



“Silence is not Silent”: A Postcolonial Feminist Appraisal of Women Silence in Mia Couto’s *Confession of the Lioness*

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Abstract

Most of the western feminist readings of literary texts in which third world women are at the center do strongly confirm the biased stereotypical depictions usually ascribed to them. However, such is not always the case of all women featured in African literature whose silences proved to be often subversive. Mia Couto’s *Confession of the Lioness* accesses the post-Civil War repertoire of Mozambique from, mainly, a black female vantage perspective. Through the focal female character Mariamar, the novel rethinks the female subaltern voices and positions. It probes the dynamics of silence and the possibilities it instigates. From a postcolonial feminist lens, the insights of Chandra Mohanty in particular, this paper examines Couto’s use of silence as a mysterious force overloaded with speech. It underlines some of the female depatriarching and self-empowerment strategies, namely narrating and writing one’s own story in the novel under study. In a village like kulumani, the atmospheric effect of the sound of silence reverberates more than the spoken word does. Reading the text from this standpoint is a starting point to depart the totalizing attitudes and the single story generally attributed to Africa and African women.

Keywords: Couto, third world women, silence, postcolonial feminism, subversion, writing and narrating.

Silence is not silent.
Silence speaks.
It speaks most eloquently.
Silence is not still.
Silence leads.
It leads most perfectly. ¹

“I journeyed through the extensive havens. But I only found shelter in the word.” ²

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¹ Chinmoy, Sri (1975). *Silence speaks, silence leads. Sound becomes, Silence is.* Agni Press.

² Couto, Mia (2015). *Confession of the Lioness.* (David Brookshaw, Trans.). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Original work published 2012): 187.

1. Introduction: *Confession of the Lioness* and the Politics of Postcolonial (Third World) Feminism

Mia Couto’s *Confession of the Lioness* (2012) has become accessible to the readers of English after having been translated from Portuguese by David Brookshaw in 2015. Couto’s forward to the novel reads as follows:

In 2008, the company I work for sent fifteen young people to serve as field officers during a program of seismic prospecting in [...] northern Mozambique. During the same period and in the same region, lions began to attack people. Within a few weeks, there were more than ten fatal attacks. This number increased to twenty in about four months [...]. Hunters were urgently needed in order to provide protection [...]. Two experienced hunters [...] traveled to Palma [...]. In the meantime, the number of victims had increased to twenty-six [...].
[...] It was suggested [...] that the real culprits were inhabitants of the invisible world, where rifles and bullets were no use at all. Gradually, the hunters realized that the mysteries they were having to confront were merely symptoms of social conflicts for which they had no adequate solution. (2015: ix-x)

In this forward, the writer stresses from the very onset the gloomy and mysterious atmosphere which pervades the novel and reflects profusely that of the real context. The novel is a witness to a series of bewildering facts that overwhelm the small village of Kulumani in which the victims of the attacks brought forth in the quote appear to be only women. This magnifies the ambiguity surrounding the nature of the beastly creatures and the society as a whole.

Having two separate narrators through two seemingly interconnected diaries, this text examines the resistance of the local culture to any kind of modern meddling. It covers the post-Civil War era and its traumatic consequences on the intra-social relations and the local human character. Couto’s reproduction of this incident is not accidental, for the assassination of women ingeminates the victimization women endure at the hands of their society and its beliefs. By dint of a discourse which fuses poetic language, magical realism with the African myth and ritual, Couto profoundly investigates the possibilities lying beneath the dynamics of silence through the black female protagonist Mariamar. Mariamar sets fire on the stereotypical renderings of African women by turning the power of silence into her own favor in defiance of the patriarchal cultural norms. Thus, as a postcolonial text, with its implicit challenging tone, *Confession of the Lioness* fits into the postcolonial feminist calls to step out the mainstream attitudes incarcerating women in the same orbit. It repudiates the totalization and the universalization of female concerns and sufferings by unraveling a unique female experience.

Postcolonial feminism, also acknowledged as third world feminism, often accounts for the negligence of gender issues in the postcolonial theory, and the absence of the postcolonial in feminism. For this very reason, many scholars believe it “originates from internal ideologies and socio-cultural factors [of the ex-colonized countries]” and not a product of the first world (Jayawardena 2008: 233). Viewing this, the ‘politics of location,’ the historical and geographical distinctiveness of the third world, is accentuated in this theory. Robert Young succinctly sums up its quintessence:

Postcolonial feminism has never operated as a separate entity from postcolonialism; rather it has directly inspired the forms and the force of postcolonial politics. Where its feminist focus is foregrounded, it comprises non-western feminisms which negotiate the political demands of nationalism,

socialist feminism, liberalism, and ecofeminism, alongside the social challenge of everyday patriarchy, typically supported by its institutional and legal discrimination: of domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, honour killings, dowry deaths, female foeticide, child abuse. Feminism in a postcolonial frame begins with the situation of the ordinary woman in a particular place, while also thinking her situation through in relation to broader issues to give her the more powerful basis of collectivity. It will highlight the degree to which women are still working against a colonial legacy that was itself powerfully patriarchal - institutional, economic, political, and ideological. (2003: 116)

With her groundbreaking essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1986), Chandra Mohanty overtly abhors the Eurocentric discourse of western feminism that champions the single story often told about Africa and its women. She delineates three basic practices whereby third world women are rendered as one powerless group: ‘homogenization’, ‘essentialization’, and ‘representation’. Of paramount importance is the first practice of homogenization. Without taking into consideration the local specificities of this part of the world, “the resultant homogenization of class, race, religion, and daily material practices of women in the Third World can create a false sense of the commonality of oppressions, interests, and struggles between and among women globally” (Mohanty 1991: 68). Briefly stated, women all over the world, with miscellaneous experiences, are never the same. Consequently, ‘patriarchies’ can in no way be identical.

