SPEAKING THROUGH SILENCE: VOICES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE NOVELS

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SPEAKING THROUGH SILENCE: VOICES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE NOVELS

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Speaking Through Silence: Voices of

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ABSTRACT

Speaking Through Silence: Voices of

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Challenging the hierarchy that associates voicelessness with absence and suppression, this dissertation examines how strategic silences displace the privileged place of audibility and broaden understandings of Muslim women's identities in contemporary Anglophone novels. While highlighting how immigrant women struggle to speak on their own terms in Britain, verbal gaps also foster awareness of missing voices and destabilize exclusionary nationalist frameworks. Narrated by a temporarily mute refugee from Syria, Layla AlAmmar's *Silence is a Sense* (2021) critiques censorship and reclaims silence as a form of connection for Arab women in England. Nonverbal speech fosters transgeographic conversations in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2022) as a fig tree mourns missing voices in Cyprus and envisions hybrid identities for immigrant women in Britain. Silences of time and space are also undone by Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), which rewrites the Antigone tragedy to problematize the inaudibility of Muslim women in British politics. Drawing attention to unvoiced expressions of love, Monica Ali's (2023) *Love Marriage* departs from inherited matrimonial ideals by silencing canonical Victorian novels. These novels also deploy intertextuality to amplify voices of global dissident writers and non-Western texts, thereby developing a more inclusive soundscape for Anglophone fiction. By approaching silence as an ethically significant mode of expression, this dissertation contributes to current scholarship on Muslim women in Britain, simultaneously exposing their discursive exclusion and drawing attention to the ways they are already speaking.

ÖZET

Sessizliğin Diliyle Konuşmak: Çağdaş Anglofon Romanlarda Müslüman Kadınların Sesleri

Bu tez, stratejik sessizliklerin sesin ayrıcalıklı konumunu nasıl yerinden ettiğini ve çağdaş Anglofon romanlarda Müslüman kadınların kimliklerine ilişkin anlayış biçimlerini nasıl genişlettiğini inceliyor. İngiltere'de göçmen kadınların kendi söylemleriyle konuşma mücadelesini vurgularken, sözlü boşluklar aynı zamanda eksik seslere yönelik bir farkındalığı artırıyor ve dışlayıcı milliyetçi çerçeveleri istikrarsızlaştırıyor. Geçici olarak sessiz kalan Suriyeli bir mülteci tarafından anlatılan Layla AlAmmar'ın *Silence is a Sense* (2021), sansürü eleştiriyor ve sessizliği İngiltere'deki Arap kadınlar için bir bağ kurma aracı olarak kullanıyor. Elif Şafak'ın *The Island of Missing Trees* (2022) adlı romanında ise sözsüz konuşma, bir incir ağacının Kıbrıs'taki kayıp sesler için yas tutması ve göçmen kadınlar için hibrit kimlikler tasavvur etmesi aracılığıyla coğrafyalararası diyalogları mümkün kılıyor. Antigone trajedisini yeniden yazarak İngiliz siyasetinde Müslüman kadınların sesinin duyulmazlığını sorunlaştıran, Kamila Shamsie'nin *Home Fire* (2017) eserinde zaman ve mekânın sessizlikleri çözülüyor. Dile getirilmeyen sevgi ifadelerine dikkat çeken, Monica Ali'nin *Love Marriage* isimli eseri ise kanonik Viktorya dönemi romanlarını susturarak geçmişten aktarılmış evlilik ideallerinden uzaklaşıyor. Metinlerarasılık yoluyla dünya çapında muhalif yazarları ve Batı-dışı metinleri duyulmuş kılarak, bu romanlar Anglofon kurgu için daha kapsayıcı bir işitsel peyzaj geliştiriyor. Sessizliği etik bir ifade biçimi olarak ele alan bu tez, İngiltere'deki Müslüman kadınlar üzerine yapılan güncel akademik çalışmalara katkıda bulunarak, onların söylemsel dışlanmalarını açığa çıkarıyor ve nasıl konuştuklarına dikkat çekiyor.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Anglophone novels featuring women who have immigrated to Britain from Muslim societies, silence emerges as a form of expression that unsettles the privileged place of audibility and redefines what it means to have a voice. When literary expression is apprehended primarily through the printed word, scholarship can easily privilege verbal meaning, even though writing is shaped by pauses that delineate words, phrases, and sentences. Even on this page, empty spaces, or inscriptions of silence, frame the letters that carry meaning. Challenging the hierarchy that associates voicelessness with absence and suppression, this dissertation listens between the lines to examine how select novels by women authors strategically embed silence into their narratives of Muslim identities in Britain. Mobilizing silence as an ethically significant mode of expression, Layla AlAmmar's *Silence is a Sense* (2021a), Monica Ali's *Love Marriage* (2023), Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2022), and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) articulate women's experiences through inaudible presences such as nature, geographic distance, cultural difference, nonlinear time, memory, and buried histories. Approaching these voiceless figures as speakers reveals that Muslim women, far from experiencing multicultural harmony, struggle to evade censorship and speak on their own terms in Britain. The sounds of memory, history, and transgressed borders disrupt nationalist sentiment that suppresses minority speakers, and converging voices from around the world decenter the hegemonic authority of the British city. While exposing conflicts and destabilizing dominant discourses that silence immigrant women, transnational and transgeographic conversations imagine

a more inclusive soundscape for the Anglophone novel. This occurs significantly through intertextual connections to global dissident writers and non-Western texts, which exceed European theories of narrative representation and expand the cultural bases of the contemporary novel in English. By examining the aural absences that resonate throughout novels by AlAmmar, Ali, Shafak, and Shamsie, this dissertation broadens understandings of how Muslim women articulate their experiences in Britain without conforming to dominant discourses that demand speaking in a certain way or at a certain volume.

1.1 Hearing the unheard: Disrupting dualistic hierarchies

Attending to unheard expressions disrupts the tendency to prioritize images of Muslim women over their own voices. This visual-verbal dichotomy persists even in scholarship that aims to provide a more accurate, thorough understanding of Muslim identities. For example, Claire Chambers (2019) asserts in *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* that "Islamic culture…has long preferred the auditory to the imagistic" (p. 199), yet her previous book *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* (2015) relies on visual tropes to explore the politics of the gaze in British Muslim travel writing. Similarly, although Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin's (2011) *Framing Muslims* criticizes caricatures of "the bearded fanatic, the veiled, oppressed female, the duplicitous terrorist" (p. 2), the title's attention to outward appearance and language of "framing" evokes the eye as the primary mode of approaching Muslims. In contrast, my dissertation displaces the dominance of the image by privileging the ear rather than the eye. Accordingly, I examine direct speech and narrative expressions as well as the metaphorical voices of inanimate objects, which I approach as figures that speak in literature.

One of the objects that speaks loudly in the public imagination is the headscarf, which portrays Muslim women as religious others who are seen but not heard. How the headscarf communicates can be conceptualized with Roland Barthes' (1964/1968) argument that clothing participates in a linguistic system governed by rules of fashion; for the most part, written descriptions and photographs of clothing in a fashion magazine function as *langue*, whereas the *parole* of clothing speaks more distinctly when an individual chooses which pieces of clothing (signs) to combine into an outfit (pp. 26-27).[1] Likewise, the headscarf functions as a sign that becomes stabilized within a discourse, which can suppress the individual speech of the woman who wears it. In other words, while the veil can speak as *parole*, it tends to operate as *langue* in accordance with dominant cultural codes. This overdetermination has been critiqued by many scholars, such as Leila Ahmed (1992/2021), who highlights how the head covering has been coopted into a broader "discourse of the veil" (p. 145) and Fatima Mernissi (1987/1991), who questions how the hijab has become "a symbol of Muslim identity" (p. 97). Examining the origins of the hijab, Mernissi points out that the Arabic word *hajaba* means "to hide with a *sitr* [curtain]," which establishes a boundary between those on either side of the cloth (p. 94). When the veil assumes a discursive function, however, this boundary is no longer merely spatial. Instead, the dominant interpretations attached to the veil separate the image of the wearer from her voice and bury a covered woman's individual speech under a pre-established reading of what her veil signifies. This occurs in Kamila Shamsie's (2017) *Home Fire* when Isma is warned that her turban may drive away a potential boyfriend (p. 41), who indeed moves away from

[1] Roland Barthes' (1964/1968) semiological approach to fashion proceeds from a distinction between *langue* (a linguistic system of socially determined values) and *parole* (an individualized act of speech formed by selecting signs from within a linguistic system) (pp. 14-15).

her before their mutual attraction turns into a relationship. Similarly, when the same man meets Aneeka, he views her as "a silent, beautiful woman in a hijab," whom he cannot quite imagine as a romantic partner until she removes her hijab and clearly signals her desire for physical intimacy (Shamsie, p. 70). In both examples, the headscarf silences the wearer's voice, rendering her an object to be interpreted in accordance with received ideological codes. Rather than interpreting narrative representations of women through the *langue* of dominant discourses based on visual signs like the veil, this dissertation tunes into the *parole* of Muslim women by shifting attention from the visual domain to the audible.

Attending to Muslim women's voices builds on feminist efforts to resist gendered hierarchies in writing. Criticizing the dominance of male-authored books in the British Museum, Virginia Woolf (1929/2015) argues in *A Room of One's Own* that nineteenth-century novelists like Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot wrote without the benefit of an established female literary tradition to guide them (p. 56).[2] Calling for a distinctly female writing, Hélène Cixous (1976) declares, "woman must write woman" and leave men to speak of and for themselves only (p. 877). While embracing the binary male/female logic in advocating for a distinctly female writing, Cixous aims to emphasize not opposition but difference, as she clarifies in "Sorties," envisioning a future in which woman has her own identity and is not defined simply in opposition to man (1986, p. 83). Similarly resisting the male/female hierarchy, Luce Irigaray (1977/1985) emphasizes woman's multiplicity and the need to make room for women's voices along with men's voices rather than

[2] Although Woolf (1929/2015) problematizes the absence of an established woman's tradition in the nineteenth century, she asserts that writers must not be conscious of their sex while writing (p. 75). Rather than inverting the male/female hierarchy by calling for a conspicuously female writing, Woolf advocates for an "androgynous" writing style (p. 71) that requires writers to be aware of both the male and female elements in their minds (p. 75).

merely "reverse the order of things" (p. 33). However, these feminist interventions focus primarily on white European women. Similarly, literary scholars such as Elaine Showalter (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000) have countered the perceived absence of female voices by highlighting women writers who were largely unheard for years, but these studies are overwhelmingly focused on white Christian women like Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, the Brontë sisters, and Virginia Woolf. Expanding the racial and cultural scope of feminist scholarship, Barbara Smith (1978) has self-consciously paved the way for lesbian criticism and bell hooks (2015) has explored how postmodern thinking, despite being developed by white men, can support Black women's identities; but these interventions have been limited to Black experiences. Despite advancements made in the last century to notice minority women writers, women writing from Muslim backgrounds remain on the margins of literary scholarship.

Listening to women from Muslim cultures, rather than assuming that they are missing from Western literature, destabilizes the aural dichotomy in which dominant voices gain authority through institutionalized support and wide readership, while marginalized voices are dismissed regardless of their content. This aural dichotomy echoes the phonocentric tradition that, as Derrida points out, is based on a presence-absence dualism: Speech is privileged because it springs from a living presence whereas writing is less favored because it circulates in the speaker's absence. When it comes to Muslim women's discursivity, however, the terms of this dualism shift slightly. In Anglophone publishing and reading markets, writing about Muslim women receives more attention than writing by Muslim women themselves.[3] As the

[3] As M. Khan (2019) declares in her introduction to an anthology of Muslim women's writing, "We've listened to a lot of people talking about who Muslim women are without actually hearing Muslim women" (par. 5).

first-hand voices of Muslim women are replaced with the more distant writing of those who claim to speak for them, the presence-absence hierarchy is inverted. Recognizing this distance that conditions dominant representations of Muslim women enacts a Derridean deconstruction, demonstrating that the absence derided by the phonocentric dualism is also at work in the privileged term. Displacing the hierarchy between presence and absence, this deconstruction opens space for attending to the voices that are easily overlooked in discursive networks dominated by non-Muslim perspectives.

Attending to unheard voices also challenges the sound-silence dichotomy that privileges audible speech due to its association with human rationality. This philosophical bias, which underlies much of Western thought, is clearly expressed in Plato's (ca. 370 B.C.E./2022) *Phaedrus* when Socrates portrays speech as having a living presence because it can respond to questions and defend itself against misinterpretation. Unlike speech, which is always connected to the human speaker producing it, Socrates claims that writing is still and silent, unable to reply to an interlocutor (p. 70).[4] This argument devalues the written word by detaching it from rational consciousness, and it implicitly equates silence with the absence of thought. Disrupting this Platonic logic, mute narrators in my focus novels manifest forms of thought and agency beyond the human voice. For example, Shafak's (2022) fig tree exhibits a relational, non-human agency when it responds to environmental signals and communicates with nearby humans, animals, and plants. The primary narrator of

[4] In Plato's (ca. 370 B.C.E./2022) *Phaedrus*, the character Socrates tells a story of how the Egyptian god Theuth invented writing and presented it to the king of Egypt as a science that would improve human intelligence and memory, but the king argued that writing would atrophy human memory and intelligence because it offers only "the appearance of intelligence, not real intelligence" (p. 69). This argument against writing takes a binary turn when Socrates compares written language to spoken language, asserting that speech is superior because it can defend itself, reply to interlocutors, and generate new life (pp. 71-72).

The Island of Missing Trees, the fig tree also uses language to communicate with readers, imbuing the written word with life that is not confined to audible speech. Even though the tree cannot move itself or address the human ear, this apparently inanimate figure communicates directly with readers, thus crossing a phenomenological barrier that the human voice cannot penetrate. By imbuing silence with agency, the mute narrator decenters human rationality as the sole determiner of communicative ability and destabilizes the Platonic view of writing as an inferior copy of the embodied voice.

Verbal silences emerge in my four focus novels as recognizable forms of expression that dismantle hierarchical relationships while preserving the distinction between sound and silence. Critical scholarship has long recognized that silence carries meaning in itself, even though such conceptual interventions necessarily rely on linguistic metaphors. For example, King-Kok Cheung (1993) declares in *Articulate Silences* that silence "can speak many tongues" (p. 1), and Vanessa Guignery (2009) writes in *Voices and Silence* that silence is "a language of its own" (p. 1). Also turning to metaphors of speech, Cheryl Glenn (2004) treats silence as "a rhetorical art that can be as powerful as the spoken or written word" (p. 9). Like these scholars, I use metaphors of speech and language to discuss the impacts of silence. Nevertheless, attending to how silence communicates does not require remaking silence into sound, a logical move that would reinscribe the primacy of speech. Instead, silence can be approached as a mode of expression with its own forms.[5] In novels by AlAmmar, Ali, Shafak, and Shamsie, silence manifests as verbal

[5] Approaching silence as a rhetorical art, Glenn (2004) asserts that silence performs diverse functions based on its context and interpretation, but that its delivery, or form, is always the same (p. 9). In contrast, my literary approach considers various manifestations of silence, such as geographic distance, cultural difference, censorship, and unuttered thoughts.

and textual gaps, empty pages, and unuttered dialogue. It also arises through characters' refusal or inability to communicate audibly, whether in written or spoken settings. These unheard expressions remain distinct from speech because they operate outside of audible language, but they offer alternate ways to perceive and interact with the world. Without erasing the distinction between sound and silence, physically voiceless speakers reclaim silence as an integral part of communication.

1.2 Speaking across borders: Distance, power, and memory

Distance is one of the voiceless figures that speaks through gaps in time and space to resist the marginalization of Muslim women. As my focus novels stage dialogues between remote locations, they challenge the assumption that physical distance produces silence. While this presumption accurately reflects the reality that sound waves diminish over long distances, literary narratives treat sound figuratively rather than acoustically. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978/2003) argues that physical geography gains meaning through a process of imagination whereby the mind "intensif[ies] its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (p. 55). The mind's power to assign identity based on perceived distance and difference reveals how interpretive frameworks distort actual space. To illustrate, Said (1978/2003) points to how Europe imagines itself as "powerful and articulate" and Asia as "defeated and distant" (p. 57). Said's example implicitly relies on a sonic metaphor, contrasting the eloquence of the European self with the silence of the Eastern other. This dualistic construction reinforces the perceived silence of the other and appears to provide a geographic rationale for it: The East is silent not only because it is imagined in opposition to Europe but also because it is located far away. Rejecting an Orientalist

imagination that alienates what is distant, the novels I examine reconfigure space by bringing multiple locations into the same discursive field. For example, the dual setting of *The Island of Missing Trees* establishes a conversation between Cyprus and England, and the motif of migration draws the two islands together so that voices from Cyprus reverberate in England, impeding an us-versus-them distinction based on physical separation. Likewise, in each novel I examine, England speaks with remote locations as characters narrate histories from Syria, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, respectively. Because these transgeographic conversations bridge physical distance, the novels transform space from a muting device into a microphone that enables communication across tangible borders.

