entrust their secrets to the author underscores the imposition of various forms of oppression that are perpetuated to rob them of their human dignity and selfhood. Writing/reading/speaking about their terrible secrets powerfully propagates a narrative's structural formation, which employs 'doublespeak' as both resistance to gendered violence and strategic and subversive tools, highlighting liberating yet complex dynamics at play. The women contributors' constrained position to share their traumatic experiences openly exposes the power politics in motion. Writing for and about them is a political move, the contested site of subjugation and relegation women have been forced to endure. Thus, they speak of silence, embedded with tales of bodily and psychological harm with instances of hostilities, torturous manipulations, and the denial of freedom. This factual-fiction autobiographical element of the real women renders subjectivity to the protagonists as they expose the unimaginable brutality and harrowing pain that women face daily. What binds the four women in a tight bond of solidarity is the culmination of their shared experiences, marked by recurring intimate violence and atrocities perpetrated against them. This framework of the textual plot narration highlights the oppression the women face through 'coerced' submission and 'unquestioning' obedience to their husbands (except for the matriarch, Apfotsapfu, the grandmother/great-grandmother).

Gendering Silence: Interrogating Victimization and Oppression

Mepfhu-o, in her author's note, forewarns textual narrative, which will broach on subject matter that will make us compellingly disturbed, provoked to anger, and feel deeply pained and stunned all at once. Through the captivating storyline, she underlines telling us "a different

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story…a difficult story…of abuse and violence" of women and girls who are at the receiving end (x). The novel brings to light the gendered notion of 'space' in an environment of toxicity, intimidation, and constant fear from sexism, violence, and crime rampantly occurring around/to/on women. From the feminist point of view, space is about safety for women, but within the patriarchal set-up, it is a contested arena whereby the delimitation of their personhood and self-worth, curb of choice, and the perpetual risk factors largely jeopardize this safe place. The confession of dark secrets of the narrator and her mother in chapter two, part one, opens on the irony of how the private 'home' space is dangerously an unsafe place for girls and adult women: "I knew very early on that mother, and I are different" (10). Stressing the word "different" is linked to sexual molestations, attempted rape, and domestic violence encountered by the narrator and her mother as young girls. The predators can take the form of a male cousin, a male school teacher, or a lawful husband, but the story of girls/women being shamed/blamed and traumatized after the sexual violation remains the same. The narrator recounts her mother's harrowing classroom experience when she managed to escape from attempted raped by her teacher:

> She said that in the classroom, the teacher would come and insult her in front of the whole class. He would throw her books at her or out of the window. She stopped going to school altogether after some time (11).

Michael Salter, taking a leaf from the concept developed by M. Lineham, discusses how the "thoughts, feelings and opinions" of the sexually abused girls and women "were chronically dismissed or trivialized", calling this a "process of invalidation" (4). The lack of accountability to confront the misbehavior of the teacher under the garb of an 'authority' figure who is an 'educator' invalidates the young girl to a shamed position with the innuendo that she is the wrong one, and therefore, her befitting punishment. Unlike any other kind of violence, gendered violence (be it domestic violence, rape, verbal assault, and psychological wound), is a threat to destroy the spirit and the soul of girls/women. Salter warns that "Repeated acts of violence 'hail' the victim to recognize her subordinate position within the gender order and invoke within the victim the imaginary representations of masculine domination that she has internalized" (8).

The pervasive act of the schoolteacher is to psychologically stigmatize the young student with his misogynistic intention to put her in a victimized position and suppress her voice to protest.