Mohanty believes that women, in this postcolonial era, are prone to a ‘double colonization’³, or silencing, at the hands of men and imperialism jointly. The latter manifests itself remarkably through the ex-colonized man and the discourse of mainstream feminism. In this discourse, women are characterized as victims of male violence, colonial process, Arab familial system, economic development process, and Islamic code, and thus they are reduced to and essentialized as a one homogenous group (Mohanty 1991: 57). In the version which comes out in *Feminism Without Borders*, Mohanty stresses this by adding the category of “universal dependents” (2003: 23). She also criticizes the label “third world woman” ascribed to these women through underlining the “effects of various *textual* strategies used by [western] writers that codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western” (1991: 52, emphasis added). The whole process which involves discourse and knowledge production of the reductionist, one-sided, western feminism on women is subsumed by Mohanty as “discursive colonization” (1991: 15). Of course, these politics of ‘knowledge production’, deemed as a form of “cultural imperialism”, are questionable since “women of Africa” are depicted as a “homogenous sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness” (Mohanty 1991: 59). One token of this strand of colonization, essentialization, is western literature through which postcolonial women are purloined of their peculiarities, and hence their voice, whether in terms of representation or critical appraisal. It is apparent that with Mohanty, heterogeneity, difference acknowledgment, is celebrated over homogeneity.

Silence is often limned as ““the right speech of womanhood” — the sign of woman’s submission to patriarchal authority” (Hooks 1995b: 337). Postcolonial feminist interventions are concerned with those silences as individual or collective phenomena. At a more nuanced level, patriarchy is exhibited through depriving women not just of the right to speak or to express one’s self but also every single right. At a broader level, as a collective experience, silence can be captured in the blindness towards the experiences of women, especially their

³ This term appeared officially in: Petersen, Kirsten Holst and Anna Rutherford, eds., (1986). *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-colonial Women's Writing*. Oxford: Dangaroo Press.

agency and history, from those postcolonial countries. This is done by means of ignoring their productions, I refer precisely here to creative writings, the complication of the process of publication and most weightily the reception of their writings and initiatives within primarily their mother countries. This last point deters female voices to reach larger audiences overseas as feminist writings are often “invisible” or “excluded from African literary criticism” particularly (da Silva 2004: 129).

In line with this, Gayatri Spivak answers the rhetorical question of her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) by asserting that “the subaltern cannot speak” (1988: 308). This answer ignites an intensely vigorous debate in which ‘to speak’ is often misread as to ‘talk.’ To clarify this, she states in *The Spivak Reader* that any ‘speech act’ involves “a transaction between the speaker and the listener” (1996: 289). The female subaltern is equally silenced and disregarded; so, she is not heard. The act of speaking, in consequence, turns into a simple act of talking. bell hooks also, resounding Spivak, locates the real struggle not in the emergence from the state of “silence to speech” but in constructing “a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (Hooks 1995b: 337-8). Subsequently, the resistant act of speaking is accomplished through ‘talking back’⁴ to the multifarious domineering powers that dehumanize women, be they local or universal, traditional or modern. This way, the act of speaking would be an “expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice” (Hooks 1995b: 340).

The subaltern’s effaced voice raises the problem of representation or “who speaks for whom and whose voices are heard” (Weedon 2007: 290). Any initiative to represent women, by experts of the ex-colonized world or western academia, may risk silencing them more and more in many considerations. On the one side, it can widen the Manichean binary ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Spivak 1988: 274), and on the other, it can plunge the whole process of voice emancipation in ‘epistemic violence,’ Spivak’s concept that echoes in essence Mohanty’s ‘discursive colonization.’ Western epistemology is often Eurocentric, so it “cohere[s] with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (Spivak 1988: 295). To this end, Spivak proposes that these experts would “unlearn [their] privileges” (1996: 4). This is a two-fold operation which involves (a) casting aside privileges accorded by race, gender, class and western scholarship to be able (b) to get integral knowledge of the specificities that constitute womanhood in different locations. Reflecting the crux of this, *Confession of the Lioness* typifies Mia Couto’s rootedness in the local culture and impartiality by allowing two native narrators, male and female, to trace the possible within the impossible.

In literary studies, postcolonial feminist criticism transcends the fetters of “western academia” by being “necessarily eclectic” (Navarro Tejero 2013: 254). It contemplates the heterogeneity of third world women that is the interplay and the impact of a long array of factors on them in the texts unfolding their marvelous experiences. The cultural beliefs in particular are punctuated, for what is a patriarchal attitude from a western feminist stance can be a pious belief to the African woman. The resistant thrust of this criticism endeavors to resist, decolonize/ liberate and most importantly empower women. This is what distinguishes this approach from other feminisms. This objective is, as referred to earlier, hard-achieving, yet the “postcolonial feminist discourse strives to create the space for this “counter sentence” [voice] to be spoken by the “gendered subaltern”” (George 2006: 216).

⁴ bell hooks’ term.

The postcolonial feminist discourse is a counter discursive space which “is encoded in the practices of remembering, and of writing” (Mohanty 1991: 38). Writing, then, is not a simple passive act of telling. Rather, it is a medium whereby women become active agents in light of the hegemonic discourse of the west which exposes them as powerless creatures by way of shared experiences. Mohanty describes writing and its distinctive contours as:

[A] discursive context [...] on *storytelling* or *autobiography* (the practice of *writing*) as a discourse of oppositional consciousness and *agency*. Again, these are necessarily partial contexts meant to be suggestive rather than comprehensive—this is, after all, one possible cartography of contemporary *struggles*. And it is admittedly a cartography which begs numerous questions and suggests its own gaps and fissures. However, I write it in an attempt to “*pivot*” the center of feminist analyses, to *suggest* new beginnings and middles, and to argue for more finely honed historical and context specific feminist methods. I also *write* out of the conviction that we must be able and willing to theorize and engage the feminist politics of women, for these are the very understandings we need to *respond* seriously to the *challenges* of race, class, and our postcolonial condition. (1991: 39-40, emphasis added)

In this context, Mohanty warns against the universalization of women experiences, and Gloria Anzaldúa warns against the universalization of women writings. Anzaldúa sees threat in the act of adhering to the “universal” in the discursive productions, writings, of women from the third world at the expense of the “particular”, “feminine” and the “historical” (1983: 170). Silence in these narratives is not always a form of subjugation, for it can be “a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own” (Minh-ha 1990: 372-373). Clearly avowed then, silence is a personal, voluntary alternative and a different performance from that of silencing.