Crossing political borders fosters a conversation about who can ethically represent an unheard subject in the dominant discourse of English, a concern raised by the cultural differences between each author and their characters. When representing silenced subjects, writers may inadvertently act as "native informants," a term Gayatri Spivak (2010) uses to critique those who reduce the alterity of subaltern Indians in order to please "first-world intellectuals" (p. 38). Such insider reporting is complicit with prevailing power structures because it gives Western audiences an impression of understanding a voiceless subject only by translating irreducible difference into hegemonic language.[6] Rather than positioning themselves as native reporters who render foreign cultures legible to Anglophone readers, AlAmmar, Ali, Shamsie, and Shafak negotiate the risk of becoming informants by

[6] In the first edition of her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak (2010) argued that the subaltern cannot speak because the subaltern is defined by its inability to speak within a hegemonic discourse. This definition defines the subaltern by its silence, which is not an absolute silence but is constructed by power dynamics that privilege hegemonic discourses. Spivak later recalled this as an "inadvisable remark" (2010, p. 63) and clarified that she supports establishing lines of communication with subaltern groups even though this moves them closer to hegemonic structures (p. 65). Without aiming to collapse the difference that defines ethnic minorities, Spivak's revised essay argues for creating pathways by which subaltern women can speak.

constructing characters with origins different from their own. Even when there is an arguable overlap between an author and her characters, as in Ali's (2023) *Love Marriage*, political and cultural borders foreground the difficulty of speaking for another person. Whereas Ali was born in Bangladesh, her characters Anisah and Shaokat come from West Bengal, a predominantly Bengali state in India. The novel avoids drawing attention to these political distinctions, yet its focus on cultural differences between Bangladeshi and English characters highlights the difficulty of ethically using a dominant discourse to represent the voiceless. Despite the main character's fluency in English language and culture, she is unable to prevent misunderstandings between her Bengali parents and the wealthy English woman poised to become her mother-in-law. These failed acts of translation by a bicultural character speak to the novel's interest in the larger issue of how representation is necessarily mediated and incomplete, regardless of who produces it. Thus, the novel deploys silence to foreground the risk of mistaking narrative representation for unmediated access to a marginalized subject's voice, even as dialogue occurs across political lines of difference.

Memory also traverses national borders to undo hierarchies of suffering. To avoid a zero-sum game in which one group's suffering must compete with another group's collective memories, Michael Rothberg (2009) argues that multidirectional memory fosters an awareness that "memories are not owned by groups" and "the borders of memory and identity are jagged" (p. 5). In this framework, one does not have to belong to a particular group or come from a particular place to interact with its history through "borrowing or adaptation" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 5). In narratives like Shamsie's (2017) *Home Fire*, the jagged edges of memory and identity allow histories of suffering from ancient Greece to resonate with experiences of

discrimination in contemporary Britain. Because Athenian women do not own the memory of being excluded from a *polis*, dramatic tragedy can be adapted to critique the exclusion of Muslim women from British society. By bringing Athens and Britain into narrative contact, *Home Fire* moves in multiple directions and emphasizes resonance rather than competition between women's experiences in Britain and classical Athens. This multidirectional narrative replaces nationalized memories with transnational connections that offer insight into the struggles of multiple groups simultaneously.

Mourning is another quiet voice that resists the power of death to permanently silence marginalized women. Judith Butler (2010) argues in *Frames of War* that the contemporary framework of multiculturalism in nation-states proceeds from pre-established communities which are unaware of the lives they have excluded (pp. 31-32). According to Butler, those excluded from a multicultural community are considered subjects but not lives, and therefore they are not grieved when they die (pp. 31-32). If a Muslim woman is ungrievable, her ontological or audible absence can go unnoticed even in a supposedly multicultural state like contemporary Britain. Butler's critique of ungrievable lives resonates in each of my focus novels, but they go further by listening to Muslim women both before and after death. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, a Turkish Cypriot woman speaks from beyond the grave through the fig tree's melancholic voice, which mourns deceased Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots alike. In *Home Fire*, Aneeka's almost-inevitable death is witnessed by strangers gathered in Karachi, as well as by those watching the television broadcast in London. Resounding in the face of death, these voices declare not only that Muslim lives are grievable but also that religion, language, and nationality have no bearing on whose death is worthy of notice.

Historical voices further depart from nationalism by amplifying legacies of European colonialism in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cyprus, and Syria that continue to resonate in Britain. In the novels I study, each immigrant's homeland was once a European colony and was divided along religious and ethnic lines during or after decolonization. Decades later, the pain of traumatic division and historical conflict remains present, thus defying attempts to move forward by silencing the past. This interest in the presence of the past marks my focus novels as postcolonial in the way K.A. Appiah (1991) uses the term when he argues that the postcolonial is not "concerned with transcending, with going beyond, coloniality" (p. 348). Rather, according to Appiah, the "post-" of postcoloniality emphasizes the histories it follows, and it issues a challenge to "earlier legitimating narratives" such as that of national solidarity (p. 353). In novels by AlAmmar, Ali, Shafak, and Shamsie, cries of inherited sorrow, unvoiced trauma, and oral storytelling replay religious conflicts from the 1974 partition of Cyprus, Muslim-Hindu aggressions in British India, and Syria's ongoing civil war. These painful sounds from the past undermine nationalist sentiments in Britain and the other countries depicted. In Shafak's (2022) novel, the daughter of Cypriot immigrants struggles to identify as British due to the wounds she has inherited from the ethnic-religious conflicts that led to the Partition of Cyprus in 1974. As it depicts the nationalist fervor that tore the island apart in the 1950s and 1970s, the novel departs from pursuing an identity rooted in a political state, thus avoiding an autochthonous impulse to install Greek, Turkish, or Cypriot identity politics in place of British nationalism. Likewise, the other three novels I study amplify histories of postcolonial conflict, thereby refusing to idealize any political state as a source of personal or collective identity. Instead, these novels imagine postcolonial Britain as a divided rather than a unified nation.

1.3 Urban discord: Conflict and convergence

Discord is amplified as diverse voices converge in London, undermining the city's authority to speak as a champion of multiculturalism. Because each novel is set in or written to London, the city can be analyzed as a narrative figure that speaks even though it lacks an audible voice. However, this voice disperses into conflicting articulations of hostility and belonging, rather than forming a unified expression that supports the ideology of British multiculturalism. To the extent that these competing voices destabilize a hegemonic narrative, London appears to be a decentered network, like the rhizome that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980/1987) put forth as a model of multiplicity that escapes the tree-like structures dominating "all of Western thought" (p. 18). Unlike a tree whose growth extends from a central taproot, the rhizome expands through a network of nodes without a top-down control mechanism. A rhizomatic society, then, offers immigrants a chance to belong in a new place because it makes no hierarchical distinctions based on country of origin. If London is a rhizome rather than a tree, its freedom from hegemonic power structures should allow it to expand infinitely to accommodate residents from all cultures. In such a nonhierarchical space, competing voices might coexist without resolving into a unified narrative. However, Deleuze's theorization of antihierarchical networks is consistently limited by his reliance on Western examples, as seen in his references to Mozart, Beckett, Kafka, Proust, and Bob Dylan (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977/2007, pp. 3-8). In contrast, the four novels analyzed in this dissertation include non-Western cultures that come into conflict with Western biases in the British city. Rather than embracing new nodes that would enrich cultural diversity, London's decentered voices expose the illusion of rhizomatic philosophies envisioning a utopian city that welcomes all newcomers.

Heard through immigrant voices that counter the rhizomatic model's hopeful overtones, London emerges as an aural contact zone where power imbalances and cultural clashes frustrate ideals of multicultural harmony. In "The Arts of the Contact Zone," Mary Louise Pratt (1991) describes contact zones as social spaces where cultures "meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (p. 34). Home to residents from all over the world, London brings together many diasporic communities, including the Syrian, Bengali, Pakistani, Greek Cypriot, and Turkish Cypriot populations represented in the novels I analyze. This cultural mingling reflects demographic changes in Britain, which increased significantly after World War II and the end of colonialism (Ball, 2011, p. 237; Hopkins & Gale, 2009). Moving beyond the neutral and even positive connotations of the contact zone as a place of "meeting," novels by AlAmmar, Ali, Shafak, and Shamsie portray London as a place where newcomers grapple with physical and discursive limitations rather than being welcomed into a nonhierarchical network. AlAmmar's (2021a) Syrian protagonist can publish articles in London, but editorial control mediates her authorial contact with the city. Further, she is resettled outside the city because refugees are distributed across England to diffuse their demographic impact. Similarly, Shamsie's (2017) characters are exiled from the city because their loyalty to family threatens the hegemonic ideals of Britishness, and the home secretary symbolically mutes Aneeka's voice broadcast on national television. Because she is a Muslim woman, the state grants her audibility only as long as her speech aligns with hegemonic ideals. These and other moments of controlled mobility and limited expression amplify dissonance and collision in London.

Peripheral neighborhoods also contribute to an aural reconfiguration of the city. Rather than dwelling on iconic sites like the Houses of Parliament or

Westminster Cathedral, the novels draw attention to culturally diverse areas where the main characters live and socialize—neighborhoods like North London, Wembley, Preston Road, High Road, Southall, Tooting, and Shoreditch. For readers unfamiliar with London, these place names defamiliarize the city and invite readers to set aside preconceptions of London as the political and cultural center of England. When encountering underrepresented regions of the city, readers can empathize with characters like Shafak's (2022) Meryem, who meets "a London she had never known existed" during her visit to Aldgate East (p. 241). Like other inaudible speakers in these novels, Aldgate East assumes a narrative voice to offer a fuller image of London that would otherwise be absent from the public imagination. As Meryem enters Aldgate East and other characters traverse London's diverse neighborhoods, they bring the city's edges into dialogue with one another. This literary aural remapping expands London into a network in which Muslim women can be heard throughout the city, without occupying London's geographic center or conforming to a unified narrative.

1.4 Beyond the West: A chorus of texts and genres

Intertextuality also branches out beyond its Western-centric origins as novels stage dialogues with texts from around the world. First coined by Julia Kristeva (1986), the term intertextuality refers to the idea that a text is always constructed in relation to other texts. This general term is therefore capacious enough to denote connections between texts from distant times and places, such as contemporary Britain and the many non-Western places observed in my focus novels. However, Kristeva's (1986) study is primarily limited to European and Russian figures, as evidenced by her listing of Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Sade, Balzac, Lautréamont, Dostoevsky, Joyce,

and Kafka as important polyphonic novelists (p. 50). Moreover, when analyzing the legacy of Menippean discourse in dialogical genres (pp. 52-55), Kristeva reinforces the European tendency to glorify classical Greece and Rome as the origins of Western civilization. Similarly, Roland Barthes (1977) relies on examples from French, Russian, and Greco-Roman writers even though he describes the text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (p. 146). For Barthes and Kristeva, intertextuality remains a primarily Western construct, and cultural diversity is limited to the borders of Europe and Russia. In contrast, the novels examined in this dissertation orchestrate a broader cultural exchange by bringing together texts from beyond Europe's borders.

Non-European genres in this expanded dialogue resist the totalizing power of the Western novel. Because it incorporates and "novelizes" other genres (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 7), the novel has been described as a generic monster, as seen in Vilashani Cooppan's (2018) description of the form's "cannibal capacity to ingest a wide range of literary genres, modes, and forms" (p. 23). The problem with describing the novel as cannibalistic is not that it makes the form seem like a barbarian but that it alienates unabsorbed genres, such as the Arab love ballads, Iranian psychedelic music, and Pakistani pop songs mentioned in *Silence is a Sense*. If the novel is a cannibal but it has not fully integrated these non-Western genres, then this suggests that the English-language novel does not see non-Western genres as similar species eligible for consumption. Instead, it rejects them as if they are of an altogether different variety. In such an interpretive framework, these referenced but un-ingested genres testify to how Muslim voices are present yet excluded from the British soundscape. However, AlAmmar's novel challenges the cannibalistic understanding of the novel and opens the way to approach generic otherness as an act of resistance: By refusing to blend

non-Western genres into her writing, AlAmmar, like the other authors I study, compels the novel to make room for other forms without dismembering them.

Greek tragedy, despite being accepted as a Western form, also defies assimilation because it critiques the oppression of Muslim women by implicitly comparing Britain to fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. For example, Shamsie's (2017) *Home Fire* rewrites Sophocles' *Antigone* with a cast of British Muslim characters to critique policies of citizenship deprivation. Overturning celebratory images of London as a highly inclusive, multicultural city, this intertextuality suggests parallels between the disadvantaged social positions of women in today's London and fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. The in-between figure of Antigone, who declares herself to have no home after being exiled for defending her brother's right to a proper burial, speaks to the political and cultural homelessness experienced by British Muslims who are unjustly deprived of citizenship due to political overreach in the name of national safety. By invoking the plotline of a classical tragedy, *Home Fire* portrays contemporary London as a nation that politically disempowers and physically banishes Muslim women. Similarly, echoes of Antigone in Ali's (2023) *Love Marriage* call attention to how immigrant women are relegated to less-than-human status, especially when their opinions are silenced. Rather than celebrate Western democracy by glorifying Greek antiquity, these novels mobilize classical tragedy to condemn Britain's exclusion of Muslim women.

Resonating against the sober voice of Greek tragedy, non-Western myths become models of transcending borders. In all four novels, mythical allusions blur the east-west divide as figures like Medea, Antigone, Icarus and Daedalus, and Castor and Pollux enter the texts along with Laila, Majnun, Sassi, and Punnu. Additionally, retelling such stories breaks down strict lines between the past and the

present as well as between cultures and species. For instance, Shafak's (2022) *The Island of Missing Trees* resurrects Greek and Roman mythology to recapture a transborder harmony that stands in contrast to the ethnic and religious conflicts dividing Cyprus and Britain. Rather than parsing out differences between Greek and Roman myths, Shafak imagines a shared past that encompasses all cultures, and she suggests that returning to a common origin (even if it is mythical rather than factual) can foster a sense of connectedness among all living beings. This harmony is epitomized by the fig tree narrator whose name Defne references Daphne in Ovid's (ca. 8 C.E./2004) *Metamorphoses*, which is itself a retelling of mythological stories. Emulating the divine and human figures who take on new forms in Ovid's myths, Shafak's fig tree embraces physical change to keep the past alive and continue loving her family, rather than allowing lines of self/other or plant/human to come between them. By resounding myths through women's voices, the novels I study also resonate with classical texts that give voice to spurned women like Penelope, Phaedra, Dido, and Medea who speak in Ovid's (1990) *Heroides*. As each of my selected novelists articulates contemporary struggles for love in resonance with similar struggles from times past, they construct a transhistorical textual community where marginalized women can find understanding and inspiration.

Religious texts and Muslim poetry also offer access to past ways of thinking that were more tolerant of difference than contemporary Britain seems to be. Feminist interpretations of Islam, for example, reiterate reports of the Prophet Muhammad's compassionate interactions with women. Such accounts can be heard in *Love Marriage*'s retellings of stories from the Quran and hadith featuring women who are praised for their faith rather than judged for their immorality by social standards. Similarly, after a member of the Muslim community dies from a racially

motivated assault in *Silence is a Sense*, the Arabic prayers offered in the local mosque form a sonic community that transcends race, language, and religion. *Love Marriage*'s references to open-minded Muslim poets from eleventh-century Persia and thirteenth-century Syria also promote a broader understanding of Muslims and women: As Omar Khayyám, Rumi, and Al-Ma'arri write of love, wine, sensuality, and intense emotion, they shatter stereotypes of Islam as a repressive culture. These well-aged articulations of what might now be considered radical liberalism thus reject any preconception that Islam can only survive in contemporary Britain if it sheds any so-called outmoded conservatism and adapts to current cultural trends. Instead, listening to voices from the past offers a fuller understanding of the identities available to Muslim women, from the Hejaz, Persia, and the Middle East, and through the centuries to Britain today.

At the same time, nonlinear narratives quietly unsettle the impulse to depict marginalized women finding their individual voices and assuming recognized places in society. Such narrative ideals, ingrained in the bildungsroman and courtship novels popular in nineteenth-century England, are closely tied to the Western concept of modern linear time. As Timothy Mitchell (2000) points out in his critique of European modernity, the concept arises from "an understanding of history in which there is only one unfolding of time, the history of the West" (p. 7). In this framework, time advances forward, and narratives that unfold linearly should portray a character or society's movement toward a defined goal. These ideals of progress are frustrated and complicated by the novels I study because they resist the Western concept of linear time. Instead of adopting the teleological trajectory of the nineteenth-century bildungsroman or the marriage novel, these novels move back and forth between past and present, often through traumatic structures that carry the

past into the present and the future. For example, the protagonist of *Silence is a Sense* recovers her physical voice and introduces herself by name at the end of the novel, symbolizing a re-emergence of her agency. However, her emphasis on the lasting effects of trauma defies any triumphalist claims of leaving the past behind. In fact, it is arguably by revisiting the past that she, like the other characters I analyze, discovers her voice. This iterative motion—returning to the past to take it into the future—neither completely embraces nor completely rejects the Western desire to reach a narrative goal but complicates it with a nonlinear understanding of time. As a result, women strive to speak in these novels, but they do not simply move from muteness to audibility.