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The blatant act of the teacher is an act of oppression that is gendered in nature. The lack of safe space is reinforced by making the molestation cases remain a secret. The mother's advice to the narrator not to share with her father as " he would get angry" and with others as "these things happen and it was nothing to worry about" (10-11) discloses the unaccounted story of many women facing similar situations as in the marital rape case of the second protagonist in part two. To remain quiet then (in these cases) is both enforced/self-imposed silence but the uneasiness to this trajectory of power politics also seeks an explanation for the more significant issue at hand: the act of subduing women's voices within their 'safe space', bearing in mind the unaccounted report of sexual abuse, intimidation, and open threat entailing the necessity to decode women's "safety from and safety to"; and the need to critically understand the implication that the " safety from routine risk and disparagement provides safety to express one's full personhood" (Lewis et al. 1). This insight underscores how domestic 'safe spaces' like the woman's sacred kitchen and bedroom could become vulnerable and dangerous places when the male presence occupies and controls them. Most of the novel battering and psychological injuries occur in the kitchen and their private room. Hooks recounts living "as though in two social spaces," a home space without fathers (when he goes to the workplace), this world comes alive with volume-up speech and women expressing themselves "loudly, passionately, outrageously". It is the second world "where sound and silence are dictated by his presence" where the women have to "adjust" or "lower" their voices or "remain silent" (hooks 128). In the novel, we also witness these distinctive spaces when the women talk openly, and the house's men are not present physically. Taking into account how a space can change its dynamics when the man dominates it by his presence with his distinguishable shouting, slurring, insults, cursing, and name shaming set against the women who are rendered silent "as though the very act of speech [by woman to man] carries embedded in that gesture a challenge, a threat to male domination" (hooks 128).

An incident of talking back as a cited example is evident in part one: the daughter of the first protagonist insists on studying outside the home as the hostile, violent home environment makes it difficult for her to study peacefully. Trivializing the relevance of a girl's education, her father denies her this right, prompting her to reply to him. For this 'rebellious act', she receives a hard blow slap on her face, reprimanding her to shut her mouth from talking back at him. But she stands her ground, and dares "staring straight back at him"; the father stares in "disbelief at the girl" for staring back at him (84). Thus, staring back as a silent language is

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daring to question the father's flawed authority, who lacks absolute integrity with no exemplary character/behavior to deserve respect, and pinpointing his failure to lend a 'listening ear' to the children's anxiety and worries. It also demands her anguish and desperation to be heard and respected instead of constantly subjugated to oppressive threats. The repercussion culminates in repeated male bashing and an eventual broken tie between the mother and the daughter, with the latter blaming the former for her lack of voicing out and supporting her stance. The women's confessions of the dark secrets and the intense emotional outbursts are signs of internal turmoils prompting them to challenge the male regressive domination when being subjugated to extreme gendered oppression by denying their basic rights. Losing the bond of sisterhood and friendship is enormous since it is an alternate world for women to voice and be heard, functioning as the place to recalibrate, strategize, and release their suppressed emotions. Female anger, accusations, condemnation, and hatred are indicative hints of resistance when male aggressions have overbearingly gone too far. This reveals that the female characters are not submissive or culpable of being run over like lifeless doormats (on the premise that victims have given up their fight to ultimate submission to male authority).

In part 1, the first protagonist, who is now a mother herself, follows her mother in remaining silent, set against her husband, who indiscriminately uses the male 'entitled' power to shut her up. Silence operates through mental intimidation and physical abuse of the female body. The old and new wounds and scars of the brutalized women are signifiers encoded with language that speaks of inhumane oppression. Contrary to the stereotyping of women as nagging, the husband is the one who unreasonably nags, whines, complains, abuses, curses, and bullies his wife. Being nurtured with such a skewed understanding of what determines a healthy and productive marital relationship, the husband makes a faulty presumption of expecting a subservient role for his wife. In many Naga households, the patrilineal system sanctions men in privileged positions. Naga women are marginalized from the public forum as the patriarchal cultural customs and traditions authorize their continuing strongholds in the Naga society even with modernity viz-a-viz education playing a significant role. The narrator's ordeal to put up with extremely violent and challenging men is an important factor in determining her position either as a submissive, voiceless victim/a woman who is oppressed, or both. There are multiple instances of mistreatment of the first protagonist's husband on her, such as tirades of verbal abuse, and physical and psychological attacks indicating his disturbing tyrannical nature. It casts a doubtful shadow on what defines man and manhood in this context as we recall the

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father-in-law lecturing the second protagonist on the definition of man: a man who beats and controls his wife. One of the husbands insists that his wife resign from her job to take care of the children and domestic chores. When she refuses to give up her hard-earned job, he accuses her of flirting with her male colleagues and labels her as a bad woman, and an uncaring selfish mother. This casts a tint on her worth as a person.