In postcolonial feminist criticism, silence derives as a form of resistance to contest the patriarchal discourse and practices. It investigates the possibilities of voicing the gendered subalterns embedded in silence. Being in a state of silence and a position of marginality is not necessarily analogous to weakness. This state carves out “a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we [women] recover ourselves” according to bell hooks (hooks 1995a: 343). With this insight, this paper will explore how Mia Couto engages explicitly, through *Confession of the Lioness*, in this project of recuperating the shadowed voices. His scrupulous depiction of women from Mariamar’s home village distinguishes silence as machinery from silencing as a machination. The paper, on this ground, underlines two female depatriarching and self-empowerment strategies, namely narrating and writing one’s own story, which impart sound to silence.

2. Mozambican Women as “Third World Women” / “Gendered Subalterns”:

Confession of the Lioness carries the confessions of the main female character and narrator Mariamar Mpepe about her village kulumani, one of the rural villages after the formal end of the Civil War that devastated Mozambique throughout 15 years (1977-1992) following just 3 years of independence. Mia Couto maps kulumani as a microcosm to adeptly broach broader mysterious issues. In the first page of the novel, kulumani is depicted as a village captivated with “illusions” and “certainties” that are passed on from one generation to another (Couto 2015: 3). A society which has myths as its code of conduct is certainly mystic. Two myths appealing strongly to human existence are brought to light in chapter one: the myth of creation and death. “God was once a woman”, the narrator declares (Couto 2015: 3), and the sky was woven by women (Couto 2015: 4). As to the dead, “they are all ordered to turn over in the belly of earth” in the same night (Couto 2015: 8).

One reason locking up kulumani “in the margins of the world” (Couto 2015: 80) might be the above. Yet, the colonizer also ruins the society dreadfully, and the Civil War rubs salt to the wound as “all people came back from the war dead” (Couto 2015: 80). All that is heard right throughout this rural area is silence. Fear inhabits the houses of kulumani instead of its people. This village is diagnosed by its administrator “as having a cancer called envy” (Couto 2015: 108). The social angst, already ingrained by the colonizer, next to the chasm characterizing the intra-social relationships are patent culminations that the novel storifies. The wise, blind, old man, the only real man in kulumani in the eyes of the administrator’s wife, asserts that the lions the expedition is looking for “emerged out of the last civil war” (Couto 2015: 82). Saying so, he spurs a strong reference to the real war, alluded to here as a simple hunt expedition, to be waged against the social devils, the lions, inherent in this society. The fear the elders have towards the newly arrived expedition at this juncture should not sound strange hence.

At the kernel of Mia Couto’s novel lies his vision of the necessity of retrieving gender issues to the fore of the post-colonial scene in Mother Africa. He proffers much importance to the different facets of oppression and repression in this backdrop. The victimization African women endure is best expressed by Hanifa Assulua, Mariamar’s mother, upon stating that the war ends and brings peace only to men since “women will wake up every morning to a timeworn, endless war” (Couto 2015: 103). One of the victimized characters of her society, she has many occasions to disclose familial, wifhood, besides social patriarchy. To start with, being a local of kulumani obliges her like all women to call her husband ‘ntwangu’ out of respect, for here wives never address their husbands by their names. Even in the same family, women and men cannot eat together, and thence the hunter reflects surprisingly once he gets the chance to share the meal with the administrator’s wife. Additionally, household activities are feminized, so it is very shameful for men to approach the simplest tasks like their drink preparation. In relation to daughterhood, Mariamar recounts pathetically how she begs her father “not to go with the administrator [Florindo Makwala]” in order to “sleep over there in his house” (Couto 2015: 162). To the father, Genito Mpepe, doing such a favor to Makwala would allow him to regain his respect! The mother has nothing to do except preparing her daughter to this meeting “in silence” (Couto 2015: 163). Other than unbosoming the miserable conditions of Kulumani, the confessions transmitted through *Confession of the Lioness* are Mariamar’s self-revelations of her sufferings.

At another level, the novel indicts the conservative ideas about women in these postcolonial societies as one of the prevailing sources of women victimization. From the colonial times till the post-Civil War era, women “had always been contained, kept in shadows”, Mariamar says while referring to her mother (Couto 2015: 10). Practices like decision making and participation in public occasions, for instance, are male issues. In this vein, the Nigerian feminist scholar Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí reiterates Mohanty’s use of the concept of ‘double colonization’ by writing about the double oppression, “European domination” and “indigenous tradition” (at the hands of African men), of African women in particular (1997: 122). Vidya Maria Joseph, likewise, regards gender discrepancies as being the end result of the “collaboration” between the “native elite groups” and the “patriarchal imperial regime” (n.d : 5). To say it differently, patriarchy is an oppressive apparatus whereby the ex-colonized man, the elite, exercises his robbed power over the weakest subjects. The novel figures such a type of double oppression under which the inhabitants are dwarfed in the presence of their administrator, the neo-colonial exemplar of the village. The incident of submitting Mariamar to him without knowing his intentions is a vivid illustration of this. Both kinds of oppression,

familial or social, lead to a long-term psychological torture which is eloquently summarized by Hanifa as “[p]ains pass, but they don’t disappear” (Couto 2015: 147).

The dramatization of women silencing reaches the zenith with the incident of the maid of the administrator’s wife, Naftalinda. It scrutinizes robustly the elimination of any attempt to challenge the patriarchal practices. Daringly, Tandi the maid disrespects the tradition that is predominantly male-centric and passes by the camp of the boys’ initiation, one of the basic rituals women have no access to. Twelve men rape the girl, and no one accepts to treat her even the nurse in spite of all the efforts of the first lady of the village to achieve justice and revenge for her maid. “Who has the courage in kulumani to rise up against tradition?” Naftalinda suggestively wonders (Couto 2015: 114). She recites how this cruel act, a rational punishment according to men, kills the soul of her maid. This incidence questions the transparency of the judicial system in the postcolonial countries through which contentious judicial cases associated with gender-based issues are not given priority by the colonial/imperial regimes and “left to traditional religious interpretations” (Joseph n.d: 5). This paradoxical attitude of these regimes, that are supposed “to save brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988: 306), certifies the viscerally patriarchal nature of their initiatives and discourses alike.