Silences at the novels' ends also depart from teleological forms by increasing ambiguity rather than offering stable conclusions. Franco Moretti (1987) asserts that a character in a bildungsroman can only achieve a sense of having arrived home when narrative time stops at a defined point (p. 26). Rather than marking arrival, silence defers closure, like a sentence that ends without a period to mark its conclusion. When novels end without arresting narrative time, lingering silences question the extent to which any of the main characters can truly speak or be heard on their own terms. In *Home Fire*, for example, Aneeka speaks publicly yet fails to achieve her goal of repatriating her brother's remains. Moreover, her speech seems to ensure her ultimate exclusion from society rather than marking her as a woman with political and social agency. The discrepancy between her public speech and her political inaudibility underscores the fact that her final words are hidden from readers. This final silence expresses skepticism about the possibility of finding harmony as a Muslim woman in Britain, even while the characters in these novels strive to love, write, and speak through silence.

Just as non-Western and nonlinear influences expand the generic scope of the novel, this dissertation pushes against the boundaries of the literary canon by applying academic rigor to popular literary fiction. Except for Layla AlAmmar, who is an emerging fiction writer and academic, each of the authors studied in this dissertation is a well-known novelist, but they have arguably achieved more commercial than academic success. Of course, Ali and Shamsie's names appear somewhat regularly in academic spaces: Shamsie's *Home Fire* has been critically analyzed in peer-reviewed journals, and her work is often discussed in larger edited volumes about Muslim, British Muslim, and Southeast Asian writing.[7] Similarly well-known due to the success of *Brick Lane* (2003), which portrays a Bangladeshi immigrant community in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, Monica Ali has been frequently studied in high school and university classrooms. Ali's *Brick Lane* has also been analyzed extensively in critical scholarship, and some of her novels such as *In the Kitchen* (2010) have been studied to a lesser extent.[8] However, her newest novel *Love Marriage*—along with most of those by Elif Shafak, Kamila Shamsie, and Layla AlAmmar—has not yet received enough critical attention to be considered part of a literary canon. At the time of this dissertation's publication, only a handful of high-quality peer-reviewed articles existed on any of the novels examined, despite their critical insights into the state of minorities and women in Britain today. By engaging at length with these novels on the fringes of academic scholarship, this dissertation asserts that the voices in *Silence is a Sense, Home Fire*,

[7] For example, Ruvani Ranasinha (2012) discusses how Shamsie's work portrays Islam as a religion and a culture in the contexts of Anglophone-Pakistani writing, a specific generation that came of age under General Zia's regime, and increased interest in the representation of Islam and Muslims (pp. 200-201).

[8] In his book on multiculturalism in novels about twenty-first-century London, Michael Perfect (2014) devotes a chapter to analyzing how people become transient and/or permanent members of London's multicultural community in Ali's *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* (p. 116).

The Island of Missing Trees, and *Love Marriage* should be heard not only in bookstores and reading groups, but also in classrooms and places of thoughtful dialogue and scholarly debate.

1.5 Chapter Summaries

Focusing on post-traumatic silence and multi-voiced writing in Layla AlAmmar's (2021a) *Silence is a Sense*, Chapter 2 argues that intertextuality models embodied belonging for newcomers in Britain by dismantling binaries of silence-speech and inclusion-exclusion. As *Silence is a Sense* breaks down a silence-speech dichotomy, it contests exclusive categories and creates room for minoritarian identities in Britain. The protagonist-narrator's physical muteness and discursive reticence prompt a close reading of how narrative gaps and silences contribute to alternative ways of understanding and communicating. Rather than approaching silence as a lack of speech or an impediment to self-expression, AlAmmar's novel deploys silence in shifting ways, which include representing ongoing trauma, moving through muteness, and using quietness to hear the suffering of others. Meanwhile, the novel makes extensive references to voices of women, Arabs, and political dissidents in Arabic, Anglophone, and Spanish literatures. This intertextuality creates a discursive model for intersubjective speech, which is embodied in urban spaces when the protagonist eventually recovers her physical voice and participates in her urban community. The persistence of traumatic memories tempers this liberating discursivity, yet the novel suggests that multi-voiced writing can help immigrant women to move through post-traumatic isolation and assert their presence in textual and urban spaces.

The sober optimism of Chapter 2 contrasts with Chapter 3's analysis of how Kamila Shamsie's (2017) *Home Fire* portrays London as a contemporary stage for an

ancient tragedy that systematically silences Muslim women when they question the counterintuitively homogenizing rhetoric of multiculturalism. As a rewriting of *Antigone*, this novel compares contemporary British Muslims deprived of citizenship to women lacking political agency in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. While this dialogue across time, space, and genre critiques how Britain suppresses dissident voices, *Home Fire* moves beyond dualistic interpretations of the Greek tragedy by dispersing conflict among multiple speakers. Nevertheless, the polyphonic structure of *Home Fire* offers no escape from the Sophoclean ending in which the protagonist's televised cry for justice affects no political change. Although women speak publicly in this novel, their lack of political efficacy exposes the inability of polyphonic intertextuality to foster political inclusion for Muslim women in Britain today. Further resisting a sound-silence hierarchy, *Home Fire* concludes with inaudible dialogue that defers political interpretations, neither affirming nor overthrowing the status quo. Thus, the resounding silences of Shamsie's characters in *Home Fire* gesture toward the ongoing marginalization of British Muslim women.

Moving away from the tragic tone of *Home Fire,* Chapter 4 examines how Elif Shafak's (2022) *The Island of Missing Trees* establishes a vision for interconnected belonging that overturns historical silences to promote healing from inherited trauma. Distant islands come into close contact as a Turkish Cypriot immigrant transformed into a fig tree retells stories of cross-border harmony and conflict in Cyprus and England. Focusing on the hybrid fig tree narrator, I examine how *The Island of Missing Trees* interrogates divisions between time, space, species, and cultures. While crossing these borders, the fig tree allows distinctions between past and present to remain partially intact, thus foregrounding the inescapable dichotomies that can lead to hierarchical dualisms and voiceless groups. At the same

time, the fig tree's phonocentric preference for translating vegetal experiences and undoing historical silences is offset by her attachment to a missing past. As she listens to buried historical voices, her narrative integrates silence and speech into a vision for interconnected belonging. Her transtemporal being also displaces present-past divisions with a cyclical understanding of time that imbues hopes for the future with ongoing grief. By blurring but not dissolving boundaries, Shafak's fig tree offers coexistence as a remedy for division but also acknowledges that this remedy will not absolve the pain of Partition. This attention to absence enriches Shafak's hopeful narrative with an awareness that post-Partition border-crossing love will remain marked by lingering pain expressed through silence.

Rather than primarily speaking against or undoing silences, Monica Ali's (2023) *Love Marriage*, analyzed in Chapter 5, strategically suppresses canonical intertexts to deconstruct stereotypes of romance that confine British Muslim women to patriarchal ideals inherited from the nineteenth century. Because *Love Marriage* traces a young couple's engagement, it begins as a courtship novel, but it departs from this tradition by ending with a broken engagement and an ambiguous expression of love. This chapter's attention to Victorian intertexts is complemented by an analysis of modernist intertexts that reject linear courtship plots and displace conservative family values, thus opening the way for Ali's protagonist to chart a new relationship to love and marriage. As *Love Marriage* draws on texts from diverse times and places beyond nineteenth- and twentieth-century England, it creates a broader framework for understanding how Muslim women articulate love and identity. By interacting with various intertexts and speaking as individuals, Ali's characters emphasize how female expression develops through discursive and verbal interactions with the past. As the women in *Love Marriage* find their voices, they

speak over stereotypes and reshape the discourses through which they articulate diverse understandings of love and belonging, even though their speech retains verbal lacunae.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, attending to what remains unheard in contemporary Anglophone novels reframes silence as a mode of expression that disrupts dualistic hierarchies. Discourses based on images like the headscarf silence Muslim women, and the preference for listening to dominant voices further suppresses immigrant women in Britain. Rather than merely amplifying quiet voices, these novels by AlAmmar, Ali, Shafak, and Shamsie unsettle sound-silence and presence-absence dichotomies by articulating Muslim women's experiences through narrative gaps. Inaudible speakers like distance and memory transgress borders to expose ongoing suffering caused by European colonialism and question who can speak in the postcolonial metropolis. Distant times and places converge in and around London to pluralize the city's voice, yet this decentering produces friction rather than multicultural harmony. These sounds of conflict and power struggles harmonize with the novels' collective resistance to assimilation, which is epitomized by their commitment to preserving silence. Even as diverse and marginalized voices gain audibility, the silences permeating these novels prompt reflection on the ethics of narrative representation and expand understandings of how women in Britain articulate Muslim and immigrant identities.

CHAPTER 2

EMBODYING TEXTUAL SOUNDS OF BELONGING: INTEGRATING SILENCE AND SPEECH IN LAYLA ALAMMAR'S *SILENCE IS A SENSE*

Depicting a Syrian refugee's journey through trauma-induced muteness, Layla AlAmmar's (2021a) *Silence is a Sense* establishes intertextuality as a paradigm for urban belonging that can dismantle binaries of silence-speech and inclusion-exclusion. From the small city where she has been resettled in England, the protagonist-narrator publishes articles in a London-based magazine, a writing back that asserts her voice as part of a discursive community and amplifies her writing in a city where she has no physical presence. However, in addition to the trauma that has silenced her verbally, her literary voice is suppressed by anti-migrant sentiment, growing nationalism, narrative norms, and resistance to hearing survivor testimonies. As the protagonist offsets her muteness by writing and urges readers to listen to what is not said, *Silence is a Sense* interrogates the emancipatory limits of both writing and silence. This raises questions like: How much can silence speak? Can writing overcome trauma, censorship, and social exclusion? Rather than embracing a silence-speech dichotomy, AlAmmar's novel employs a range of multi-voiced writing and listening practices to forge belonging in textual and urban spaces. Through its intertextuality, *Silence is a Sense* creates a discursive model for embodied connections that can replace absent identities and exclusion with belonging for refugees in Britain. In this way, the novel imagines a literary and urban space where Arab women can speak, while also using silence to draw out voices that have been suppressed. Before demonstrating how intertextuality becomes embodied in the city,

this section will briefly summarize the novel in relaiton to key concepts of multidirectionality, multifaceted silences, and trauma.

Set in Syria and Britain in the decade of the Arab Spring and early years of the Syrian civil war, *Silence is a Sense* is narrated in the first-person by a young female refugee who goes unnamed until the novel's final pages. Although she fled a war-torn country in search of safety and freedom, once settled in Britain she finds herself isolated and traumatized into muteness. She is bothered by loud sounds that trigger memories of the war, such as fireworks that remind her of bombs exploding, and thus she embraces silence to make such reactions cease and to avoid talking to people around her. This muteness gestures toward the inexpressibility of trauma even as the protagonist's textual voice bears witness to the horrors of war, forced migration, and anti-Muslim extremism in Britain. Even though the protagonist spends most of her time alone while writing articles for a magazine in London, she is gradually drawn into relationships with her neighbors, her publisher, and her readers; and by the end of the novel she has spoken her name aloud. Yet this narrative arc from isolated silence to social speech must be interpreted carefully considering the text's multidirectional movement and its strategic use of silences.

Through the narrator-protagonist's writing, both in the text of the novel and her embedded magazine articles, *Silence is a Sense* builds an extensive web of literary references in which migrants, exiles, and dissidents sound out unique histories. By amplifying voices of writers from distant times and places, the novel develops a multidirectional framework for belonging as an other. I borrow the term "multidirectional" from Holocaust scholar Michael Rothberg, who argues in *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) that cultural memory and individual identity are formed through cross-referencing and negotiation rather than competition. Moving

away from a scarcity mindset in which different groups compete to be heard in a limited space, Rothberg (2009) encourages readers "to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others" (p. 5). This emphasis on reciprocal influence reframes public discourse not as a one-directional flow but an intersection of multiple paths in which both people and places change as they interact. In *Silence is a Sense*, stories of resistance and oppression from Europe, the Middle East, North America, and South America interact with the protagonist's suffering and struggle. The novel's form also manifests multidirectional movement as the book's forty chapters leap abruptly among topics, locations, and timeframes. The writing often follows a logic of association rather than sequence, and the narrator openly questions the value of narratives that artificially organize memories into an orderly progression with an ending. In this back-and-forth movement between past and present, here and there, the narrator meditates on writings by Isabel Allende, Edgar Allan Poe, Mahmoud Darwish, and other thinkers, and through this discursive oscillation she finds new ways to express herself and participate in a transnational textual community.

This discursive encounter stands in stark contrast to the silences that permeate the novel and its urban spaces. As the title *Silence is a Sense* asserts, silence is not just a linguistic or aural category; it is also a sense that shapes understanding of the world. Even among philosophers who pay attention to the senses, this is not a prominent way of thinking in the post-Enlightenment, Western tradition. For example, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke (1690/1999) analyzes the senses as sources of knowledge, rebutting Classical and Renaissance tendencies to prioritize reason alone. Proceeding from the accepted opinion that

humans possess five senses, Locke theorizes that knowledge of the world is shaped by impressions, which are received as felt sensations and then distilled into conscious and unconscious thoughts. Although Locke expresses theoretical openness to the idea that "there may be justly counted more" than five senses, he insists that human imagination is limited to the five known senses because we cannot imagine what we do not perceive (1690/1999, p. 103). Over three centuries later, we continue to speak primarily of the five senses—sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing—that Locke mentioned. But *Silence is a Sense* asserts that silence is also a sense—neither the only sense nor a superior one, yet a sense nonetheless. If we gain information through seeing, hearing, speaking, touching, and smelling, one might ask, can we not also gain information through silence? This line of inquiry has been developed recently by scholars like Lisa Mazzei (2007), who demonstrates in *Inhabited Silence in Qualitative Research* how silence provides valuable insights and opens new ways of thinking. Investigating racial identity and the reluctance of white teachers to discuss racial identity in a non-white environment, Mazzei approaches silence in qualitative interviews as a "way of knowing" that is "meaning full and purpose full" (p. 2). In this epistemological mode, silence can be used to interpret places, communicate new ideas, and express the inexpressible, as I will demonstrate in this chapter.

In the Syrian context of AlAmmar's novel, verbal silences indicate where human voices have been forcefully repressed, particularly under Bashar Al-Assad's regime during the Arab Spring and ensuing civil war. In 2011, inspired by popular uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon, Syrian opposition groups planned a "Day of Rage" for February 4-5.[9] When this first attempt at protest failed to actualize,

[9] In 2011, as popular dissent spread across North Africa and the Middle East, Fridays became frequent days for mass demonstrations known as "days of rage" (Salih, 2013).

Damascus-based activist Suhair Atassi described Syria as a "kingdom of silence" where authorities used fear to deter popular protests (qtd. in Wikstrom, 2011). In this kingdom, silence is a tool used to contain people and suppress dissident voices. Like Atassi, AlAmmar's narrator perceives the unrealized Day of Rage demonstration as a silence that chokes her and her friends while they watch crowds chant for freedom in Egypt (pp. 63-64).[10] Although Syrians succeeded in holding a public demonstration to call for freedom of expression and democratic reforms on March 15, 2011, the protest was quickly squashed by military forces.

Authoritarian control in AlAmmar's novel is also conveyed through objects that watch and listen to contain dissident speech. With metaphors that foreground sound and censorship, *Silence is a Sense* describes Syria as a place where "even the walls have ears" (p. 18) and "one wrong word could land someone in jail" (p. 32). These personified walls with ears collude with political powers and have more agency than the activists who are confined to prison. Lack of free speech is also represented through lexical silences, like referring to Bashar Al-Assad as "the doctor" rather than by name (p. 62). Because Bashar Al-Assad trained as an ophthalmologist before assuming the presidency, referring to him as "the doctor" is a strategy to express subversive political opinions. In another oblique allusion to Assad's power, the protagonist is haunted by an all-seeing eye that hovers in the corner of her apartment in Syria (pp. 237-240). These motifs of the eye and the doctor are presented but not directly explained to the reader, thus reproducing the roundabout, censored speech required under the Assad regime. Where walls have

[10] Atassi's phrase also appears directly in *Silence is a Sense* when Khalid describes Arab literature as a "Kingdom of Silence" because writers must use obscure metaphors, write between the lines, and hide messages in "gaps and lacunae" (AlAmmar, 2021a, pp. 116-117).

eyes and ears, they become state actors with more power than individuals who would raise their voices against the state.

Absent voices also indicate where trauma has stifled individual identities. The connection between silence and trauma is a prominent theme in AlAmmar's writing, beginning with her first novel *The Pact We Made* (2019a), in which the main character Dahlia is haunted by a demon that is unmoved by her "silent scream" (p. 32), a soundless echo of her inability to cry for help when her uncle raped her at age fifteen. As a result of the rape, she believes that her body is not her own, and she is unable to speak of what happened to damage her sense of self. Her missing voice reveals an absent identity, a motif that AlAmmar finds common in Arab literature due to the persistence of traumatic events and memories (2019b, 2021b, 2021c, 2022). For example, in a study of fiction by Palestinian writer Adania Shibli, AlAmmar (2022) highlights how distancing narrative techniques like omitting names and personal pronouns correlate to fragmented identities, which are often found in contexts of intense melancholy and collective trauma. Adopting this technique in *Silence is a Sense*, AlAmmar withholds the protagonist's name until the last page of the novel. Having survived bombings, fallen buildings, multiple rapes, crossing the sea in a small boat, cold nights without shelter, and fleeing across Europe, the protagonist is unable to claim an identity for herself. Instead, she reiterates the labels imposed by those who have raped, insulted, and humiliated her: "I am a girl with no name, a girl with no face. I can be whatever you see. Arab. University student. Writer. Fatty. Muslim. Whore" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 55). These nouns may partially describe the protagonist, but they are listed like categories for a person who has no memorable features and therefore no identity, and they highlight the absence of the protagonist's own voice declaring who she is. Yet equating silence with a lack of

identity alone is too simple a conclusion, for the novel develops a more robust conception of subjectivity, which moves between silence and speech.