Monalisa Changkija comments on the reality of the Naga women within the milieu of Naga marriage as she observes, "For all the trappings of modernism, the Naga wife is a Naga woman, not yet a Naga person" (71). Changkija further writes, "...the Naga marriage, which is a product of the patriarchal Naga society, definitely operates along patriarchal norms and reflects it" and "...without exception, an unequal one, where the role of the wife is taken for granted as subservient" (77). This places into perspective some serious considerations: do education, academic qualifications, and economic independence garner an equal voice and status to the wife at home (personal space) and in society (public space)? Do they translate into self-empowerment? Changkija further opines that "Education and academic qualifications are means of empowerment, not empowerment per se…[and it does] not actually empower her as a person, not when she is confined to the rules of a patriarchal value system and must abide by them, as also operate within them…" (80). In the context of the novel, we process this stifling reality as the second protagonist realizes that even after her commendable education success and the merited job, respect is still denied to her. It has not stopped the domestic violence, marital rape, and perpetual harassment inflicted by her almost deranged husband on her and her children.

For hooks to "back talk" or "talking back" is "speaking as an equal to an authority figure" (5). Thus, by enforcing silence, the abusers want to suppress their female counterparts, primarily by controlling their tongues as deliberated words can challenge and denounce their male authority and hegemonic power. If the protagonists are permitted to speak, it is the language of submission, servility, and obedience, while voicing injustices, complaints, grievances, or protests are erased or denied access to them. Silence then, is unfairly a violation of human rights meted on the abused girls and women. The question is: did the protagonists choose to be silent out of fear, weakness, and submission, or for self-preservation reasons? The narrative highlights this tension clearly as the husbands frequently attempt to shut up their wives, allowing them to speak only when spoken to. When the women talk otherwise, they are brutally

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punished. Silence then is a metaphorical cutting off of the female tongue for speaking against injustice, but paradoxically, permeating through this (female) willful silence culminates in a subversive act, spilling out against cruelty and systemic violation being perpetrated. The grimy predicament is doubly felt by the looming presence of the larger male-dominated society with their complicit act of stoic silence. Elizabeth M. Schneider, in *The Violence of Privacy* points out that, "By seeing woman abuse as "private," we affirm it as a problem that is individual, that only involves a particular male-female relationship, and for which there is no social responsibility to remedy…Men deny battering in order to protect their own privilege… Privacy operates as a mask for inequality, protecting male violence against women" (42-43).

Meanwhile, the mothers-in-law of both protagonists lack humane empathy and compassion towards the aggrieved younger women and their grandchildren. Where supporting and nurturing them to navigate their troubled marriage should have bridged into a healthy relationship, fostering solidarity of sisterhood, the correlation between them is one with a power struggle to control. This disparity is witnessed in the narrative when the mothers-in-law side with their sons' shameful actions as they blindly accept believing that a wife is subservient to her husband and has no right to question his authority over her. The daughters-in-law are accused of being the reason for the marital incompatibility and discord. They are treated with disdain for presumably failing to be 'good' wives and 'dutiful' mothers. Mepfhu-o resonates with this relationship being complicated by domestic violence between/amongst women when she writes, "..when a woman is abused, the question mostly asked is - "What did she do?" The fault is always intrinsically female…It is the male side of the story that is mostly narrated. Therefore, women have suffered in silence because society has indirectly taught them that it is a shame 'to be abused'. What society forgets to teach is that it is a shame 'to abuse'" (xiii).