A further prejudice that plagues women is matriarchy. Like all the female characters in Couto’s text, Mariamar is a gendered subaltern in view of the practices laid out earlier. Yet, what is really soul-killing to her and her sister Silencia, the last victim when the novel opens, is revealed at later episodes. It is the rape the father bedevils his daughters with whenever he is drunk. Rather than sympathizing with her daughters, Hanifa puts the onus on Mariamar and avenges herself as a woman with a ‘taktuka’⁵ performed in reverse. Mariamar’s life is given to the lifeless tree, and she becomes in return alive without a soul. In the novel, patriarchy and matriarchy are equally exhibited as detrimental powers. In regards of this, the African woman is not only doubly but thrice colonized. Next to the male and colonial/imperial dominance, she is under the coercion of other women who are more privileged in varying terms, kinship in this case. The effects of this matriarchy cannot to be minimized; they are evidently as harmful as that which results from patriarchy while taking its psychological affliction on Mariamar into consideration. The novel showcases Mariamar and her mother as victims of the father. The mother should have supported her daughter; nevertheless, in such a turbulent context, no one can expect the reaction of the other. Matriarchal practices in post-colonial societies can be seen as indirect manifestations of patriarchy. In clearer words, patriarchy toughens matriarchy. It is already stated that colonialism blindly drives patriarchy to the extreme, so it is logical to assume matriarchy as a progeny of patriarchy by which disempowered women, like Hanifa, exert their anger and disgust on less disempowered women, her daughter in this novel.

Describing the anxieties that women of kulumani are constantly pulled between, the hunter situates them “between a serpent’s spittle and the devil’s breath” (Couto 2015: 135). This biform suffering calls to attention Spivak’s conception of the ‘gendered subaltern’, the subaltern woman, which is for the view that women are silenced and caught in the midst of perplexing binaries: “patriarchy and imperialism” on the one hand, “tradition and modernization” on the other (Spivak 1988: 306). Taking this and the above into account, Kulumani is a ‘third world’ and its women are ‘gendered subalterns.’

3. Cartographies of Resistance and Empowerment:

⁵ According to the novel, this is a ritual which is supposed to extract life from an animate creature (a tree in this case) and breath it into in a lifeless/sick body like that of Mariamar.

Despite highlighting the experiences of disempowered women in Mozambique, *Confession of the Lioness* harbors also some modes of resistance and empowerment pertaining to women in Africa generally and Mozambique particularly. A close reading of the novel demonstrates two distinctive, yet differing, ways to subvert hegemonic patriarchy.

3.1 A Loud Voice of Dissent:

This mode of direct confrontation with the male counterpart is represented by Naftalinda whose marriage to the administrator opens up a space for expression to her unlike many women. The social constraints besieging women are defied through the ritual of ‘shitala’, the elders’ meeting, in which the issue of the lions that haunt the village is being discussed. This woman interrupts them, something forbidden by tradition, by asserting that “[t]he enemies of Kulumani are right here, they’re in this assembly!” (Couto 2015: 86). Without fear, she advances to accuse the male assembly for being responsible for the incident of her girl maid, already referred to earlier. In the following passage, a conversation with her husband at that meeting, Naftalinda shows a great challenging spirit by delving into the very problem of this village:

*Comrade First Lady, please, this is a private meeting ... [the administrator]
Private? I can’t see anything private here. And don’t look at me like that, because
I’m not scared. I am like the lions that attack us: I’ve lost my fear of men.
Naftalinda, please, we’re meeting here in accordance with age-old tradition,
Makwala pleads.
A woman was raped and almost killed here in this village. And it wasn’t the lions
that did it. There’s no longer anywhere I can’t go. [...]
Mama Naftalinda, you’ve got to ask to speak, Florindo Makwala warns.
The floor’s mine, I don’t need to ask anyone. [...]
You pretend you’re worried about the lions that take our lives from us. But I, as
a woman, ask you: What life is there left to take from us? (Couto 2015: 86-7)*

Naftalinda unveils an “age-old” sexist social system reclining on the legitimacy of tradition to perpetually silence women. Because of this, the meeting amounts to a riot in a “world where the living and the dead need translation in order to understand each other” (Couto 2015: 87). This is a world where men are ‘the living’ and women are ‘the dead’. Illustrative of this is Spivak’s evaluation of the act of speaking of the ‘gendered/sexed subaltern’. Since there is no listener, as the elders do not care at all, the speech of Naftalinda turns into an act of talking. The woman has “no space [guaranteed by her society] from which [she] can speak” (Spivak 1988: 307). John McLeod’s interpretation of Spivak’s view recalls this scene: “the subaltern cannot speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation” (2000: 195). On another level, conversely, this venture from the first lady shakes the hegemony of kulumani males and humiliates them. It furthermore releases the female voice from the “despotic” (Couto 2015: 135) act of silencing.

Public speech delivery is another initiative seeking justice against patriarchy that the novel projects. Besides attempting to avenge her maid, Naftalinda’s provocative speech in the funeral aims basically to urge Kulumani women to rebel against this sexist retarding traditional system. If read from a generalized rather than a particularized standpoint, however, this speech emanates into a poignant call to all women to decolonize themselves from the psychological self-enslavement leading them to be the slaves of male dominance. The exemplification of both psychological attitudes is incarnated in the very disappointing reaction of the few women who attend the funeral and retreat one by one in silence. Though this audacious step from this woman does not meet something tangible, she succeeds to ingrain in her husband suspicion about the

nature of the lions that attack the village even during daytime, and “their intentions are almost human” ! (Couto 2015: 151).