Amid the verbal lacunae that fill the novel, *Silence is a Sense* uses non-human speakers and extra-linguistic sounds to represent trauma aurally. After a nighttime explosion in Syria, we hear "jinn shriek with laughter" and an angel of death who "sighs" as he comes to the scene of yet another casualty (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 150). These eerie sounds and otherworldly speakers gesture toward the incomprehensibility of traumatic events because they cannot be fully understood by the reader. Why are jinn laughing? Why is the angel of death sighing? In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth (1996) conceptualizes trauma as an open wound that cries out yet remains inaccessible, like a dead woman whose soul has transmuted into a tree that now complains when it is hit (p. 2). This ongoing cry emitted through a non-human form captures an aural dimension of trauma that has not been adequately explored in trauma studies focused on linguistic voice. While acknowledging the unspeakability of trauma, scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1996), Dori Laub (1995), Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub (1992), Geoffrey Hartman (2003), and Anne Whitehead (2004) have emphasized the importance of listening to trauma survivors' voices. However, the tendency to focus on literary and witnessing voices overlooks how ambient sounds in narrative also contribute to testimony. To expand the range of listening, literary inquiry can use methods from sound studies to open our ears to urban sounds and silences that bear witness to traumatic experiences. For example, in a study of cinematic terror, Raya Morag (2008) asserts that sounds can approximate the unrepresentability of war-time trauma more closely than images can because sounds recede immediately. In an extended memory of the Syrian war, *Silence is a Sense* describes falling bombs as "a sound like thunder, like warring gods in your

mind, like worlds collapsing" (AlAmmar 2021a, p. 148). Although the text cannot physically reproduce the sound of thunder, it conjures a sudden clap or a roll of thunder that reverberates forcefully, perhaps rumbling through one's chest before receding into the distance. These aural notes convey the residual terror that lingers in the protagonist's memory. The initial sounds of explosions, sinister laughter, and weary sighing have receded into the silence of the unspeakable, but they echo throughout the literary text.

Even though non-human sounds can amplify the after-effects of trauma, and linguistic silence can speak volumes in the literary text, the protagonist's verbal reticence distances her from meaningful relationships in England. Knowing that she will never return to Syria, the protagonist begins to wonder whether "there was anywhere in the world that [she] belonged" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 12). This lack of belonging is directly related to her trauma-induced silence as she uses headphones to block out unwanted noises, leaves her flat when the neighbors are too loud, and refuses to speak aloud. While these strategies effectively discourage others from talking to her, they exacerbate her isolation and establish a dichotomy between sound and silence. However, this stronghold of silence and exclusion begins to be dismantled textually, as the protagonist-narrator incorporates many voices into her writing. In the following sections, I investigate how belonging is constructed discursively through intertextuality (Section 2.1) and through linguistic contact and hybridity (Section 2.2). This textual belonging stands in contrast to the urban exclusion (Section 2.3), censorship (Section 2.4), and ongoing trauma (Section 2.5) that isolate the protagonist in lived physical and social spaces. However, as the final two sections argue, the eventual integration of silence and speech establishes textual

and urban spaces where Arab refugee women can speak even while the weight of trauma calls for continued attendance to verbal absences.

2.1 Intertextuality as a model for urban belonging

In this section I argue that *Silence is a Sense* models a liberating discursivity as voices from distinct Anglophone, Arabic, and Spanish texts mingle in the narrative through quotations, references, and allusions. This meeting of diverse texts in AlAmmar's novel produces an intertextuality that emphasizes how texts, like people, are formed and influenced in relation to others. The first scholar to coin the term "intertextuality" was Julia Kristeva, who writes in "Word, Dialogue and Novel" that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1986, p. 37). Because any given piece of writing is in dialogue with preceding works, it can be seen as a collection of quotations, yet it is not necessarily a verbatim reproduction because the new text subsumes and changes the previous text. Examining AlAmmar's references to prior works of literature demonstrates how *Silence is a Sense* converses with, absorbs, and transforms other pieces of writing in a dynamic comparable to the development of intersubjectivity. Theories of intersubjectivity posit that the self is defined and shaped by its interactions with others, just as intertextuality emphasizes how one text is formed in conversation with other writings. Kristeva highlights this similarity in her statement, "The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity…" (1986, p. 37). This comment identifies a similar mode of interaction in intertextuality and intersubjectivity, thus making it appropriate to consider how textual interaction can imitate or model social interaction. For this reason, I approach textual relations in *Silence is a Sense* as interactions between diverse voices, which discursively model

social interactions and then feed back into the protagonist-narrator's lived experience so that the isolation and restrictions she experiences in Syria, Europe, and England are contrasted with and eventually displaced by textual freedom.

The importance of freedom for a young writer like AlAmmar's protagonist is introduced in the epigraph taken from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In this famous *künstlerroman*, the protagonist Stephen Daedalus searches for an identity as an individual, not one defined according to the establishments of Irish or English nationalism. Throughout his education and adolescence, Stephen struggles against pressure to be "Irish." His father encourages him to be a good gentleman, and his mother longs to see him fulfill the religious duty of taking communion on Easter, even though he no longer believes in the Catholic church. A teacher shames him for using an Irish word "tundish" instead of the English word "funnel" (later, Stephen learns that tundish is in fact an English word), while his classmates criticize him for not joining the Irish league to learn the Gaelic language. Rather than supporting Irish reformers, speaking Gaelic, and joining the Catholic church, Stephen avoids nationalist causes, writes in English, and leaves the church. When a classmate accuses him of not being sufficiently Irish, Stephen states, "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (Joyce, 1914-1915/1992, p. 220). Stephen's foremost concern is not national identity but artistic identity, which requires a soul to fly free from restraining nets. For him, escape comes through language as he develops his ear for poetic rhythm and pursues his artistic passion.

AlAmmar (2021a) references this passage in her second epigraph, a near-quotation that establishes a close relation between her protagonist and Stephen

Daedalus. I call this a near-quotation because AlAmmar modifies the form slightly and changes two small words. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen's statement about escaping nets is uttered in prose. However, in AlAmmar's novel, these lines appear on the epigraph page in between two other fragments of poetry, and thus they also look like poetry:

> When the soul of a man is born in this country
> there are nets flung as if to hold it back from flight.
> You talk to me of nationality, language, religion.
> I shall try to fly by those nets. (qtd. in AlAmmar, 2021a)

This visual modification changes the way I read Joyce's words; it makes me listen for rhythm or rhyme as I do when reading poetry. Rather than quickly reading the first sentence all the way through, I pause after "country" before continuing to the next line. My attention lingers on the idea of a soul being born, and I wonder where "this country" is, since the phrase implicitly contrasts itself with other countries. For Joyce, the country is Ireland, but for AlAmmar it may be Syria or England. The next line describes the country as a place where nets are flung "as if" to prevent flight. Curiously, these two words "as if" differ from Joyce's text. Where Joyce writes "there are nets flung *at it* to hold it back from flight" (p. 220), AlAmmar writes, "there are nets flung *as if* to hold it back from flight" (emphases mine). This small adjustment of one letter in each word preserves the rhythm of Joyce's sentence, but it introduces more ambiguity because the nets are flung in general, not at a target. This change also displays the writer's freedom to play with words and interact with Joyce even by modifying his words. Just as Joyce's speaker resolves to "fly by" the nets of language, nationality, and religion, AlAmmar adopts the spirit of Joyce's statement by not allowing his words to limit her quotation. In the same spirit of free interaction,

AlAmmar's protagonist will learn to be influenced but not restrained by other writers as she develops her literary voice.

Evoking a sense of freedom inspired by Joyce, AlAmmar's novel also challenges sentimental ideas about memory passed on by nineteenth-century European writers like Guy de Maupassant and Fyodor Dostoevsky. In a reappraisal of intertextuality, scholar Elaine Martin (2011) points out that, far from being a "blithe" descriptor (p. 148), intertextuality always has a subtle critical agenda, which includes re-evaluating other texts (p. 149). In *Silence is a Sense*, one of the functions of intertextuality is to make room in the European canon for Arab women's perspectives. This is accomplished by bringing the narrator's voice into conversation with canonical Western writers, sometimes in a direct confrontation of a European intellectual heritage. For example, the narrator argues that de Maupassant could not possibly have imagined a war-torn Syria when he wrote, "*Our memory is a more perfect world than the universe: it gives life back to those who no longer exist*" (qtd. in AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 19, emphasis by AlAmmar). This line comes from a short story titled "Suicides" (1880/1955), narrated by a man who is driven to kill himself in part because vivid memories of his former companions and deceased mother make him feel more distressed that he is growing old alone. His memory might be a perfect world that imbues a sense of life into his memories of his dead friends, but it drives him to take his own life. Now people like the editor in *Silence is a Sense* pluck this quote from the internet and use it as an inspirational statement with little idea that it comes from a story about suicide. After overturning the "pithiness" of de Maupassant's statement on memory (p. 19), AlAmmar's protagonist disputes Dostoevsky's claim that people can recover memories from the age of two (p. 20). Rejecting this idea, she asserts that memory is deceptive and formed cumulatively

through the stories we hear. Although these dead authors cannot respond to the protagonist's voice in a text that they have never read, the novel re-sounds their ideas through the voice of a Syrian woman in the twenty-first century.

Questioning the perspectives of major European writers makes room for historically othered voices—from colonized subjects and citizens of totalitarian regimes to minoritized Arabs—that meet on the protagonist's bookshelf. Along with American, British, and Syrian women writers, this multicultural space holds books by George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, Robert Fisk, Mahmoud Darwish, and Edward Said (AlAmmar 2021a, p. 95). These obvious textual references enable readers of *Silence is a Sense* to use intertextuality as a hermeneutic tool, an approach developed by Michael Riffaterre (1984) in "Intertextual Representation." Riffaterre describes intertextuality as a perception that one cannot understand a text without going through its intertext, an interpretive act dependent not on an outstanding memory or a refined education, but on the ability to make textual connections (p. 142). When viewed as a hermeneutic tool, the intertextuality in *Silence is a Sense* invites readers to use the bookshelf as a bibliography that reveals the protagonist's anti-authoritarian literary and political influences. Orwell is famous for his dystopic satire exposing the problems of authoritarianism, and despite facing many book bans, his writing is now recognized among the classics. Less well-known is the Central European journalist Koestler, who left the German Communist Party after becoming disillusioned with Stalinism and subsequently published an anti-totalitarian novel called *Darkness at Noon.* In AlAmmar's novel, these writers who questioned European authoritarianism are found in the same space as three writers known for their criticism of American and Israeli policies toward Palestine. In his journalism, Fisk criticized Israel's involvement in Palestine and American policy in the Middle East. Darwish used

poetry to assert an Arab identity for Palestinians oppressed by Israel, and Said criticized the exploits of European colonialism while advocating for Palestinian recognition. Although Orwell and Said are routinely found on Western university reading lists, Koestler, Fisk, and Darwish remain less well-known, but AlAmmar's inclusion of all these writers on the bookshelf displays an interest in leveling canonical hierarchies and speaking out against oppression.

Beyond the bookshelf, specific intertexts establish transnational, transhistorical solidarities that amplify the voices of women writers who forge their own gender identities, despite pressure to submit to cultural norms. For example, linking the motif of muteness to Isabel Allende's (1985/1988) *The House of the Spirits* contributes to transnational feminism as AlAmmar's female protagonist, silenced by the Syrian civil war, identifies with a Latin American woman of the twentieth century.[11] Reflecting on her muteness, AlAmmar's protagonist writes, "In Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Clara goes mute and feels she is filled with the silence of the whole world. I too felt myself filled completely with silence" (2021a, p. 172). As mentioned here, Allende's young protagonist Clara fills herself with "the silence of the entire world" after foretelling her sister's death and witnessing the ensuing autopsy (Allende, 1985/1988, p. 54). Afraid that her prophetic speech can produce death and catastrophe, Clara refuses to talk for nine years. After nine years of silence, Clara speaks aloud to announce her upcoming marriage to Esteban, thereby skirting cultural norms for courting and engagement. Like Clara, AlAmmar's protagonist embraces silence due to traumatic experiences, and she avoids getting

[11] *The House of the Spirits* takes place in an unspecified Latin American country, which is generally assumed to be Chile. While it does not name historical figures, the novel is closely intertwined with political events in Chile, beginning in the early twentieth century and ending in the 1970s, when a US-backed military coup replaced the democratically elected President Salvador Allende with the dictator Augusto Pinochet.

married in accordance with cultural norms; in fact, part of her reason for leaving Syria on her own is that she does not want to move to Egypt with her family and marry a man of her father's choosing. In England, she is occasionally sexually active, even though her cultural and religious heritage discourage sex outside of marriage. Despite and through their abstinence from speech, both Allende's and AlAmmar's protagonists resist gender norms.

References to Mahmoud Darwish's famous Arabic poem "Identity Card" further develop the theme of rejecting identities that are imposed rather than chosen. When it was first recited in 1957, "Identity Card" claimed an Arab identity for oppressed Palestinians by repeatedly declaring, "Write down! / I am an Arab" (qtd. in Mattawa, 2014, p. 7).[12] Providing social context for this assertive line, translator Khaled Mattawa (2014) notes in *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation* that Darwish first spoke these words in Hebrew to an Israeli official placing him under house arrest. At that time, "Palestinian" was not a publicly recognized identity, and "Arab" was a derogatory term in Israel-Palestine (Mattawa, 2014, p. 11). In "Identity Card," the poet translated this initial Hebrew utterance "I am an Arab" into Arabic. By using his own language to defiantly articulate a minority identity given by the oppressor, the poet subversively reclaimed this identity for himself (Mattawa, 2014). Like Darwish, AlAmmar's protagonist claims an Arab identity in front of immigration officials who are interested only in categorizing her according to a country of origin. In one of her magazine articles, she describes how border officials across Europe demanded to know her passport identity, but it felt "anathema" and "unnatural" to privilege national identity over "ancestry or ethnicity or religion"

[12] "Identity Card" is found in the collection *Awraq al-zeitoun* [*Olive Leaves*], which has not yet been published in English translation. I quote here from Khaled Mattawa's translation in *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation* (2014).

(AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 153). She quickly learned that "Syrian" was the answer expected by migration authorities, but her writing continues to challenge the imposition of national identities. For example, when mentioning other people whom she met along her migratory route, she identifies families according to their hometowns, like the Alis from Homs and the AlKhalafs from Raqqa (AlAmmar, 2021a, pp. 152-153). Throughout the novel, by referring repeatedly to Darwish and "Identity Card" while criticizing nationalism, she aligns herself with a minoritarian identity.

Quoting Darwish's poem, which arose from a verbal utterance, creates an iterative movement between oral and written expressions of identity. The imperative "Write down!" was first uttered by Darwish when he was placed under house arrest, and then spoken again when he recited the poem to a live audience in 1957. But of course, as the existence of the poem proves, Darwish also wrote the lines, thereby suggesting that identity should be written down as well as spoken. In *Silence is a Sense*, AlAmmar's protagonist enters the oral-written debate from a less integrated position, replacing orality with verbal silence and writing, and imposing a gap between speaking and writing. Both times that AlAmmar's protagonist cites Darwish's poem, it is contrasted with silence. The first time the poem appears is in a nightmare based on a memory of Khalid, her now-deceased boyfriend in Syria. The protagonist sees Khalid move his lips as if giving her "that same old recitation of Darwish," a poem that he said was "inscribed in the breast of every Arab" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 23). Khalid can recite the words because they are written in his soul, so his recitation makes a complete movement between writing and speech. In the nightmare, however, this cycle is interrupted by Khalid's silence because he no longer speaks; his lips move only as if they are making sound. By recording this

memory, AlAmmar's protagonist fulfills the injunction to write, but her ongoing silence prevents her from integrating writing and speaking into her own identity as an Arab.

The link between identity, silence, and speech becomes clearer in the second reference to Darwish's poem, which we find buried in a suitcase of documents that "prove [she's] a real person" (p. 75) yet have been hidden away to stave off memories that the protagonist wants to repress. By burying doctor's notes, diagnoses, and journal fragments that bear witness to her trauma, the protagonist has symbolically silenced a crucial part of her identity, including the statement أنا عربي (I am an Arab) (p. 77). These words borrowed from Darwish are written in her journal, but she has yet to utter the statement aloud. Unlike Darwish and Khalid, who deconstruct the oral-written binary by using written and spoken language to express their identities, AlAmmar's protagonist seems to reinscribe this binary. However, examining hybrid language in *Silence is a Sense* will reveal how the novel broadens notions of orality and discursivity to include silence.