For a prolonged period, the 'male side of the story' has been listened to and repeated till it has been framed into our conscious and sub-consciousness. But the precariousness of this one-sided narrative is alarmingly propagated further by the older women who have accepted to be silent and willfully obey the patriarchal system without questioning it. They have also been subjected to both physical and mental abuse. It appears ironic that they can raise their voices to instruct their sons' wives on the prescribed code of conduct for women (which is in alignment with patriarchal norms) but fear to do the same with their menfolk. Thus, while their men seamlessly disregard their personhood and identity, quite ironically, they continue to

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propagate the regressive patriarchal norms on their daughters-in-law. But part of their silence is to keep the honor of their 'good family' status intact and also to shun the stigma that comes with it. The fear of being exterminated as 'social pariahs' if they are labeled as 'battered women', does a disservice to themselves and their younger womenfolk: they embrace invisibility and self-annihilation. Sadly, they are the real victims who are thrice victimized- by the men of the house, the society, and self-inflicted.

They vehemently cast aside the choice to put an end to the vicious victim-abuser cycle. In a bizarre twist, the younger women could have been at the receiving end because they are the soft target for the older women to vent out their own suppressed frustration, humiliation, and 'shameful behind closed doors' stories. Failure or refusal to confront the real source of this debacle also exposes their lack of courage and fear to face the disturbing reality. But the price for this condonation is ramified across generations, particularly when the abused becomes the abuser as evident in the lives of the older women replaying the aggressor's role on their younger women, or the sons enacting the violent actions of their fathers. These manifestations are disturbing signs as they legitimize male atrocity and its dangerous tendencies to irrevocably damage or harm women and children. The onus is truly in their hand to redress this grievance immediately and stop the buck right there from spreading the menace. Therefore, this ill-treatment and negligence is another attempt at enforced silence perpetuated by alienating the daughters-in-law as 'outsiders' instead of 'allies' and are denied to voice their opinions and angst. But this enforcement is doubly tragic since women perpetrate it on their womenfolk. The mindscape of the older women laden with hypocrisy exposes their 'secretive' sad life stories as disempowered women, first by their husbands and later by their sons. Part of the larger problem centering around the abusers' nasty behavior is because their mothers have never reproached or corrected them when necessary.

Naila Kabeer's poignant question finds relevance in the fear of the older women, "Does their silence reflect a fear of the consequences, the absence of alternatives, or the futility of protest?" (16). In the case of the older women, their silence indicates all three markers. This also connotes that older women have embraced victimization without imagining/thinking of themselves as one. But for both the narrators, they are acutely clear that the atrocities propagated through gendered violence are oppression. On the other hand, the first narrator's choice to stay in her marriage is summed up by her grandmother and her daughter, the second protagonist: a failed

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woman who rejects her agency consequentially (although they have failed to take cognizance of her quiet resistance and resourcefulness). However, their interjection with this criticism stems from the inherent social stereotyping of victimization, implying that to stay is presumably understood as accepting violence. But Mahoney critically views that "The prevalent social focus on leaving conceals the nature of domestic violence as a struggle for control, pretends away the extreme dangers of separation, and hides the interaction of social structures that oppress women" (62). Reading Mahoney's critical analysis problematizes the grandmother and the daughter's desire for the first protagonist to exit from her marriage, as there are multiple complications to consider when making such a crucial decision. Later on, when the daughter in part two reflects on her broken marriage festered by experiences of domestic violence, her perception of her mother's decision changes. She is now able to weigh in many complex and difficult factors that her mother has to process when making a very tough decision:

> I had always wished she was educated so that she could've dealt with things differently. As I stood there on the same ground, I realized I was worse than her, with the education that I thought could do just about anything, it only allows me to identify patterns and discrepancies in my life but as helpless as my illiterate mother to do anything to salvage my own life (154).

This reckoning is significantly important as the second protagonist makes a conscious decision to leave her marriage but in doing so, she does not pass on her righteous judgment of her mother. Instead, a newfound respect and admiration arise within her for how her mother has chosen to remain dignified throughout her humiliating ordeal. This powerfully illustrates how each woman has made the best decision in their circumstances.