Strongly germane to the previous counteraction is the use of body as a weapon. Light is spotted on the female body as a locus of enslavement and simultaneously resistance in two basic senses. In offering her naked body intentionally to the lions to compel her husband to bring justice to her maid and all women alike rests Naftalinda's, the novel's, reference to African 'body politics', a very thought-provoking topic of discussion. Generally speaking, Naftalinda possesses a body which is often sorted as vulnerable in the eyes of her society, yet her bravery reclaims sound to the female body especially when considering that none of Kulumani's males dare to undertake this heroic experience. As a woman, the administrator's wife avowedly expresses her private needs such as having a beautiful body like Mariamar's. She confesses that sexuality is her underlying aim behind this endeavor, something that her husband, as it is the case of all men, does not give a concern to. She avers: “I want to be devoured, but I want to be devoured in the sexual sense. I want a lion to make me pregnant” (Couto 2015: 167). Importantly, this incidence probes the peculiarities of the female subjectivity and what constitutes it in this context. Commonly believed are the stereotypical beliefs of, especially, gender victimization often accorded to African women; nevertheless, this gesture substantiates their activism in the social life as far as human rights emancipation is concerned. Above all else, they are human beings who can articulate their sexual desires like western women. Mohanty believes that women experiences and needs all over the world are not the same; consequently, their subjectivities can never be the same. Moreover, in this very act of sacrifice, be it from Naftalinda or Tandi, the idea of martyrdom is genuinely rooted. Both cases are no different from the Indian Sati women, widow burning, to whom the ritual becomes a willing conscious act to revolt against the society's misrecognitions.

Substantial achievements of this cartography of resistance are nothing to mention, yet a voice, better say an atmosphere, of dissent reverberates in kulumani. Not only this, the administrator succumbs to his wife's determination and resigns his current job to become a teacher again. A tribute to his maid is also paid by writing the report of her rape. With this challenging step, Naftalinda procures a new appreciation of life as an 'active agent' in her society even partially, and she, most importantly, vocalizes the dead Tandi. In the same way, Alexander and Mohanty write against the unsound generalizations upholding the image of the powerless creature assigned similarly to all women from postcolonial societies by insisting that women “do not [necessarily] imagine themselves as victims or dependents of governing structures but as agents of their own lives” in which they reproduce “the terms of one's existence” continuously (1997: xxviii). So, such a type of direct contest to the society of Kulumani bestows its, if not extrinsic, intrinsic result i.e. psychological empowerment.

3.2 Speaking through Silence:

Mariamar is Natftalinda's counter figure as far as resistance in *Confession of the Lioness* is concerned. While the second resorts to direct means in her long-way battle, the first prefers to overturn the desolate atmosphere of the village to her own favor. Silence becomes her subversive power that is put in a stark opposition with silencing. This section underlines the importance of silence as a power that spawns possibilities of living and empowering rather than speech.

3.2.1 Narrating H (i/er) story:

In postcolonial feminist criticism, 'storytelling' is deliberated as an act which engenders a space to reconstruct one's self as well as an opposing discourse as, already mentioned, thought by Mohanty. In *Feminism Without Borders*, she retraces the story of Yance Ford, an African American student at Hamilton University, and her idiosyncratic project “This

Invisible World” to exceptionally unfurl consciousness concerning her experience. Mohanty appraises the following in this project:

her consciousness of being colonized at the college, expressed through the act of being caged like “animals in a science experiment,” and the performance of liberation, of active decolonization of the self, of visibility and empowerment. Yance found a way to tell another story, *to speak through a silence* that screamed for engagement. However, in doing so, she also created a public space for the collective narratives of marginalized, especially other women color. (2003: 206, emphasis added)

In view of this, Couto institutes a fertile ground for Mariamar to pierce her silence by being the teller of a narrative which venerates women’s issues. Undeniably, it is a chance to voice out her own concerns, share her ideas, and assess the while-post Civil War repertoire of her country without being overwhelmed through a narrative plot that conjures up the gist of Yance’s project. Though *Confession of the Lioness* is told through two participating narrative perspectives, Archangel Bullseye the hunter and Mariamar, Mariamar’s proves more resonant with its vibrant renderings of the Mozambican female experiences: psychological and historical. By shifting from the first to the third person narrator, Mariamar swings the narration in the direction she likes: the novel becomes her testimony, and we become her own listeners.

Therefore, Mariamar casts light on the personal h(i/er)story alongside the collective one. Crucially, precedence is given to recapture these two dimensions of history, that of women and children specifically, to the mainstream history of Mozambique. The Civil War no doubt has a damaging impact on the society in its entirety. The poor children of Kulumani had to familiarize themselves, like adults, with war. They “asked their legs to help them run away in the face of gunfire, faster than bullets”, Mariamar narrates perceptively (Couto 2015: 90). This was their daily routine. “In a world of explosives and blood”, this activity of hiding in the bush was their enjoyable game (Couto 2015: 90). War taught them to “invent *silent* pastimes” (Couto 2015: 90, emphasis added). Mariamar was one of those children who learned to even “shout voicelessly” (Couto 2015: 91). Without saying, women represent the most mal-treated group under all the circumstances, whether in times of war or peace. They have to bear the pressures and the subjugation of their husbands. Under this tragic atmosphere, decision making is a male act par excellence all the time.

Mariamar’s version, as Mia Couto puts it, of the events in the novel re-incarnates the concept of ‘gendered history’ that is fundamental to postcolonial feminism. This theory advocates the female voice in all the domains including the history of colonization as well as the struggle for decolonization which is usually male-centric as it is the case of the postcolonial discourse. Chandra Mohanty, in “Under Western Eyes,” demonstrates how third world women have diverse histories compared to western women. Thus, she, in “Cartographies of Struggle,” sketches out Third World feminists’ call for the rethinking and “rewriting of history based on the *specific* locations and histories of struggle of people of color and postcolonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples” (1991: 10). Even in the same geographical setting, people have different experiences and particularities, yet the generalized version of history is usually bereft of them. For example, testimonies of women who have significant stories and ways of involvement in the struggle of their countries are generally overlooked despite the momentous issues they point to. Securing a position in the existent reductionist history is one of the facets of ‘speaking through silence.’ In this sense, Mariamar’s attempt to provide a revisited feminized version of the history of her nation is a salient mechanism of empowerment to enter the realm of visibility.