2.2 Linguistic contact and hybrid identity

Moving between speech and writing develops another kind of textual contact that includes the meeting of written and spoken texts as well as spoken and unspoken languages. Broadening the scope of intertextuality beyond Riffaterre's hermeneutic and Kristeva's text-based definition allows us to consider spoken language, cultural artifacts, and even religious practices as texts to be read and interpreted, whether or not they spring into existence as legible words. This creates an oscillation between the oral and the written, like the hybridity that Homi Bhabha envisions to dismantle hierarchical binaries. Linguistic hybridity is instrumental in the search for an

independent voice because it eludes binary politics, as Homi Bhabha (1994) points out in *The Location of Culture*: "the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *inter*national culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*" (p. 38). By italicizing "inter" and "hybridity," Bhabha emphasizes in-betweenness and the coming together of difference in speech. He also envisions hybrid speech as a "Third Space" where the "politics of polarity" are evaded (p. 39). Bearing these principles in mind, we can see how linguistic mingling in *Silence is a Sense* moves toward a hybrid other identity. Rather than privileging the oral or the written (and additional metaphorical poles of either/or), AlAmmar's protagonist uses multiple languages to articulate an in-between identity.

Although it is written primarily in English, the style of *Silence is a Sense* models a give and take between multiple languages. Rather than drawing from a single body of literature, such as English or Arabic, *Silence is a Sense* creates a multilingual zone. The novel is filled with names of canonical Anglophone writers such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Joyce, Dickens, Austen, Brontë, Kipling, Twain, and Poe, as if the protagonist is self-consciously displaying her familiarity with English culture. Arab writers also feature prominently. Names like Mahmoud Darwish, Ghada al-Samman, Zakariya Tamer, Nizar Kabbani, Ghassan Kanafani, Naguib Mahfouz, and Ulfat Idilbi reflect the writer's Arab roots and her knowledge of important literary figures. In addition, the novel includes one chapter titled in German, "Blut und Boden," and another in French, "Où est la Frontière?" This multilingualism creates tensions that are dramatized in the protagonist's disagreements with her boyfriend Khalid, who advocates reading primarily Arab writers because they ground their writing in a familiar language and geography.

Unlike Khalid, the protagonist was raised reading Anglophone books, through which she discovered the "alien worlds" that lay beyond the cedars of Lebanon and the Atlas Mountains (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 116). While her ongoing debate with Khalid establishes a dichotomy that seems to demand loyalty to Arab or English literature, the protagonist resists Khalid's imposition of Arab literature at the exclusion of others. Instead of choosing one linguistic canon, she refers frequently to both Arab and Anglophone writers throughout her narrative.

AlAmmar's decision to write in English also contributes to ongoing debates about postcolonial writing in English. On the one hand, one might argue that to write in English is to succumb to the oppressor. In *Silence is a Sense*, Khalid takes such a position when he argues for reading Arab writers rather than English writers; one can assume that he would also criticize his girlfriend's choice to write in English rather than Arabic. On the other hand, many have argued convincingly that writing in English need not be seen as capitulating to colonialist homogeneity.[13] For AlAmmar's protagonist, writing in English gives access to a British audience as well as a global audience. It also represents how she is displaced, while at the same time displacing the English language by bringing it into contact with Arabic.

Within this Anglophone dominant, AlAmmar's novel incorporates Arabic words to stretch the bounds of English-language writing. Names of food and clothing items like *hummus, fattoush, fatteh, dajaj, muhammara, kebbeh, kousa, hijab, keffiyeh,* and *salwar kameez* are transliterated into the text, along with words less

[13] The twentieth issue of *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* is devoted to examining texts by Arabs writing in foreign languages, and many articles in the journal address debates on writing in the language of a former colonizer. For example, Anne Armitage (2000) provides an overview of debates surrounding Francophone writing in the Maghreb, pointing to Abdelkebir Khatibi's forceful argument for plurilingualism (p. 45) and Mourad Bourboune's emphasis on language as a tool of expression regardless of its colonial associations (p. 53). Articles by Cynthia Nelson (2000) and Shereen Abou El Naga et al. (2000) argue that writing in a foreign language resists homogenization by drawing out multiplicity and hybridity. Khaled Mattawa (2000) suggests that writing in a foreign language enables one to pose new questions and take on attitudes that are otherwise inaccessible (p. 271).

familiar to non-Arab readers, such as *malak almawt, yasqut, maat,* and *khuthee*. These words are sometimes accompanied by a clarifying contextual clue, but never directly defined in a footnote or glossary. When asked about the presence of Arabic in the novel, AlAmmar shared in an interview that using unglossed Arabic is a deliberate gesture of inclusion toward bilingual readers, since the presence of a glossary can signal to Arab readers that the novel is not written for them (Columbia Global Centers Amman, 2021). Without driving away English-language readers (after all, the novel is written in English and published in Britain and America), *Silence is a Sense* asserts a place for Arabic in the Anglophone novel.

Linguistic contact is further developed by the occasional use of Arabic script, which provides a visualization of phonic difference. Considering the differences between Arabic and Latin alphabets, Abdelkebir Khatibi (1983/2019) explains in *Plural Maghreb* that whereas Latin script is structured around consonants and vowels, Arabic lettering originates from Hamito-Semitic pictography and is structured on a logic of silence and movement. Khatibi (1983/2019) also argues that when a text is haunted by what it cannot say due to working in a foreign language, it increases multilingualism, rather than returning to the mother tongue. These different linguistic structures meet visually and aurally in *Silence is a Sense* when AlAmmar brings Arabic letters and sounds into the English text, a bilingual movement that makes visible the gap between Arabic and English. For example, Chapter 14 is titled لاجئ, which means "refugee" in Arabic, but this meaning is not explicated until later in the chapter when the narrator comments on the undesired connotations of terms such as refugee, exile, fugitive, displaced person, asylum seeker, and boat people (pp. 89-90). Compared to the negative judgment carried by each of these English

terms, the protagonist finds the term لاجئ less weighed down by prefixes and synonyms. It has:

> just the long *la*, as though you were about to break into a lamentation. Then the sharp jerking nod of the *ji'*, the *hamza* stopping you from venturing any further into the grief that lies there, ensnared and entangled, in such little letters. (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 90)

This poetic explanation of an Arabic word exposes the distance between the two languages, while the use of two languages blurs the division between them. By breaking down the word لاجئ into its component sounds, AlAmmar makes Arabic sounds audible to English readers. The movement from *la* to *ji'* to *hamza*, with interpretive commentary in between, demonstrates how a single word can contain lamentation and the suspension of grief, emotions that are muted and lost in translation.

Lying at the interstices of Arabic and English is a silence amplified by AlAmmar's multilingual expression. To further deconstruct monolingualism, the novel gives voice to the language of silence. This oxymoron, conceptualizing silence as language, reveals the constructed and paradoxical nature of silence, which is not in fact an absence of sound or an inability to communicate. Rather, silence belongs to a spectrum of sound and language, and its ambiguity can be used to escape rigid categories like English, Arabic, Christian, Muslim, or Jewish.

Because silence is interstitial and ambivalent, it can be leveraged to blur the lines of religious divisions. Rather than allowing overcharged Islamic symbols like the headscarf[14] or mosque attendance to speak for her, the protagonist of *Silence is a*

[14] Examining how young British Muslims construct their identities, Claire Dwyer (1999) argues in "Veiled Meanings: Young British Muslim Women and the Negotiation of Differences" that dress, especially the veil, is an "overdetermined signifier" (p. 5). Dwyer's article explores how women rework their attire to create and articulate new hybrid identities.

Sense deploys silence and ambiguity to evade religious categories. In England, she no longer wears the head scarf, she does not keep track of daily prayer times, and she is unaware of Ramadan's arrival until noticing a celebratory meal in the mosque courtyard. When people like the imam and her neighbors assume that she is Muslim, she bristles against this imposed identity. But rather than directly rebutting this assignment of Muslimness, she quietly dodges the issue. For example, she refuses to entertain her editor's requests for articles on religious issues, and she offers no response to the question of what made her "abandon God" (p. 28). Sometimes she seems to identify as a Muslim, such as in an article where she asks, "Is it my job, as a Muslim, to try to convince you not to be afraid of me? That my people are not hardwired to want to blow you up on a tube or ram you with a van?" (p. 73). In these questions, she uses "my," me," and "my people" to speak as part of the Muslim community, but at other times she speaks as someone who has left religion. Her refusal to align with a particular faith community constitutes a silence that is liberating in its ambiguity.

Juxtaposing monotheistic religious practices and emphasizing similarity rather than difference is another way that *Silence is a Sense* evades religious strictures. In one of her published articles, the protagonist likens all religions to each other by asserting that "the notion of 'us' versus 'them' is hardwired into every religion" (p. 26). Her article further challenges difference by stating that both Buddha and Islam claim there is "only one message that's sent down" (p. 26). Though each of the Abrahamic religions claim to be distinct, she suggests that they are alike in their exclusivity, and that having a single revelation is not a unique claim since it is also found in Buddhism. She also calls attention to practices that separate Muslims and Christians: "If you don't believe what I believe, leave your foreskin on

to prove it or drink this wine and believe it's the blood of the Lord or turn your face away from Jerusalem when you pray" (p. 26). This sentence undercuts distinctive religious practices by minimizing punctuation. By not using commas to separate the practices of circumcision, communion, and prayer direction, AlAmmar blurs the unique theologies symbolized by these rituals. Over and over, the protagonist challenges the exclusiveness of religious categories both directly and indirectly, by clearly expressing her opinions and by bringing different religions into the same textual space.

As *Silence is a Sense* uses multiple languages to deconstruct totalizing categories, it suggests that there is freedom in evading fixed identities. Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim beliefs come together in the protagonist's writing, and the novel gives voice to writers from South America, North America, Europe, and the Middle East. Arabic and English mingle, and silence is woven throughout the text. This intertextuality provides a model for interacting with difference, yet, as the next section discusses, these ideals seem to be absent from the urban spaces where the protagonist is geographically othered, physically silent, and subtly censored.

2.3 Urban exclusion

In contrast to the multicultural inclusion heard through its intertextuality, *Silence is a Sense* depicts the British city as a place that marginalizes refugees by casting them into unnamed and unknown spaces where they are silenced by generalized prejudice. Migrants are described as dehumanized masses rather than individuals with names, and the anonymous protagonist lives in an unnamed city that could be anywhere or nowhere. This almost-unreal city hosts residents from proper-noun places like

Bangladesh, Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Iraq, and the Levant; but these details are drowned out by anti-Muslim sentiment that forecloses hybrid identities. In this section, I consider how urban geography and soundscapes convey Muslim exclusion in *Silence is a Sense.*

Although AlAmmar's protagonist never visits London during the novel, the city hovers in the background as a political power that determines where refugees can settle. In line with British immigration policy, the protagonist has been resettled in a small English city, which goes unnamed but is compared to small cities like Cambridge, Loughborough, and Doncaster. These cities receive refugees according to immigration policies that establish quotas to prevent population imbalances. Such policies, AlAmmar's (2021a) narrator suggests, are designed to keep London free of refugees who would otherwise "frighten the country with an unmanageable horde of displaced persons" (p. 131). The word "horde" is typically used in a derogatory manner, and here it envisions an uncontrollable mass of people, like the stereotypical images of masses of Muslims at the gate of Europe who represent a threat of invasion (Nash, 2012). In *The Daily Lives of Muslims*, sociologist Nilüfer Göle (2017) points out that rhetoric describing Muslims as invaders objectifies them into a monolithic category "without face, history, or voices" (p. 46). "Horde" is an example of such discourse that not only strips immigrants of their individual faces, backgrounds, and voices, but also strips them of their humanity by conjuring images of threatening animal herds and warriors. The sense of danger posed by refugees is also expressed by a minor character in AlAmmar's (2021a) novel who compares refugees to a polluting flow that needs to be diluted to avoid "clogging" up London like "clumps of dirt or hair stopping up a drain" (p. 131). This degrading vocabulary reduces

migrants to unwanted material, and it is used to justify moving people around the country like refuse that threatens the nation's purity.

In addition to being kept out of London, AlAmmar's protagonist is unable to visit iconic English spaces. She reads reports of refugees who are received by sponsors and toured around the country to visit cultural sites like Shakespeare's hometown, Anne Hathaway's cottage, and Wordsworth County. These immigrants featured in the media are invited to "warm English cottage[s]" and "Sunday roast traditions" that symbolize a welcome into English society (p. 131). Unlike these immigrants, the protagonist finds herself in a nondescript collection of residential buildings labeled East Tower, South Tower, and West Tower. These generic names for apartment buildings emphasize the protagonist's distance from public spaces that are worthy of being named. With only cardinal directions distinguishing each building from another, this city is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, like a fairy tale or a bad dream.

In contrast to this lexical vagueness, the mingling of Western rock and pop with traditional Iranian, Pakistani, and Arab music forms a multicultural soundscape in the protagonist's unnamed city. Early in the novel, she attends a community meal that represents an attempt to turn the mosque into a welcoming space for people from many cultures. Studying how Muslims forge belonging in current-day London and Berlin, Elisabeth Becker (2021) found that the mosque is often a place where Muslims who are "cast as others" in Europe can develop a sense of place independent from nation-state categories (p. 6). The so-called "unity feast" in AlAmmar's novel positions the mosque outside of nation-state categories because it invites people to "celebrate their heritage and share their culture" through food, colorful decorations, and music (p. 46) that bring unique traditions into the same

space. A set of speakers playing "Pakistani pop and Iranian psychedelic and Arabic love ballads" (p. 45) produces a sonic multiculturalism that blends Western pop and rock music with classical melodies, themes, and instruments. In a study of how music imagines the nation and produces hybrid identities in British-South Asian postcolonial literature, Christin Hoene (2015) concludes, "music affects people across boundaries of nations, languages, and cultures by connecting them on a musical level that forestalls differences resulting from the politics of location" (p. 12). In other words, music cuts around geopolitical conflicts and complicates the production of a homogenous national identity because it moves between cultural specificity and aesthetic universality. This can be seen in a brief consideration of the musical traditions referenced in AlAmmar's unity feast. Pakistani pop, which emerged in the 1960s and peaked in the 1990s, blended classical Pakistani music with Western rock, pop, jazz, and hip hop; and it has been used to express dissent against authoritarian governments in Pakistan (Pirzadeh and Pirzada, 2019). Psychedelic Iranian music can be included in what Masoud Kowsari (2023) terms the "underground" style that has been suppressed in Iran because it does not conform to Islamic moral standards supported by the post-Revolution regime (p. 4).[15] This kind of music, like Pakistani pop, emerged in Pre-Revolution Iran and complemented traditional melodies and song structures with electric guitar and rock styles, expressing a creative openness to Western trends while remaining deeply rooted in Iranian culture.[16] Arabic love ballads, meanwhile, often use melodramatic poems to

[15] Masoud Kowsari (2023) includes critical pop, rock, rap, heavy metal, and fusion in his description of underground music (p. 4). The term "psychedelic," which AlAmmar uses, appears in none of the scholarly literature on Iranian music styles, but I believe psychedelic can be considered along with these types of music listed by Kowsari.

[16] In "Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourses in Iran," Laudan Nooshin (2005) points out that rock music, in contrast to mainstream commercialized pop, contains an "indefinable oppositional quality" in Iran. Nooshin finds that these genres incorporate Western popular styles to create "a localized brand of Iranian rock" (p. 1).

express love and heartbreak, and they remain popular throughout the Arab world. As these musical styles converge in the courtyard, they aurally convey openness to different rhythms and musical traditions, which resist conforming to one cultural creed.

Unfortunately, exclusivist claims of ownership overturn the audible mingling in the courtyard, demonstrating how a gesture of hospitality like the unity feast is vulnerable to hostility. In his lecture "Hostipitality" Jacques Derrida (2000) wrestles with the risk of hospitality which requires a host to open one's home to a stranger. In Derrida's thinking, the stranger may be hostile, and thus the host who opens their home to a stranger may be attacked. When members of the mosque in *Silence is a Sense* host a community meal in their courtyard, they welcome anyone who comes, without imposing a condition for entry. But this hospitality is hijacked by xenophobic men like "Mr. Big Man" who enters the courtyard and claims "This is my fuckin' country" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 53). It does not matter to him if the meal is open to everyone or if it is a "private party," as one Muslim man argues once the peace has been disturbed (p. 53). In this confrontation, an us versus them mentality overpowers the sounds of interfaith dialogue, and the multicultural music is replaced by shouting that "takes on its own beats and rhythms" (p. 53). After Mr. Big Man claims that the UK is his country and insultingly tells the imam to go back to India, the crowd pushes back physically "because now it is *their* courtyard" (p. 54, italics original). These claims of ownership undo the gesture of hospitality that invited different languages, cultures, and beliefs into the same space, and the protagonist runs away from the scene that has now been divided by possessive adjectives like "my" and "their."

The contrast between common and proper nouns in *Silence is a Sense* calls attention to how exclusion operates in tandem with an inability to recognize the unique identity of another person. As a representative of the unnamed city, Mr. Big Man receives a descriptive nickname rather than a given name, and he addresses people with racist slurs and insulting nicknames that cast them as members of an undesired group, rather than allowing them to be seen as individuals. As a result, these voices are silenced and distanced when they testify to individual suffering.