Claiming Agency: Voicing The Silence

The equation of silence as disempowerment with a lack of agency viz-a-viz male oppression is challenged as strategies to survive or resist male-controlling power are evident in the novel. Reiterating Parpart's insistence on the lookout for any potential "subtle strategies" ("Choosing Silence"1) which can promote an improvement in women's lives, makes a relevant point as we search the myriad ways in which women utilize silence. By rendering voicelessness to women, the men continue to oppress them, but the simultaneous operation of self-imposed silence by the former weaves an alternate narrative that paradoxically speaks louder than their 'suppressed silence'. In this light, the duality of silence indicates a new meaning "as another kind of power",

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as Parpart would say ("Choosing Silence" 1). Strategic silence in this case has the simultaneity of the choices women can make quietly and effectively set them to action even when they seem to pose as subservient to their husbands' whims and demands. The question surrounding invisibilizing the external agencies/support systems such as the local police special cell unit for women's safety, women-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs), church groups, and the surrounding community as the micro representation of the macro society in the plot narrative rests on the inherent male controlling factor that prevents his oppressive actions from being leaked outside the four-walled room under the guise of being a 'private matter.'

In part one, the abusive husband has no intention to start a family with the first protagonist, but when he is informed about her first pregnancy, he is angry, even questioning the legitimacy of the unborn child as his. Between the conversation from the narrator's overwhelming news of "our baby" to the husband's quick disband of "that baby of yours" (35) to be aborted, and her shocking realization of his paternal rejection of the baby, an important point can be decoded here: the self-determination/will power of the woman despite the curtailment of her freedom of choice. Therefore, she held on to keep the baby despite the danger she may face. The womb, therefore, becomes the contested site on the question of the 'reproductive rights' and 'self-determination' of women. Moreover, the barrage of physical attacks on the protagonist for 'talking- back' to keep the baby also highlights her quick, instinctive reaction to protect her womb when she is attacked: "I was still holding on to my stomach protectively…I was protecting my own…the one inside me" (38). Giving birth to four children proves her strong desire to be a nurturer despite her difficult situation. Although her husband may aggressively control her, it does not squash her determination to be a kind, caring, and loving mother to her children in contrast to her husband's hard-heartedness.

Reading feminist projects on the qualitative studies on women in intimate interpersonal violence and their strategic approaches to survival has revealed some encouraging findings, such as women keep quiet to protect their children and themselves; children are hidden in the room from witnessing the violence; the inner strength and resilience of the women; the compassion, patience, and thoughtfulness of the mothers; avoidance of sharing domestic violence with children; reassurance of hope; and, seeking external help (Lapierre, 2010; Lempert, 1996; Peled and Gil,2011; Weinzimmer et al, 2013). These findings are helpful tools

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in analyzing how the abused women in the textual narrative have used similar strategies to deal with their dire situations.

Silence, then is a coping mechanism to protect the traumatized children and for self-protection. As the sole caretaker, women make deliberate choices not to engage in verbal fights with the abuser, especially when the children are around, often relenting to their abused partner's inhuman demands, and maintaining secrecy. These strategies reflect the mothers' fundamental creed to be the protector of their children. From this standpoint, the unflinching self-sacrificial love and commitment of the mothers play a defining role in the lives of the children as in the case of the first protagonist's children. They managed to be economically independent and self-sufficient later on in life. Without the mother's resilience and hope transmitted to her children, the latter could have been embroiled in a similar predicament. Perhaps the defining moment is witnessed when the first protagonist breaks the intergenerational curse of domestic violence. Quite unlike her son-in-law who follows the footsteps of his father as a wife-beater, her only son chooses not to become like his abusive father. His relocation to a metropolitan city to work there symbolically represents a willing desire to move on from the hurting past and break the chain of violence. The protagonist, therefore, becomes the enabling force for her children. Thus, the death of her husband (due to alcohol addiction) liberates her from a life of physical torment, agony, and trauma. On the other hand, in the absence of her deceased husband, she reclaims her female space and also the entire house. Thus, the unison of her independent spirit with a secure home merges into a sanctuary of self-reflection and healing. This is categorically evident when her daughter leaves her husband and comes to stay with her as she has nowhere to go. In light of the broken relationship between the mother-daughter duo which hasn't been mended as yet, the daughter comments,

> On my way here, I thought she would criticize me for my failed marriage just like I had judged her all these years. And I reasoned to myself that she had every right to refuse me, given the kind of daughter I was to her. But she took me in, no question asked. No judgment passed (153).