Evidently, *Confession of the Lioness* adverts explicitly to an elite-male discourse and practices case in point that pays no respect to the sacrifices of women as active, daring partners and agents in the struggle against the Portuguese colonizer and during the Civil War era. The safety of tradition is the impetus of this discourse. Their reaction to the incident of the lions, a human catastrophe not because all the victims are so far women but because it is one of the “political objectives” of the administrator in the first class (Couto 2015: 54), is an outright verbalization of this. Assuredly, Mariamar’s move, telling history from a female vantage eye, is an endeavor to correct the gender bias towards masculinity observable in the nationalist discourse after independence and to fill in the abysses of the conventional version of history. Likewise, Ann McClintock rightly deplores the African nationalist discourse of being male-centered by denying women’s political agency (1995: 15). Thus, the creation of a counter-discursive space of expression to contest this epistemic violence engulfing their ‘Voice’ is a necessity. The text accordingly attests to Mohanty’s view of storytelling as a traditional discursive practice central to what is known in African literature as orality in its subversion of the discursive colonization, even orally, of this discourse. Couto’s novel celebrates orality as an African-based version of discoursing deeply grounded in the ontological African worldview which hinges on myths, legends, African magical realism and the like. Worth mentioning here is that by juxtaposing both discourses, male and female, the writer gives prominence to Mariamar’s narration as a counter discourse. Storytelling can considerably lend consciousness raising of darker corners in the experiences of women from postcolonial societies.

Mariamar’s personal ‘story’ runs in parallel with that of her country; she cannot detach herself from it, for it is a central aspect of her identity politics. Her story accentuates the role of the aforementioned ‘politics of location.’ She suffers from silencing; however, in many cases, silence emanates as her own alternative. Transcendence to her own world, a form of detachment, allows her new opportunities and freedom to survive. Pertinent to the process of the protagonist’s narration are the motifs of memory (remembering) and dreams through their utility to recuperate the past with its glaring and destructive sides. The narrative’s use of the third person pronoun in many cases to come to grips with the memories and dreams of Mariamar outstandingly sustains the impression that they are the reader’s property and not hers.

The narrative adopts two narrative perspectives relatable to Mariamar. The first is her current view as a woman of 32 years old, and the second is the 16-year old adolescent’s perspective. The memories unleashed via the adolescent’s eye thematize the lack of equal life opportunities when children of ex-colonized societies are compared with their western counterparts at multiple scales. Economic and health conditions are set forth through the first paralysis of the child Mariamar and her diseases without being consulted by doctors or without having the necessary equipments to facilitate her life, simply because she belongs to a rural area far from the center of life wherein the sophistications of the traditional medicine or the church are all what is in hands. Life is taken from her legs, yet she was “never [...] [her] own prisoner” (Couto 2015: 92). Other children used to carry her on their backs “scrambling around joyfully” (Couto 2015: 93). All in all, she “enjoyed a childhood delegated to [her] by other children” (Couto 2015: 93). After two years in the church, the Civil War ends and she stands on her feet again. A close reading of Mariamar’s story reflects also a psychological void caused by the cold treatment of her parents as a genuine production of this mysterious society, so that when she first meets the hunter who saves her from the rapist policeman, he becomes her savior. In addressing her parents using their names without titles throughout most of the novel, Mariamar’s emotional detachment from them is indirectly exposed. Though “[o]nly the landscape seemed to interest him [the hunter]” (Couto 2015: 38), their first arranged meeting is the corner stone on which this girl fabricates her dreams, love fantasies and wonderings on the one side and her despair on the other equally.

The very intimate human aspects— memories, dreams and imaginations of the protagonist— mirror the influence of the politics of location in this novel. Her memories are not mere recollections of past events, for she envisages out of them spaces of introspection and retrospection on the impact of geography as well as the politics of gender with its multilayered strata of issues. A good example is the reminiscence of the retaliation conducted by the mother which causes Mariamar’s second paralysis since poison cripples her body, senses and soul. She “only had one faculty left: [...] the power of *hearing*” (Couto 2015: 144, emphasis added). After falling in the River Lideia in her way to attend the first death anniversary of her uncle Adjiru, she miraculously regains health. When intertwined with and nurtured in nature, Mariamar’s memories paint authentic natural images. Nature, this pure primitive world, is crystallized as a source of life and freedom from the shackles of her society, her father, and her body confinement. Given its healing sway, she finds in the river more particularly an urge to fly. The hunter watches her as the river, fire and music transform her into “a queen” via dancing (Couto 2015: 121).

The fact of being adjacent to the flora and fauna of her land endows Mariamar with many powers. Aside from telling, she is graced with the ability of hearing. Her strong senses strangely enable her to hear unearthly voices that others cannot hear. Couto’s use of some magical realist elements entrusts Mariamar with a unique potential to communicate herself fluently. In one of the episodes of the river, a lioness emerges and “greet[s] [her] with a sisterly respect [...] a sense of spiritual harmony” (Couto 2015: 40). Suddenly, a voice flows out of her breast. It is the voice of her recently dead sister Silencia who pleads for accompaniment. The accordance between the lioness and the protagonist is not strange inasmuch as it implies the lioness’ traits set in her. After attempting to save the administrator’s wife from the teeth of the lioness, Mariamar’s confessions of how she “grow[s] in strength and size and force[s] the lioness to back off” (Couto 2015: 169) strengthen the point. Nearing the end, she, besides the river, plainly describes the process of “transmutation” she undergoes all this time: “it was the dark that showed me what I had always been: a lioness. That’s what I am: a lioness in a person’s body” (Couto 2015: 181). The darkness this woman signals here is not necessarily a time-related aspect but a human-related social disease that dissolves the very fabric of such societies. In this short quote, Mariamar calls upon all muzzled women to use life impediments to their own favor to extricate the powers they have.