2.4 Discursive distance and silence

Writing from outside London, where her articles are published, the protagonist uses distance and silence to shape her testimony even though her positionality and writing strategies seem to impede the reception of her voice. In *Truth and Testimony*, Dori Laub (1995) argues that Holocaust survivors are never able to satisfy the compulsion to tell their stories because "There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured" (p. 63). Faced with the impossibility of finding adequate words, the right time, and attentive listeners, trauma survivors can find themselves "invade[d]" by silence (Laub, p. 64). Laub suggests that survivors can only find peace by bearing witness, which necessitates telling their stories rather than letting silence prevail. But what if there were another way to conceptualize the significance of silence in testimony? Rather than pitting silence and speech against each other, what if silence could be deployed as a crucial part of witnessing? This is what AlAmmar's protagonist does as she integrates silence into her writing and calls on readers to listen more carefully across distance.

In *Silence is a Sense*, the protagonist uses writing to point out how readers are deaf to what happens far away. This deafness conditioned by distance reflects the presence-absence hierarchy, which assigns more value to lives that are tangibly present while ignoring those that cannot be seen or heard. While isolating in her flat in England, AlAmmar's (2021a) protagonist spends much of her time observing the council estate, somewhat voraciously watching and listening to her neighbors as they go about the mundane tasks of daily life, such as cooking, eating, exercising, working from home, and watching television. Because she is a discrete observer, her position as a writer resembles that of the speaker in Khaled Mattawa's (1995) poem about the 1977 uprisings in Libya, extracted as one of the epigraphs to *Silence is a Sense*. In "Fifty April Years," the poetic speaker eats lunch at his kitchen table and watches his neighbors reading, thinking, and watching TV:

> as if the world had stopped calling,
> as if we had emerged
> from the whirlpool of its demands
> with a wild mixture of cowardice
> and courage to say unto others
> "I wish you did not exist." (Mattawa, 1995)

Repeated "w" sounds in nearly every line drag the world, we, wild, and wish into the whirlpool's cycle of cruelty and revenge where children are killed while playing soccer, resistance leaders are executed, and ghettos are bombarded. Yet these atrocities, mentioned in previous stanzas, are lost in the relentless whooshing of the whirlpool. In another stanza, the speaker hears on the radio the "whistle and boom" of a mortar shell attack that killed forty children, yet he and his neighbors carry on with their individual activities far from the scene of the tragedy (Mattawa, 1995).

Like this poet, AlAmmar's protagonist finds that her readers in Britain are deaf to the pained cries of the world beyond their reach.

The inability of London-based readers to hear distant suffering is epitomized in the editor's London-centric response to a series of terrorist attacks in Britain. On June 14, after a series of violent incidents in England and less than two weeks after an attack on London Bridge, AlAmmar's protagonist publishes a piece criticizing the tendency to conflate Muslim refugees with Muslim terrorists. Her article makes no connection to the bridge incident, about which she has only skimmed a headline. Yet Josie the editor responds with concern that the writer "might be glossing over the very real, unequivocal violence that has been occurring in Great Britain over the last few months" (AlAmmar, p. 145). Josie neglects to specify what events she is referring to, and she repeats rumors that one of the recent attacks may have been carried out by an asylum seeker (p. 145).[17] She then cautions the writer to "be careful of making sweeping statements about how we shouldn't fear Muslim refugees because they don't have the capacity for violence or something" (AlAmmar, p. 145). Ironically, Josie's warning against overgeneralized assertions is itself a broad, unsupported claim that trails off into a vague mention of violence. Because she is concerned about local tragedies that *might* have been carried out by asylum seekers, Josie and her colleagues take issue with the argument that refugees are not carrying out terrorist attacks and that Muslims should not be the scapegoat for every act of

[17] In fact, the March 22 attack in Westminster was carried out by a British man named Khalid Masood, neither an asylum seeker nor a migrant (Arif, 2018). The May 22 attack was associated with the Islamic State and perpetrated by Salman Abedi, also a British-born citizen. The June 3 attack, the only one mentioned here that may have been linked to asylum seekers, was carried out by Khuram Butt (a British-naturalized citizen born in Pakistan), Rachid Redouane (of Moroccan and Libyan origin), and Youssef Zaghba (Moroccan Italian origin). Regardless of the attack referenced, repeating unverified rumors that blame migrants for terrorist attacks reveals an ignorance of the lengthy and stringent screening processes applied to asylum seekers in Britain.

terror. Despite soliciting and publishing articles from a Syrian refugee, Josie is only moved by reports of death that are close to home.

Of course, one could argue that the writer is also desensitized by distance because she seems unaware of the events that triggered Josie's comment about the "horrific violence" in Great Britain (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 145). Her subsequent internet search shows it could be the March 22 attack on Westminster Bridge, the May 22 attack at a concert arena in Manchester,[18] or the June 3 attack on London Bridge, which all occurred in 2017. Since the protagonist is removed from these locations, she does not directly portray these events in the novel. Rather, she lists them next to similar incidents in Berlin, Paris, and the Bataclan, along with the number of people killed in each location. This fact-based presentation is devoid of emotion and focuses on numbers and places rather than human lives. Furthermore, the protagonist admits that she ignored the most recent headline about "Terror on London Bridge" because "seven or eight dead in a city hours away hardly seemed worthy of media attention" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 146). Weighed against the hundreds of thousands killed in Syria, these European attacks were insignificant for the protagonist. As she compares numbers of casualties, the protagonist admits that she might be falling into the same apathy that she criticizes: too much death turns individual lives into numbers of casualties.

Even if numbers have a numbing effect, the protagonist resists the idea that a writer should transform harsh facts of death into sweet melodies that will resonate with naïve readers who know nothing of wartime survival. She criticizes refugee testimonies that sound like a "soliloquy on how time is what ultimately kills you"

[18] Chapter 18 is an op-ed in response to Manchester bombing, criticism of the tendency to disavow fundamentalists as not true Muslims, when actually anyone who calls himself a Muslim can be a Muslim.

rather than brutally acknowledging that death comes from barrel bombs, snipers, prison guards, and smugglers (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 190). In theatre, a soliloquy allows a character to express their thoughts without being heard or interrupted by other characters, while still being heard by the audience. Although this would seem like an ideal form for allowing trauma survivors to speak aloud, this overheard monologue form is easily distorted or turned into palatable statements with universal applicability. AlAmmar's protagonist knows that a testimonial "soliloquy" often originates from firsthand accounts that refugees and asylum seekers share with writers, who then "transform it into a tale for the public" (p. 189). Accordingly, when a testimony becomes a tale, the fault lies not with the victims who share their stories but with interposing writers who excessively accommodate the public ear.

In her own writing, the protagonist deploys silence to encourage close listening rather than falsely empathetic distortions. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominic LaCapra (2014) urges those who listen to survivor stories to avoid suffering vicariously through the victim's story. Instead of promoting empathy, a concept fraught with the risks of overidentification, LaCapra calls for "empathic unsettlement" to respect survivor's voices. This can be uncomfortable for listeners and readers, especially when the testimony is halting or full of gaps, as in *Silence is a Sense*. The protagonist keeps the reader at a distance by letting her writing flow with her thoughts and sensations, even when nightmares and triggers disrupt the narrative progression. A chronological timeline can only be pieced together after multiple readings of the novel, and even then, some episodes are so vague or disrupted that it is unclear whether they occurred in the past or the present. The protagonist displays little attempt to make her emotions accessible to the reader, and a lack of contextual details forces readers to pay attention to what is not written. Rather than refining her

story into a melodious soliloquy, the protagonist allows silences to linger, and she issues a call to listen more carefully. She urges those who record testimonies to "pay attention to the gaps, to the lacunae, to the silence, to what is not being said" (AlAmmar, 2021a, pp. 190-191). This lineup of synonyms amplifies silence without denoting what is missing, because it is the job of the reader, not the writer, to hear what is not said. The real story is not in poeticized thought or obvious emotion, as might be heard in a soliloquy, but in the gaps between the words.

The challenge to listen to silence also resists narrative norms that seem to encourage loquacity. The protagonist believes that her editor Josie wants to read stories with "a narrative arc and maybe some character development" (p. 192), such as memories of crossing borders and walking across Europe. As she writes early in the novel, "Josie wants it all. She doesn't come out and say it, but I know she means the harsher, the better. She wants a nice little packet of memories she can serialize for her readers" (AlAmmar, 2021a, pp. 18-19). This collection of memories should overflow with details and verbose descriptions, and it should be easily categorizable. As the editor approves or rejects articles in accordance with narrative norms, she reinforces the preference for pieces that speak loudly over those that require readers to listen carefully for what is not said.

Reader responses in *Silence is a Sense* further demonstrate how survivors' voices are pushed out of London. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van der Kolk (2015) suggests that trauma survivors sometimes withdraw into silence because their experiences overwhelm listeners, who then reject the speaker. This silencing cycle occurs in *Silence is a Sense* when the writer hesitates to divulge her story and is then criticized when she begins to write more freely. After initially resisting Josie's requests for memories of Syria and her refugee experience, the protagonist finally

produces one article after another describing harsh travel conditions through Turkey and Greece, an infected toe, a gun to her head, riding in freezing trucks, dodging rubber bullets, and inhaling tear gas. But before she shares more details or writes, for example, about the bombs that "pulverized" her home in Syria, Josie cuts her off, suggesting that her stories are "*overwhelming*" and unbelievable (AlAmmar, p. 191, emphasis original). Likewise, online commentators question the writer's credibility and accuse her of compiling different people's experiences and passing them off as her own. As online readers criticize her story, they discredit her experience rather than bearing witness to the pain of forced migration.

Even though she writes toward London and publishes in the political center of the country, AlAmmar's protagonist is largely unheard, as her penname "Voiceless" indicates. This penname re-sounds Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" (2010). Spivak famously answered her own question with a definitive no, reasoning that the subaltern cannot speak because the subaltern is defined by its inability to speak. On this basis, AlAmmar's narrator, a writer with access to a keyboard, a publisher, and a public audience, may not be considered subaltern. Indeed, when asked about the name "Voiceless" in an interview, AlAmmar describes this as a tongue-in-cheek comment on the tendency to describe Arab women as having no voice or needing help to make their voices heard (Magers & Quinn Booksellers, 2021). In fact, AlAmmar's protagonist speaks in a hegemonic language and successfully navigates the publishing market in London. But because she resists verbose narrative norms and her voice is subtly censored, she might be perceived as being unheard. Voiceless has a voice, but it can only be heard by those who are willing to listen to what is not said.

Voiceless's writing posits silence as an integral part of communication, yet the shortcomings of silence as a writing strategy are obvious. Like language, silence is multifaceted and ambiguous, and its meaning can shift with context. Not only is it difficult to hear what is not said when one is surrounded by closer and louder voices, silence can be easily distorted and can become all-consuming. Examining how silence morphs into sensory and spatial modes in *Silence is a Sense*, the next section argues that verbal abstinence locks the protagonist into an absent identity and a traumatic isolation.

2.5 Post-traumatic silence: A sense and space

The preceding section discussed silence primarily as a form of speech that is important for testimony but is suppressed by narrative norms. In this section, I consider how the ambivalence of silence, which enables it to speak in different forms, shifts into a spatial and sensory mode that suspends the protagonist in a liminal trauma. In this post-traumatic space, she lacks an identity and a voice, and silence is binding rather than liberating.

A present-absent identity is introduced with poetic sound in the novel's first epigraph, which presents an image of shattered glass:

> Fate smashes us as though we were made of glass,
> and never are our shards put together again.

These lines come from the free-thinking philosopher Abu'l-'ala Al-Ma'arri (973-1057 AD), whose Arabic poetry is known for its liberal use of "rich rhyme," which rhymes two syllables rather than one and is therefore exceedingly difficult to render into English. The ambiguity of Al-Ma'arri's poetry, which illuminates the absent identity of AlAmmar's protagonist, can be grasped by comparing a couple

translations. Reynold Nicholson (1966) translates these lines as part of a quatrain that alternates double rhyme with single rhyme:

> We laugh, but inept is our laughter;
>
> We should weep and weep sore,
>
> Who are shattered like glass, and thereafter
>
> Re-moulded no more! (p. 316)

Here the poet expresses a sense of impotence because his laughter is inept, weeping carries on, and humans are broken like glass with no hope for restoration. The last two syllables of "laugh*ter*" and "thereaf*ter*" create a double rhyme, while *sore* and *more* form a simple rhyme that attempts to capture the aural complexity of Al-Ma'arri's writing. Ameen Rihani's (1920) translation, meanwhile, uses simple rhyme in the first, second, and fourth lines, with the third line remaining unrhymed:

> I laugh, but in my laughter-cup I pour
>
> The tears of scorn and melancholy sore;
>
> I who am shattered by the hand of Doubt,
>
> Like glass to be remoulded nevermore. (p. xxx)

Using single rather than double rhyme, Rihani's translation takes more liberty in word choice to convey the nuanced emotional distress of acknowledging one's powerlessness. The speaker pours scorn and melancholy into the cup of laughter, yet this glass is shattered by Doubt, which stands out because it is not part of the rhyme scheme. In the first line, the speaker is the agent who holds the cup, but by the fourth line the speaker has become the cup broken by Doubt's hand. Like the speaker and glass who are there in one line and not there in the next, the protagonist in *Silence is a Sense* has an absent presence that resonates with Al-Ma'arri's poetry. Rather than

prioritizing rhyme in the Al-Ma'arri epigraph, AlAmmar's translation[19] carries smashing sounds through the two lines, sonically foreshadowing the explosions and cries that will haunt her protagonist. AlAmmar's translation also personifies Fate as the shattering force, which gives agency to Fate rather than the human "us", who almost disappears. Like glass, which can be seen and seen through, the protagonist shattered by trauma is physically present but lacks a voice to solidify her identity.

The protagonist's absent identity is doubly bound by silence and solitude. In this too, she resembles Al'Ma'arri, who saw himself as a prisoner to fate, in part because he was blinded by smallpox at a young age. Al-Ma'arri's rich poetry has been attributed to his blindness, which may have helped him to develop a highly retentive aural memory. Geert Jan van Gelder & Gregor Schoeler, translators of Al-Ma'arri's *The Epistle on Forgiveness*, describe his memory as "the aural equivalent of a photographic memory" (2016, xxv). Using his large vocabulary, he was active in Baghdad literary circles, where he challenged Islamic precepts like prayer, fasting, and belief in resurrection of the dead because he saw religion as a fable with no bearing on reality. When his outspokenness led to his expulsion from a literary circle in Baghdad, he returned to his hometown and led what he considered a solitary life (van Gelder & Schoeler, 2016, p. xxvi). Consequently, he described himself as doubly imprisoned by solitude and blindness (Al-Ma'arri, 1918, p. 7).[20] Like this poet from the eleventh century, the protagonist of *Silence is a Sense* feels suffocated by cultural norms in Syria that silence dissident voices, confine women to domestic

[19] Because AlAmmar gives reference to Al-Ma'arri but not to a translator, I assume this is her own translation.

[20] In the preface to *The Luzumiyat*, translator Ameen Rihani (1918) cites Al-Ma'arri's description of himself as "a recluse in two prisons," the two prisons being solitude and blindness (p. 7). In one of his poems, Al-Ma'arri (1918) speaks of his blindness, his confinement, and his flesh (p. 92). Reynold A. Nicholson's translation (1966) renders this image of the poet as being "thrice-imprisoned" by solitude, blindness, and the body (p. 315).

roles, and discourage her from pursuing higher education. To escape these restrictions and the war, she leaves Syria, but she finds herself trapped in post-traumatic hypersensitivity.

The forces that control AlAmmar's protagonist are depicted as overwhelming sensations that lead to muteness. In an exploration of how noise and silence shape aesthetics and epistemologies, Salomé Voegelin (2010) defines noise as a sonic event that demands total attention, "to the exclusion of all other sensorial possibilities" (p. 47). The all-consuming nature of noise can be heard in AlAmmar's protagonist's sonic descriptions of her environment. Since the Syrian war and her journey across Europe, she now perceives the world as

> […] noise and chaos. A relentless assault on the senses. It is bombs and gunfire and babies crying in trees and mothers wailing and fathers shouting and rushing rivers and howling winds and crunching tires and and and. It is the furthest possible thing from silence. And it seemed to me that the only way to counter this cacophony was to go quiet, to express nothing. The only reasonable response was to fill myself up with silence. (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 172)

These lines replicate the sonic "assault" of the noisy world by using "and" over and over. Specific sounds of weapons, distraught human expressions, and stormy natural phenomena are linked by this repeated conjunction, which brings together bombs from Syria and a baby crying somewhere on the journey to Europe. At the end of the third sentence, the triple repetition of "and" suggests that the narrator could continue listing sounds that fill the world, yet she stops because to carry on would merely add to the "cacophony" that overwhelms her senses. Opting for a quiet strategy, she leverages muteness against a world that is too noisy.

But silence slips out of her control and becomes an echo chamber of the war. In *Listening to War*, an in-depth study of how the sounds of modern warfare impact the body, J. Martin Daughtry (2015) analyzes how war can disrupt the mental processes of attaching meaning to sound. Daughtry writes, "There are times when one's ability to choose how to frame a sonic event is compromised by the helplessness one feels in relation to that event" (p. 47). Sounds receive meaning through their contexts and interpretations, but this does not mean that individuals have complete control over meaning, especially in war. In an author interview with Layla AlAmmar, social entrepreneur Curt Rhodes[21] shares the story of a girl who rarely spoke after being kidnapped for ransom at a young age. Rhodes surmises, "She was taking refuge in silence and that silence also becomes a kind of prison" (Magers and Quinn Booksellers, 2021). Like this girl, AlAmmar's protagonist seeks refuge in silence, but it eventually extends her fear of violence and reinforces the trauma that binds her in isolation.