Mepfhu-o treats the dilemma of the 'leave or stay' in a broken, abusive marriage from two differing perspectives, touching upon what Mohoney has insisted on re-looking at the conflicting dichotomies between voice/agent and voiceless/disempowered, emphasizing the batterers' offensive actions and the battered women's resilience to bounce back despite the dangerous situation surrounding them. Identifying the abusers re-shifts the narration from

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'victim-talk' (as Mohoney warns us to refrain from it) to detailing the inhuman antics of the abusers, thus critically examining the dichotomies at hand. Apfotsapfu, the great-grandmother, symbolically representing a free spirit with a mind of her own, views marriage as a sacred amalgamation of respect, love, care, and security between the married partners. For her, when this sanctity is destroyed through male ill-treatment and oppression, staying in a marriage is hazardous to both the children and the wife. Her presence becomes an illuminating factor as she never fails to speak out, unlike her granddaughter (the mother/first protagonist) who chooses to remain silent. Her captivating yet intimidating presence makes her progeny uncomfortable for a reason. The first protagonist tells us how she dreads her grandmother's visits as she "comes only when she senses that something is wrong…" (25). Later, she insists, " Come with me. Take her and come. I have enough to feed us…if you want your daughter to live a life different from yours, leave him and come with me" (28). The grandmother's voice of reason and alternative resolution calls for a radical move for the women entrapped in troubled marriages.

For the first protagonist, her spiritual belief is the culminating factor in making her personal decision: "Nothing she says or does will make me change my mind. He is my husband, God has chosen him for me and me for him and I made a promise- I dare not go against His will" (30). This explains how her stance stems from her Christian faith and vow ('in good and in bad times') she made at the altar when she got married, thus negating the helplessness and economic dependence syndrome tag as her reasons to stay with her husband and children. In a Naga patriarchal customary law, if a married woman leaves her husband, she cannot claim her rights to her children or any other benefits from her husband. Her difficult choice, therefore, rests on her wisdom to stay for the sake of her children who need her assuring presence for their mental and physical well-being. On the other hand, the second protagonist follows the advice of her Apfotsapfu by leaving her husband. She realizes that staying in this marriage is more harmful for her children than for her: " All these years, I thought I had to stay for the kids but I realized that I had to leave for the kids" (148). However, leaving is not her first choice. With her love for her husband and the hope that he would realize his mistakes and save her family from societal scrutiny, she has kept her silence and tolerance. Instead, her silent period has been the time for strategizing her next move and determining how to execute it best, keeping her children's well-being as the top priority. Her decision brings closure by fulfilling her great-grandmother's desire while putting an end to intergenerational psychological wounds and

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trauma for the next generation. The women's choices expose gender politics as biased and unfair to them.

In the last chapter, the second protagonist returns to her mother's place to make a fresh start. Her return significantly allows her to face her suppressed ghosts: her father's abuse and torture; her loss of trust in her mother; her unforgiving heart towards her parents, and her sense of self-loss. Releasing her traumatic memories and past through forgiveness and reconciliation enables the process of renewal and hope. As an informed, educated woman, she counters the Naga customary laws on divorce (which favors men) by intending to file a legal case of domestic violence against her husband and seeking to co-parent her children. Essentializing the power to stand for her rights liberates her from the shackles of patriarchy's unrealistic demands on women. Thus, the title of the first chapter 'Genesis'(part one), and the last chapter 'Revelation' (part two) brings the biblical analogy of the restoration and hope of a new order: from the fall to reinstatement. The reclamation of their freedom through the domestic space, the reconciliation between the mother and daughter, and coming to terms with their hurting past mark the end of the abuser's control and oppression. This entails that women are not devoid of choice. However, despite receiving inhuman treatment, they never lose track of their sanity and identity. Thus, the dichotomy of voiceless/disenfranchised and voice/empowered is reconfigured with a radically fresh perspective asserting that silent women are as equally vocal as those who can speak and have the inner power to fight for their rights. They mechanize their agency and female power on their terms, validating their deliberate actions, empowerment, and agency.