Now, whether physically or spiritually, Mariamar is a lioness whose fate is to speak out against the injustices done to African women by telling her own story that is theirs in a way or another. Symbolically, Mariamar’s uncle Adjiru, her spiritual grandfather at the same time, has always yearned to hear the story of the queen of Egypt from her mouth. He prophesizes that she will be “the one who’s going to tell stories” (Couto 2015: 67), not only stories but peculiarities. In her account of her birth story, physical and mythical, Mariamar dwells on the significance of nature, African mythology and spirituality in the life of the African woman:

A tiny leg ascended from the dust and turned on itself like some tumbling spar. Then the ribs, the shoulders, and the head appeared. I was being born. The same convulsed shudder, the same helpless cry of the newly born. I was being delivered from the belly from which rocks, mountains, and rivers are born. (Couto 2015: 180)

Integrally, this is what constitutes the female African subjectivity/womanhood and its uniqueness. Mariamar’s task in this novel is no exception from the task of the postcolonial feminist literary critic who is deemed to identify these aspects in the artifact of the continent.

To conclude this section, Mohanty’s view is of great use. ‘Remembering’ is a form of resistance that embraces agency as mentioned in the first section. She adds succinctly: “[t]he

very practice of remembering against the grain of “public” or hegemonic history, of locating the silences and the struggle to assert knowledge which is outside the parameters of the dominant, suggests a rethinking of sociality itself” (1991: 39). Accentuated more, “history, memory, emotion” are denoted as “significant cognitive elements of the construction of critical, self-reflective, feminist selves and that in the crafting of oppositional selves and identities” (Mohanty 2003: 8). To trigger the effectiveness of such a counter-cognitive practice, i.e. remembering, *Confession of the Lioness* underlines the strong bonding between it and the act of telling/ narrating. Said otherwise, for remembering to become a resilient weapon, it must be energized by telling.

3.2.2 The “Monster’s Words”⁶, the Lioness’ Words:

If narrating/telling is power, then writing/recording as Mariamar expresses in many occasions is more empowering. In this novel, they are inextricably tied; the former is not complete without the second. Unlike the hunter who openly admits his intention to write his diary in his version of the events, Mariamar exposes her diary, or notebook, only in the last chapter when he comes to escort her to another city under the request of the administrator’s wife. Writing in *Confession of the Lioness* is an essential discursive performance to both males and females. The novel contains three male figures related to writing: the writer of the hunt delegation, the hunter and Mariamar’s uncle as her prime teacher. In consistency with the whole atmosphere of the novel, writing is depicted as a mysterious sacred force which eschews all categorizations. The actual process and its details — when, where and how it takes place— are not as crucial as its outcomes. The act gratifies the internal sensations of the protagonist more than anything else. This is what Gloria Anzaldúa christened as ‘organic writing’. She demarcates this ‘level’ saying that “[i]t’s not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue - *organic writing* I call it” (1983: 172).

In relation to this last point, Hooks defines ‘writing’ as “a way to capture speech, to hold onto it, to keep it close” (1995b: 338). Writing, in this respect, becomes another facet of speech, another weapon against silencing, another channel to produce noise and transmit voices to all kinds of deaf ears. hooks’ personal experience epitomizes greatly that of Mariamar, the only female writer in Kulumani that the novel identifies. A possible reason that hinders Mariamar from the revealment of her notebooks can be found in hooks’ essay “talking back”:

The fear of exposure, the fear that one’s deepest emotions and innermost thoughts would be dismissed as mere nonsense, felt by so many young girls keeping diaries , keeping and hiding speech, seems to me now one of the barriers that women have needed and need to destroy so that we are no longer pushed into secrecy or silence. (338)

In a place like Kulumani “where the majority of folk are illiterate, people find it strange that a woman knows how to write” (Couto 2015: 65). More surprising is that a man like uncle Adjiru has always been Mariamar’s reference figure, support, and first teacher in view of this context. What is not surprising is that all the locals conceive this strange skill as the pure offspring of the mission in which she passes two years. However, she corrects this fallacy in her diary by relating her basic learning to the very local primitive context:

[m]y schooling dates from before [the mission]: If I learned to read, it was thanks to the animals. The first stories I heard were about wild animals.

⁶ This is Gloria Anzaldúa’s expression which appears in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers.”

Throughout my life, fables taught me to distinguish right from wrong. To unravel the good from the bad. In a word, it was the animals who began to make me human. (Couto 2015: 65)

In this passage, there is a straightforward hint to the role of African heritage and nature in molding the imagination and human aspects of the Mozambican/African female character. The whole learning process, writing in particular, is itself distinctive as it is profoundly entrenched in nature like the act of narrating. The continuation of the above quote corroborates its uniqueness:

From the bush, he [the uncle] would bring little trophies that he gave me: claws, hooves, feathers. He would leave these remnants on a table by the front door. Underneath each of these adornments, Adjiru Kapitamoro would write a letter on an old piece of paper. An *e* for an eagle’s feather, a *g* for a goat’s hoof, an *m* for *munda*, the word for an arrow in our local language. That was how the alphabet paraded before my eyes. Each letter was a new color through which I looked at the world. (Couto 2015: 65)

Beyond hopes and dreams, the rich natural world of Mozambique, flora and fauna together, fosters basic schooling and molds worldview. To combine letters to form writing is to open prospects, “new colors”, to approach world affairs as this passage indicates. In this context, African feminine writing takes its significance from nature which exalts its rudimentary components, bones and residues of animals here, over artificial material like paper. In other words, without the bones of animals, paper would mean nothing. For this writing distills its tenor from nature, it becomes organic writing. This recourse to the origins is a source of empowerment rather than disempowerment given that it yields ways of being and becoming. A reinforcement of this claim is Mariamar’s presentation of herself as a woman who learns to face lions since her early childhood. She feels triumph when she manages to shape the name of the beast: “[f]or the first time in my life, I was coming face-to-face with a lion. And there the beast was, written on the paper, kneeling at my feet” (Couto 2015: 66). In this stance, the psychological relief flowing from writing is emphatic.