As silence shifts throughout the novel, it becomes linked to the threshold between life and death. After surviving multiple bombs and rockets in Syria, the narrator and her friends come to view silences between blasts as unbearable moments between the known and the unknown. This liminal suspension is defined as:

> Terror. Terror is no longer the one-two explosion of barrel bombs or the pop of gunfire or the knock on the door. No, we have redefined it. Terror is the silence between explosions, the quiet before the knock on the door, before the bullet hits its target and you can breathe again because this time, it wasn't you. (AlAmmar, 2021a, pp. 238-239)

[21] Curt Rhodes is the founder of QuestScope, an international non-profit agency that works for trauma recovery, economic inclusion, and empowerment of marginalized women and youth in the Middle East. See https://www.questscope.org/en

This passage begins with a pause in which the narrator writes "terror" alone, as if the word itself is enough to fill a sentence. After this halt, the repeated word almost produces a stutter before it is defined in the negative: terror is not the loud sounds of bombs, guns, and knocking on doors with which the war began. Having learned to listen to war, Syrian civilians know that bombs come in pairs, so after a first explosion they wait to hear a second. The silence in between these explosions is filled with suspense, like the pause between "Terror" and "Terror" at the beginning of the paragraph. Just as the reader understands terror only after the second utterance, the protagonist grasps that she is still alive only after the second blast of noise. The second noise brings relief, but it does not undo the frightening register of the preceding pause.

Reading the protagonist's sustained silence as an extended experience of war shows how her refusal to speak keeps her inside the space of trauma. After meeting with an English doctor who speaks about trauma as a single event that can be pinpointed, categorized, and then integrated into the present, AlAmmar's protagonist realizes that she cannot communicate her experience of trauma because she conceptualizes it differently. As Bessel van der Kolk (2015) acknowledges in *The Body Keeps the Score*, survivors quickly encounter the limits of language because "traumatic events are almost impossible to put into words" (p. 233). To make the doctor understand her, AlAmmar's protagonist believes she would have to find a new language and new words, but she asserts that this is "impossible" because "You have to step outside something, for a little while at least, in order to name it" (p. 172). For the protagonist, trauma is not a singular event with a before and an after, but a series of political occupations, detainments, surveillance systems, and oppressive governments that encapsulate the individual in something that cannot be escaped.

Because this extended trauma cannot be simply stepped out of and analyzed from a safe distance, the protagonist finds herself caught "*within* the long pause of trauma" (p. 171), a wordless pause that echoes the terrifying quiet between explosions. Lacking language to express this ongoing liminality, she goes mute. As a result, she is caught in a double bind, traumatized into muteness and stuck in it because the words that might help her escape can only be accessed from outside the time and place of trauma.

Although silence has become a space that the protagonist inhabits, it can shift again. In "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma," Barry Stampfl (2014) proposes that involuntary silence is a phase in trauma response, but it does not have to be the end point. Stampfl's work raises the possibility of reading the silence in *Silence as a Sense* as part of the narrator's recovery process, which moves her away from isolation and into community. As Khalid, the protagonist's once-lover, said before he died, "'None of us is condemned to be just one thing, forever and always'" AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 137). The protagonist does not have to remain imprisoned by silence, isolation, and trauma; nor does silence have to remain linked to terror. Silence can be a place of refuge and resistance, trauma and isolation, or even, as we will see in the next section, a place of connection and healing.

2.6 Embodying belonging: An imperative to speak

To escape the bond of trauma and approach belonging, the protagonist of *Silence is a Sense* must integrate speech and silence. This can begin in the realm of the imagination and writing, but it should move to the real world, like this line from Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Silence": "'*I read the fables of sorrow, and weariness, and disgust for mankind, and a longing after solitude*'" (qtd. in

AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 119). Poe's word choice "fables" introduces a fiction, but it quickly moves to the realm of the real by acknowledging the sorrow, weariness, disgust, and longing that make life hard to bear. This movement bridges the perceived gap between fiction and fact, and it lays out a model for moving from literary speech to audible speech. As long as she remains silent, AlAmmar's protagonist has a voice, but only in textual spaces. So that her voice does not become a fable with no connection to the physical world, it needs to move into actual spaces. This imperative to speak is issued by three different men in *Silence is a Sense*, beginning with Poe.

Because it creates aesthetic pleasure through poetic sound, Poe's writing provides an excellent repertoire of sonic strategies that enable literature to transcend the written text. For example, his narrative poem "The Raven" (1966) opens with a grief-stricken speaker sitting at home on a rainy night. The scene contains realistic details that are transmitted sonically through details like a repeated "rapping, rapping" and "tapping" heard at the speaker's chamber door (p. 754). This verisimilitude is bound up with the aural symmetry of "rapping" and "tapping" which complement each other in both rhythm and rhyme. The poem's aural aesthetic is also delivered through a consistent ABCBBB rhyme scheme in which the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth lines of each stanza end in "or" sounds (pp. 754-756). This steady rhyme enables a smooth transition from the realism of the speaker mourning his beloved Lenore to the supernatural moment when the raven utters the word "Nevermore" (p. 755). After the raven speaks, the poetic speaker engages in "fancy upon fancy" trying to make sense of the bird's utterance, which sounds out an appropriate reply to each of the speaker's audible questions (pp. 755-756). But rather than solving the mystery of the bird's speech, he ends up haunted by the raven that

will leave his soul “nevermore” (p. 756). Just as the repetition of “nevermore” and other rhyming words blurs the division between internal and external realities, the sounds of the poem haunt the reader by echoing internally even after the text has been put away.

A similar technique of using sound to bring a textual world into a physical space can be found in Poe’s “Silence,” which AlAmmar’s protagonist reads obsessively but silently. This short piece tells a fable about a man who can withstand loud, frightening storms but flees in terror when a demon curses him with silence (Poe, 1966, pp. 603-605). At the beginning of Poe’s fable, there is no silence: water lilies “sigh one unto the other,” trees crash into each other with “mighty sound,” and clouds roll over each other with “rustling and loud noise” (p. 603). These sounds portray the desolation of the place, but they also create aesthetic pleasure for the reader. The story begins with a description of the river Zaire in Libya: “The waters of the river have a saffron and sickly hue; and they flow not onwards to the sea, but palpitate forever and forever beneath the red eye of the sun with a tumultuous and convulsive motion” (Poe, p. 603). The rhythm and alliteration in this sentence contribute an aesthetic pleasure to this eerie description of the river. The sickly color of the water pleases the ear with its two-syllable adjectives that both begin with “s”. The palpitation of a heart, matched by the red color of the sun, is also a frightening image, but it becomes attractive through the rhythmic symmetry of the tumultuous and convulsive motion that matches the palpitations. To appreciate this aurality, Poe’s writing should be read aloud. If the reader remains silent, like AlAmmar’s protagonist, these sounds remain trapped in the text.

To escape the text, an imaginary Poe demands to be read aloud, thus issuing an injunction to move from literary expression to audible speech. In the chapter titled

“Immersion Therapy,” AlAmmar’s protagonist imagines the author himself in her room while she reads “Silence.” Poe instructs her to read the story aloud, reminding her that his writing is “meant to be heard, rather than read” (p. 118). When she continues reading silently, the author grabs the book and cries out, “‘You must shout the words to the heavens! [. . .] Otherwise what is the damn point?’” (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 118). This surreal scene becomes nightmarish as the apartment blocks in the narrator’s setting crash into each other like the storm-tossed trees in the story, and blood falling from the sky mirrors the blood that rains down in Poe’s story. As Poe reads, the protagonist “jerk[s]” and “convulse[s]” on her bed, and her “heart pound[s] to the rhythm of his cadence” (2021a, pp. 118-119). Her fearful movements and pounding heart indicate that she continues to associate noise with danger, yet Poe’s intervention foreshadows the need to overcome her fear by entering speech as fully as she enters Poe’s literary world. By plunging the protagonist into the crashing sounds of this nightmarish story and the ensuing silence, this chapter in the novel enacts an immersion therapy. When Poe finishes reading the story, his voice gives way to silence and the terror of the episode subsides, but his point has been made: Literary expression must be made audible.

Political action can make literature audible by linking the often-separated realms of literature and life. This symbiosis is expressed by Spivak, who is well known as a literary critic but is also active in developing teacher training programs and agricultural education in rural India. Spivak shares in an interview that one of her friends calls her “Miss Supplementarity” because she tries hard to avoid prioritizing one concept at the expense of another (Sharpe and Spivak, 2003, p. 615). Accordingly, when asked about the need to make political changes as well as mindset shifts, Spivak (2003) agrees that both are needed. Literary expression and

political activism must supplement one another. In *Silence is a Sense*, Khalid expresses a similar philosophy of supplementation. Although he died in service as a White Helmet, echoes of his voice declare the need to replace silence with political speech. Deprived of a public voice in war-torn Syria, Khalid wants to be seen as more than a "*dumb animal*[]" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 187). This reference to mute animals resonates with Aristotle's (ca. 350 B.C.E./1962) argument in *The Politics*, which establishes voice as a defining characteristic of a political being and compares those who lack speech to animals. Rejecting Aristotle's premise, which enables dehumanizing views of the oppressed based on their inaudibility, Khalid asserts, "*No one is truly voiceless*" (p. 188). Although Khalid acknowledges that his countrymen are perceived as having no voice, he believes that Syrians will speak out again, not only in quiet writing but also in life. Thus, the protagonist dreams of Khalid singing to him about "The hush, the eloquence of our silence, and how we must, nevertheless, one day puncture it with screams" (p. 185). Although silence can be a form of resistance, it must eventually burst into sound. Khalid's imagined words carry force as he speaks of "puncturing" silence, not just with average speech or a quiet conversation but with "screams." These screams cannot be confined to pages or posters like those that the protagonist and her friends prepare to express their dissatisfaction with the Assad regime. In his life, Khalid aligned his beliefs with action by serving as a White Helmet to rescue people from bombed out buildings, and after death his lingering presence in the narrative emphasizes that discursive resistance must be matched by political action.

While aiming for integration rather than an either-or mentality, temporarily adopting a silence-speech dichotomy reveals how silence can constitute a failure of action, as Adam argues in *Silence is a Sense*. The protagonist writes against hatred,

violence, and abuse; but her failure to speak has direct consequences for people in her neighborhood. She is unable to help a neighbor being domestically abused: although she dials Emergency, she fails to form any words to inform the operator of the situation. On another occasion, she notices a teenage boy hiding spray paint in a flat and fears that this will be used against the Muslim community, yet she does not alert anyone to this suspicious activity. Later, this spray paint is linked to the murder of Hasan, a Muslim shopkeeper. When Adam, a neighbor with whom the protagonist has a developing friendship, learns that the protagonist knew about the spray paint, he angrily accuses her of failing to act. Upon learning that she is the Voiceless writer, he accuses her of being hypocritical, publishing bold words about the need to overcome xenophobia and Islamophobia, yet hiding behind her muteness and selfishly thinking only of herself. According to Adam, writing is not enough; without matching action, words are just empty statements. He declares, "If you believe in something, you have to act it, *loudly*" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 256). Adam believes that whoever shouts the loudest wins, and actions increase volume by making words tangible. As Adam confronts the protagonist, he clearly exposes the gap between her written convictions and her physical silence.

These calls for audible speech intensify the novel's interrogation of silence and writing, but they do not have the final word. Through her physical silence the protagonist has tried to establish a writerly identity, while Poe, Adam, and Khalid urge her to take make this voice physically audible. Without embracing a silence-speech dichotomy as these three men seem to do, she begins to speak aloud and embody her political ideals. As the following section argues, the interplay between silence and speech is crucial to the protagonist's movement toward community

because silence facilitates attentive listening and positions her to speak when it matters.

2.7 Connecting through silence

Silence can be isolating, but it can also be relational and restorative. Although she initially uses silence to avoid relationships, the protagonist's lack of speech makes her more attentive to the community around her. Through her quiet listening, the protagonist of *Silence is a Sense* becomes relationally connected enough that she wonders, "When did I become so entangled in the lives of these people?" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 226). In the final pages of the novel, the connective potential of sound is more fully realized as the protagonist finally publishes her name and speaks aloud, signaling a discursive and audible movement away from alienation and toward an embodied belonging with an audible political identity.

When it enables listening, silence can increase awareness of one's position in relation to others. In *Listening to Noise and Silence*, Voegelin (2010) argues that silence draws out intersubjectivity by increasing awareness of the surrounding environment. As a result, "what silence reflects back to me is myself as my agency in the world, as life-world" (Voegelin, p. 93). In AlAmmar's (2021a) novel, the narrator's silence makes her more aware of her position in a suffering world. After Adam confronts the protagonist about her failure to prevent a hate crime, the pain of this event is compounded with the sounds that echo in her memory:

> The humming in my chest is a howl. A wail. A shriek. A siren. All the noise of the world is inside me. Every blast, every pop pop pop of gunfire, every crying mother and whimpering child, every crashing wave, every grunting and moaning man, every swear word yelled in every language of Europe,

> every asthmatic child dying in every poorly ventilated truck with huge wheels that crunch over gravel and dirt. They are all in me. I have swallowed them with the silence. (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 256)

The short phrases in this passage create a staccato-like effect that bombards the reader with a humming, which intensifies into a howl, a wail, a shriek, and a siren. Because these noises are linked to gunfire, death, and the perils of being smuggled across Europe, they overwhelm the narrator with the pain of others. She hears the cries and moans of mothers, dying men, and crying children as if they are all inside her body because the lines between self and other have dissolved in her consciousness. This shattering of borders brings together not only the past and the present but also a diverse group of people from Syria, Europe, and England. The echoes of their suffering is overwhelming to the protagonist, but her visceral sensitivity reveals her connection to others.

Listening can also bring people in a temporary sonic community that overcomes ethnic and religious differences. Raymond Murray Schafer (1977) notes in *The Soundscape* that hearing is as intimate as touch when it is "fused with sociability," such as "whenever people gather together to hear something special" (p. 11). This occurs at the funeral for a homicide victim in *Silence is a Sense*. Funeral attendees include members of the Muslim community as well as "non-members" like curious university students and local business owners (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 273). For the duration of the service, everyone gathers in the same space and moves from prayer into silence at the same time. In a quiet moment following the prayer, the protagonist sees a diverse community through tear-blurred vision: "White, brown, black, with straight noses and bulbous ones, curly hair and straight, covered and exposed, they all blur into one mass of living, breathing beings" (p. 276). As the

visual markers of skin color, facial contours, and hair texture fade into each other, the breath of the crowd can almost be heard in this phrase “living, breathing beings” (p. 276). These two-syllable words, all in the present continuous tense, follow each other with a regular pace that vocalizes life and makes breathing audible for the reader. Paradoxically, those who come to the mosque to mourn a homicide victim become a community that sounds definitively alive.

As AlAmmar’s protagonist hears those in her immediate vicinity, she becomes aware of their suffering, and she eventually breaks her silence to help a neighbor. In *Reading Trauma Narratives*, Laurie Vickroy (2015) suggests that trauma recovery is possible only when the wounded recognizes the rights and pains of other people as well as their connections to other people (p. 13). Throughout the novel, the protagonist has heard her community, from the sounds of her next-door neighbor cooking and watching TV to the cries of the abused woman across the way, and the silences of the elderly man living alone. At times these sounds have been unbearable because of the violence that echoes in her mind. But her silence has also become a space where she can listen to those around her, and because of this she is positioned to help a neighbor in need. At the end of the novel, she notices an old man choking on his food, and she runs to save his life. This requires shouting to get the building apartment door open and then speaking on the phone to describe the situation to an emergency dispatcher. For the sake of an other, the protagonist finally uses her physical voice.

Recovering the ability to make daily conversation takes more time, but as the protagonist begins to participate in a political community, she finds a place where her differing opinions are welcomed. Her activist neighbor Adam has sought her opinion on political matters and invited her to join a pro-immigration demonstration

in Manchester, even though she disagrees with his grassroots approach to social change. For example, she notes the irony of the "language of conquest" in his campaign that he calls an "Army of Tolerance" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 286), a rather militaristic way to describe a peaceful march calling for open migration. Nevertheless, she decides to join the demonstration, and she arrives prepared to speak aloud to Adam for the first time. Even though she worries that she can only speak in solitude, this fear is proven false when she introduces herself saying, "'My name is Rana Halabi. It means 'from Aleppo' '" (p. 289). By expressing her identity in this setting, she enters a political community where her voice is wanted.