Conclusion

This women-centric narrative on gendered violence highlights the tendency to read rather simplistic and reductive stereotypes, casting the women as either 'disempowered voiceless victims' or 'empowered voice agencies' based on the choices they make in their extremely difficult situations. It makes a case study on how imperative it has become to take cognizance that women who remain with their husbands are often judged as 'weak-failed women' as in the case of the first protagonist and her mother, who has decided to stay in their broken marriages; and, those women who choose to leave their husbands due to excessive abuses as 'strong women' as in the case of the second protagonist. However, as each story of brutality and suffering unfolds, this distinction becomes blurred. Understanding the intricate complexities

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within this distinction is vital since there is no such distinct categorization, or it runs the risk of overlooking the deliberate choices exercised by women as survivalists' strategies throughout their tortured experiences. Their silence narrates a tale of pain, hardships, and atrocities, simultaneously displaying their exuberant inner strength, resourcefulness, good sense, wisdom, and emotional intelligence, thus evidencing how conventional categorizations have overlooked female agency from a radically challenging standpoint. While the women appear to remain silent in the presence of their violent men, the intricacy of their silence belies anything but muteness since their interior thoughts are teeming with an instantaneous flow of monologues and dialogues, incessantly questioning their shamed battered state and of their husbands' inhuman injustice acts and a site to re-organize/re-evaluate their strategies to counter male domination.

The evidence of physical scars traces the elusive gaps and ellipses inherently present in silence but within which finds a vault-like rich repository of the women's ability to endure, persevere, tolerate, and sacrifice. The truth of the matter is that under such tremendous pressure to comply, the women have discerned the futility of countering the abusive husband/father with physical or verbal retaliation. Self-preservation as a coping or defense mechanism reflects the protagonists' instinct to shield their children from harm. Staying safe, therefore, becomes a necessity for themselves and the children, a priority well in place. Where to be meek is perceived as a sign of weakness, risking their own lives in the line of defense demonstrates their resoluteness, courage, and willpower to survive despite the perilous circumstances. Hence, the women's stories are read as testimonies of grit, resistance, and power struggle to work within/around/against the strong oppressive tide, but still willed themselves to come out triumphant. By mapping the female (silent) voices and agency through her novel, Mepfhu-o poignantly opens the conversation to speak out of "criminalization in defining battering as a public harm and heightened the movement's analysis of reforms" in the words of Schneider (49). The old house is significantly important as it encompasses more than a place of habitation. It bears witness to all the atrocities women have endured, but claiming it as their own, they recreate it as a home that is filled with "uninhibited laughter and conversation. Just as it should be" (161). Relocating from the oppressive house to her mother's safe home, the second protagonist claims her subjectivity and agency. Finally, women can withstand the clutches of misogyny and oppression, thus allowing them to embrace their personhood, identity, and self-dignity. Indeed as Mepfhu-o sums up:

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> This book is not a story of defeat but about building trust and supporting one another and how important it is for girls or women to find and empower one another as we try to find our 'selves'. It is time to shift the narrative…that is not so focussed on revenge, hatred, or bitterness but a positive narrative… (xv-xvi).

This strategy to tell the world breaks male power, allowing the calculated silence of the women into a written voice as an important "redemptive writing" to borrow Gleen's words (74). Mepfhu-o documentation substantiates, in Gleen's terms, "engendering silence" (20) to "witnessing silence" (49) or "attesting silence" (77) to finally "opening silence" (150). In hooks' perspective, writing about the women's struggle and suffering is "a way to capture speech, to hold onto it, keep it close" (6) and "to create a world where domination and coercive abuse are never aspects of intimate relationships" (91). This novel, particularly in the Naga context, successfully conveys the necessity to radically redefine all the underpinnings of silence, agency, and voice and engage in this nuanced discourse from an informed perspective.

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