In view of Mohanty’s concept of ‘double colonization,’ the role of uncle Adjiru can be seen as a bizarre contribution to the construction of Mariamar’s personality. Yet, his wide knowledge, farsighted life perspectives and deep consciousness lead him to get the girl involved in exploring the world of literacy. Thus, Mariamar’s process of learning is based on deep willingness rather than enforcement. Adjiru succeeds to steadily instill in her the consciousness of writing as “a dangerous form of vanity [that] fills the others with fear” (Couto 2015: 66). Such a confession from a man in the male-based society of Kulumani cements in Mariamar a strange love and attachment to writing. Not surprisingly then, the novel reifies writing as a sacred ritual which forges gradual maturity; it equates literacy with maturity and consciousness. Being literate is a premise to the real world of womanhood. Accordingly, Mariamar has never received a truncated appreciation as a woman who has not passed the traditional ritual of initiation to womanhood, like the other Kulumani women, from her uncle. The whole ritual is needless since the “women [she] would become was already within [her]” (Couto 2015: 95) considering her education. Writing in light of all this enables ‘talking back,’ and ‘talking back’ is a pivotal “rite of initiation” (hooks 1995b: 340). On this basis, writing becomes the female rite of initiation that all women should pass through to enter the realm of womanhood and the struggle to free women that *Confessions of the Lioness* induces.

Far from reading between the lines, Mariamar’s writings are not devoid of overtly-formulated confessions confirming her vigilance of the abovementioned assets of writing. Just as “[b]ooks brought [her] voices like shade in the open desert”, writing “saved [her] from

madness” the atmosphere of Kulumani may cause (Couto 2015: 64). The word is personified as an animate creature; “[a] word drawn on a piece of paper was my mask, my charm, my home cure” (Couto 2015: 65). It is her “very first weapon” (Couto 2015: 66). Without ignoring its dangers, if gripped with misuse, the word can transform the woman into “someone else [...] no longer being able to return to [herself]” (Couto 2015: 65). The first section of this paper has already pinpointed some of the dangers the third world woman might be trapped in by means of her discursive productions: the universalization of the particularities of her experience and the standards of her writing exactly.

Undoubtedly, Couto’s text underpins the utility of African female writing, as opposed to orality, in abating the wings of silencing inflicted by the different centers of patriarchy through discursive colonization essentially. The closing pages of the novel coalesce this weapon with the African concept of time. Hanifa translates her exhausted daughter’s gesticulations to the hunter as: “she says the only clothes she has are this notebook” (Couto 2015: 191). Her gift to her daughter establishes the solid relation between this text, the notebook, and its context, ‘the politics of locations and time’ in this case by virtue of offering the necklace that is considered as the family’s “ancient thread of time. All the women in the family counted the months of their pregnancy” on it (Couto 2015: 192). The gesture restores some of the lost brightness to Mariarm’s eyes, for the concepts of fertility and womanhood are encoded in this instrument. Literally, Mariamar holds her h(i/er)story on the one hand and the whole feminine thread of time on the other. In so doing, *Confession of the Lioness* lays a firm platform for the idea of female genealogy as a decolonizing strategy in the sense of being a shield of female heterogeneities and epistemologies. Being outside the circle of time, i.e. timeless without the trope of history that shapes us, is to risk losing identity.

The process of writing and rewriting in the Third World is not meant only to be “corrective to [...] masculinist history” (Mohanty 1991: 34). It becomes most outstandingly “the context through which new political identities are forged [...] a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself”, as Chandra Mohanty opines (1991: 34). In writing, Mariamar stumbles on her ‘self’ and ‘voice.’ The female voice, with its metaphoric sense and forms, can resound without a sound because it is a channel in itself and “a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language” (Minh-ha 1989: 39). The postcolonial feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, in her essay “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers”, propels women to write by charting the gains of this compelling discursive site of empowerment. She best summarizes the epitome of the essay by contending: “I write because I’m scared of writing but I’m more scared of not writing” (1983: 169).

4. Conclusion

Reading Mia Couto’s *Confession of the Lioness* from a postcolonial feminist view considerably opens many prospects to penetrate the equivocal experiences, and heterogeneities, of women in postcolonial Mozambique. The novel is subversive taking into account its challenging tone to the stereotypical renderings and readings of African women. Thus, it is resistant to the ‘discursive colonization’ of the propagandist western discourse and its claims of homogeneity and common experiences. It also contests the ‘epistemic violence’ evident in the western scholarship. Such a production and the like is, in Mohanty’s terms, “clearly an important discursive site for struggle” that “constitutes an increasingly important arena of third world feminisms” (1991: 32).

Couto’s oeuvre, like the one under study and *The Tuner of Silences* (2009), is known for its reliance on the dynamics of silence, for the possibilities that lie in silence can be more effective than speech itself. Silence creates a space for another language that permits the articulation of the ‘counter sentence’. In *Confession of the Lioness*, silence is presented as a mysterious force

intertwined with the local landscape and myths. These features endow the female protagonist with the strength to destabilize the precepts of her home village through being the teller and writer of her story despite all the obstacles. This step is the writer’s answer to Mohanty’s call to surpass all the presuppositions surrounding Third World women inability to represent themselves and deny their agency. Narrating and writing are forms of ‘discursive resistance’ carried out against the ‘discursive colonization’ of the patriarchal and imperial discourses together. Both pave the way for African women to reach larger audiences, inside and outside the continent, to speak out against the ‘single story.’ By this, they complete the standards of the speech act, i.e. the speaker and the listener, or the act of speaking. Springing basically from silence, narrating and writing are two depatriarching and self-empowerment strategies available to women in this context.

To sum up, Mia Couto’s treatment of silence as an aspect of communication as well as disruptive force of the dominant discourse is really appealing. In regard of the above, he is qualified to be considered a ‘postcolonial feminist.’

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