Rana's name invites a discussion of the interplay between visuality and aurality in *Silence is a Sense*. In Arabic, the name Rana (رنا) is related to the verb *ranā* or *yarnū* (یرنو), which means "to gaze" or "to look intently." It is often interpreted to mean beautiful, glittering, eye-catching, or mesmerizing. Such semantic readings reflect how names gain significance not only from their lexical definitions but also in relation to broader social structures. Accordingly, Rana's patriarchal and collective society of origin may emphasize her as a beautiful object of desire. However, the novel problematizes a semantic reading that would romanticize Rana's name and reinscribe her into a system of male control enforced by the gaze. Through her migration journey, Rana has struggled to escape rapists who see her as an object of desire, and her family's suffocating love, which would keep her close to them and marry her off to a man of their choosing. These structures of control distort the meaning of the name Rana, turning her into a passive object that is viewed rather than an active gazer. By becoming a gazer who discretely observes her neighbors from her apartment window in Britain, Rana reclaims the lexical meaning of her name. She further escapes the dominating gazes that seek to define her identity by

using silence to draw attention to language. As a result, the men in her life in Britain, like Adam and the imaginary Poe, want to hear her voice, not just gaze at her as an object. Rather than being subjected to the gaze of another person, something that is out of her control, she is encouraged to speak. By choosing when to reveal her name, which draws attention back to the gaze, Rana establishes her agency in making and expressing her identity.[22]

Uttering her name is also linked to a shift in writing style that suggests Rana has found her voice, like Stephen Daedalus in Joyce's (1914-1915/1992) bildungsroman. Having published anonymously throughout the novel, Rana submits a short story for publication in another magazine, this time with her name on it. Moving from memoir-style articles to fiction gives her more freedom to use silence and language as she deems appropriate, rather than striving to please an audience who can only hear a certain way. This change in form linked to the emergence of the self follows the trajectory of Joyce's (1914-1915/1992) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* At the end of *Portrait*, the narrative shifts from a third-person omniscient narrator into Stephen's first-person narrative. Although the narrative still proceeds by thought association, like an early stream-of-consciousness technique, the change in form signals that Stephen has found his identity as a writer. The artist's birth is conveyed in the penultimate sentence, "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (1914-1915/1992, pp. 275-277). Stephen's intention to forge a new consciousness in his soul seems to separate him triumphantly from the structures of religion, language, and nationality that he tried so hard to evade. Similarly, when AlAmmar's protagonist experiments with a new writing style, she

[22] Many thanks to Şirin Aşkar at Haliç University for advising on the Arabic meaning and connotations of the name Rana.

seems to follow in Stephen's footsteps. Because her short story is well received, there is an implication that the protagonist has finally found her voice as a writer and broken free from the past that haunts her.

However, overemphasizing this trajectory disregards the ambiguity that permeates the novel, and it threatens to reinscribe binary dichotomies. It would be naïve to argue that a change in form was all that the traumatized Syrian woman needed to find her identity as a writer, or that writing fiction will give her more freedom than producing opinion pieces based on her firsthand experiences. Further, to read the end of *Silence as a Sense* as a triumphant birth of an artist is to fall into the trap of making every feminist novel a bildungsroman that celebrates the emergence of the individual. In her essay "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern," Spivak (1998/2006) analyzes a short story by Mahasweta Devi, arguing that while Devi gives a subject position to a subaltern woman character, she does not make her an "individualist" hero of a bildungsroman. Spivak states, "To place the subaltern in a subject-position in her history is not necessarily to make her an individualist" (p. 355). In making this distinction between having a subject-position and being an individualist, Spivak simultaneously resists the ideal of forward progress in the coming-of-age story and makes room for characters to change in non-linear ways. Similarly, AlAmmar's character claims a subject position as she speaks again, but she does so without becoming a heroine who conforms to a linear story line. Part of her project has been to find a voice for what has been silenced, without destroying silence or succumbing to the narrative norms imposed by her editor.

One of Rana's final reflections on memory and trauma further articulates how her non-essentialist identity emphasizes complexity and ambiguity. The protagonist's silence and isolation early in the novel are attempts to shut out traumatic sounds from

the past, but these memories continue to surface. When the protagonist finally speaks aloud and publishes a piece of short fiction with her real name, she moves into discursive and political communities where her voice can be heard. This does not mean that she has eradicated her trauma; on the contrary, the narrator asserts that memories and sensations of terror persist because they are carried "in the rooms and boxes of our hearts and minds" (AlAmmar, 2021a, p. 282). But the past and present terror that trapped the protagonist into an isolated silence have been put back into this metaphorical box. Trauma is no longer a room that she inhabits; it is part of what fills the spaces in her mind. With this spatial shift, the protagonist begins to participate in her community through listening and speaking. Although she will likely continue to encounter echoes of the past, she is no longer defined by her trauma or muted by sounds of terror. Having established an identity as a writer with a specific name and history, she brings discursive ideals of dialogue into two cities—London and her unnamed city—where they can be embodied, spoken, and heard.

Establishing an audible identity with a name also brings the protagonist closer to London. If identification as a speaking body is a precondition to political membership, as Aristotle proposed thousands of years ago or as Gayatri Spivak suggested in asking if the subaltern can speak, *Silence is a Sense* shows how a refugee woman in the twenty-first century must develop a coherent identity and a recognizable voice to participate meaningfully in the British metropolis. At the end of the novel, the protagonist publishes her name and shares it with her editor Josie, who responds with an invitation to meet her in person, perhaps in London (p. 285). These actions bring the protagonist closer to the city from which she has been excluded. Until now, she has been heard in London as Voiceless, an anonymous refugee, but publishing under her own name gives her a fuller presence in London.

She is no longer an unnamed voice living in a generic city. She is Rana Halabi, a writer with a name and a history.

Just as the protagonist-narrator's writing brings silence into a multilingual discourse, her decision to speak aloud transforms textual ideals into urban realities. As long as the protagonist produces polyphonic texts yet remains silent in her city, she perpetuates an oppressive dichotomy that isolates her in post-traumatic muteness. From her small British city, the protagonist of *Silence is a Sense* initially experiences London as a place that marginalizes refugees and allows anti-Muslim prejudice to inhibit cross-cultural welcome. Sounds of encounter, like the Arabic, Farsi, and Pakistani music in the mosque courtyard, are replaced by generalized "us" versus "them" thinking that negates individual histories and silences voices that bear witness to suffering. To escape this suppression and break the bond of trauma, the novel dismantles the barrier between silence and speech as well as a parallel distinction between textual and urban spaces. The protagonist's writing allows verbal lacunae to linger, and it favours gaps and fragmentation over detailed narrative that progresses smoothly to an end. The novel also co-mingles Arabic, Anglophone, and Spanish voices to establish intertextuality as a paradigm for free speech and belonging. This enables audible encounters with difference, and it contributes a Syrian woman's voice to contemporary literature. Within the novel, her voice enters the city when she finds the courage to speak aloud, in response to her attentive listening and her awareness of another person's suffering. As AlAmmar's novel makes clear, silence can speak, suppress, trap, liberate, isolate, and connect, just like verbal expression. By complicating any simple associations of silence with suppression or speech with freedom alone, *Silence is a Sense* gives ear to textual voices and silences, and it envisions belonging for Muslim immigrants in urban

spaces that respond to the sense of silence. Rather than reinscribing binaries of silence-speech, inclusion-exclusion, and fact-fiction, *Silence is a Sense* moves in multiple directions and brings in diverse voices to imagine belonging for Syrian newcomers in Britain.

CHAPTER 3

THE TRAGEDY CONTINUES: RE-SOUNDING SILENCES OF WOMEN IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *HOME FIRE*

Sounding a counterpoint to the note of optimism in Chapter Two, this chapter examines how Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) rewrites the tragedy of *Antigone* to critique the lack of belonging for second-generation immigrant Muslim women in London. Limited by the tragic framework that shapes its plotline, *Home Fire*'s multi-voiced structure exposes the inability of polyphony to foster political inclusion. Polyphony has often been deployed as a sign of freedom (free play), agency, and connection across lines of difference. But *Home Fire*'s relationship to *Antigone* forestalls the conclusion that increasing dialogue or replacing silence with speech can ameliorate lack of belonging because in this novel the interplay of diverse voices is unable to change the fateful outcome scripted by the *Antigone* pre-text. Just as Antigone's attempt to bury her brother (who has been exiled for rebelling against the state) leads to her own death as well as his, Aneeka's call for justice is unable to repatriate her or her brother. By bringing the *Antigone* tragedy to a contemporary novel filled with sound, *Home Fire* suggests that British Muslim women have no voice in London.

The plot of *Home Fire* closely follows that of Sophocles' *Antigone.* In Sophocles' (ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982) tragedy, the titular heroine's brother Polyneices is forbidden a proper burial in Thebes because he fought against the state and killed his older brother Eteocles in battle. Against King Creon's orders and despite her sister Ismene's refusal to help, Antigone determines to bury Polyneices even if her loyalty to family and the divine laws of justice will make her a traitor to

the nation. After Antigone illegally performs burial rites over the outcast corpse, Creon condemns her to be buried alive, ignoring her pleas for justice as well as warnings from the chorus, his son Haimon, and the seer Tiresias. At the end of the play, Creon finally heeds this counsel and decides to bury Polyneices properly, but it is too late to stop the tragedy in motion: Antigone hangs herself, Haimon kills himself upon discovering his fiancée's dead body, and Haimon's mother commits suicide when she hears the news.

These Sophoclean characters form the basis of the main characters in Shamsie's novel, but *Home Fire* moves the classical Greek drama to contemporary London and tells the story through the voices of second- and third-generation Pakistani British Muslims. Siblings Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz Pasha (representing Ismene, Antigone, and Polyneices, respectively) have grown up in London with an absent father who fought for Muslim causes in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, Kashmir, and Afghanistan before dying on the way to a Guantánamo Bay detention center. Because of their relation to a jihadi fighter, the Pasha family has censored their behavior to avoid raising suspicions that they are more loyal to family or faith than to the nation. Thus, when Parvaiz joins the Islamic State, his sister Isma reports him to the British authorities, who then strip him of his British citizenship. Meanwhile, Aneeka remains in contact with Parvaiz and tries to bring him home by developing a romantic relationship with Eamonn Lone, son of the home secretary. But after Parvaiz dies in a drive-by shooting in Istanbul, his corpse is sent to Pakistan because the British home secretary, Karamat Lone, refuses to repatriate the body of a so-called traitor. Aneeka flies to Karachi to mourn her brother and make a public appeal for his body to be repatriated, yet Karamat shows no sign of relenting—until it is too late. The novel ends just before an explosion kills Aneeka and Eamonn, thus

constructing a cliffhanger that seems to underscore these characters' lack of freedom. Even though each of the main characters indirectly narrates a section of the novel, and they have access to social media and other forms of digital expression, their technical ability to speak contrasts with their limited political agency.

Home Fire is not the only recent novel to rewrite *Antigone* with an interest in multiplying narrative perspectives and amplifying unheard voices in diverse contexts. Natalie Haynes's (2018) feminist intervention *The Children of Jocasta* rewrites Sophocles' Labdacid cycle from the perspectives of Jocasta and Ismene to give voice to women characters often disregarded as unlikeable or weak and submissive. In an illustrated retelling, *The Story of Antigone*, Ali Smith (2011) takes the perspective of a crow to adapt the story for younger readers, emphasizing interconnections between animals and humans. Set in Afghanistan, Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's (2012) *The Watchman* incorporates voices of a Pashto woman, a Tajik translator, and American soldiers to criticize US military involvement in the region. Also set in a contemporary conflict zone, Sara Uribe's (2012) *Antígona González* compares Antigone's quest to bury her brother with a Mexican woman's search for the body of her brother who has gone missing due to gang and drug violence. Even though she does not find the body, Uribe's speaker declares in one voice with the author, "we want to name the voices of the stories that occurred here" (p. 97, own translation).[23] Naming these histories will not change them, yet novelists continue to use the Antigone story to tell of injustices in Greece, Afghanistan, Mexico, and Britain. Like these novels that rewrite *Antigone* from marginalized positions, *Home Fire* centers the voices of Pakistani British citizens not to offer

[23] Uniting the narrator Sandra Muñoz with her own voice as an author, Uribe writes in Spanish, "Soy Sandra Muñoz, pero también soy Sara Uribe y queremos nombrar las voces de las historias que ocurren aquí" (Uribe, 2012, p. 97).

multi-voiced discourse as a form of salvation but to draw attention to a tragedy unfolding in contemporary London.

Simultaneously, because it gives voice to so-called rebels and traitors, *Antigone* has also given birth to a long line of dramatic adaptations in which oppressed classes challenge injustice and overbearing rulers. One notable adaptation is Jean Anouilh's 1944 staging of *Antigone* in occupied France, which made the tension between civic and moral laws relevant to French citizens subjected to Nazi rule. The following year, in 1945, Bertolt Brecht staged a more radical version envisioning Antigone as the German people rising up against Hitler. In 1974, Fugard et al.'s *The Island* transposed the drama to a South African prison to expose human rights abuses and criticize the apartheid system.[24] More recently, Kamal Kaan's (2021) *Aliyah: After Antigone* sets the tragedy in Bradford, UK to examine the fragility of contemporary citizenship for Bangladeshi and Muslim Brits. Joining this tradition of adapting *Antigone*, *Home Fire* rewrites the tragedy to interrogate exclusivist attitudes toward British Muslims and critique policies authorizing citizenship deprivation. Since 2002, the United Kingdom has increasingly used citizenship deprivation as a counterterrorism measure, most often against citizens from immigrant backgrounds (van der Baaren et al., 2022). In 2014, an amendment to the Immigration Act permitted citizenship deprivation of naturalized citizens even if this would render an individual stateless, a caveat that had been included in earlier versions of the policy (McKinney et al., 2023). Because British-born citizens without dual nationality are not subject to this amendment, some critics have argued that the

[24] *The Island* (Fugard et al., 1974) embeds a restaging of *Antigone* within a play set in the Robben Island prison, where Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were incarcerated during the South African apartheid era. The play suggests that these prisoners, like Antigone, were condemned unjustly, since their crime was protesting the apartheid system. Their seemingly unending sentences and futile labor are likened to Antigone's live burial.

amendment unduly discriminates against migrants and ethnic minorities (McKinney et al., 2023, p. 14). Kamila Shamsie (2018) has also spoken out against citizenship deprivation laws, asserting in her speech "Unbecoming British" that these policies reveal that "the equality of all citizens is a myth" (n.p.). Many of the criticisms in Shamsie's speech are reflected in her novel, but by rewriting *Antigone*, *Home Fire* goes a step further and links the critique of British citizenship to the foundations of Western democracy in classical Greece, the birthplace of tragedy.

As *Home Fire* revisits what has become a landmark text in the Western canon, it unsettles the originary purity associated with Greek texts and causes us to ask, as George Steiner does, why *Antigone* has such a hold on the European imagination. Throughout *Antigones: The Antigone Myth in Western Literature, Art and Thought*, Steiner (1986) searches for a satisfactory answer to why *Antigone* has been resurrected and reinvented over and over. Perhaps he comes closest when he remarks almost in passing that to examine the persistence of *Antigone* is to wonder about "'the tyranny of Greece over the western mind'" (p. 122),[25] a curious turn of phrase that casts suspicion on Greece's dominance. Is Greece privileged because it was in fact so great, or do Greek myths exert a hidden tyranny over the West? The disproportionate influence of Greece in the Western imagination is precisely what Martin Bernal (1987) interrogates in *Black Athena* as he examines how nineteenth-century racism and romanticism established an origin myth for Europe by imagining

[25] Steiner encloses this phrase in quotation marks without indicating a source. One persuasive explanation, for which I credit Dr. Charles Sabatos of Yeditepe University, is that Steiner is alluding to Eliza Marian Butler's *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (1935/1958), which would have been well-known when Steiner was writing the first edition of *Antigones*. In *Tyranny*, Butler (1935/1958) argues that great German writers such as Winckelmann, Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, and Heine were concerned with ennobling humankind, but they succumbed to "the tyranny of an ideal" in excessively glorifying Greece (p. ix). Foregrounding the rise of fascism that she observed while writing this book from 1933-1935, Butler suggests that literary Hellenism paved the way for racist propaganda to flourish in twentieth-century Germany. By changing "Germany" into "the western mind" in his phrase (p. 122), Steiner (1986) broadens Butler's argument to problematize Greece's influence beyond Germany.

classical Greece as a pure, white, progressive, just society. Deconstructing this image, Bernal demonstrates that Greece was in fact highly influenced by Egypt and the Levant (p. 19), and the classical Greeks acknowledged they were the product of interpenetration and cultural mixing, even if they at times downplayed this reality to boost a sense of national pride (p. 24). Like Bernal's research that shows our image of classical Greece to be a constructed myth, Shamsie's novel disrupts a foundational story in the Western tradition. Rather than using the *Antigone* plot or the form of Greek tragedy to perpetuate myths of cultural purity and nationalism, Shamsie appropriates the story for Southeast Asian British Muslim women, the very people who would be excluded from a purist mythology.

By adapting *Antigone* to critique inequality in Britain, *Home Fire* draws out a subversive impulse in Greek drama. Although fifth-century Athens is known as the birthplace of Western democracy, its social structures would have fallen woefully short of contemporary standards for inclusion. Edith Hall (2004), for example, describes Athens as "xenophobic, patriarchal, and imperialist" (p. 93), and many scholars have noted that women were excluded from the public sphere (Dué, 2006; Foley, 2001; James & Dillon (Eds.), 2012; Pritchard, 2014). However, during the Dionysian festivals, social norms could be challenged and disrupted on the Athenian stage, perhaps because the god Dionysus was associated with otherness, sexual ambivalence, ecstasy, intoxication, transformation, and transgression, as suggested by Peter Easterling (1997, p. 37, 44-48). Along with satyr plays, the Dionysian festival featured both comedy and tragedy, with various degrees of dissent expressed in each. Old Comedy is known for its strident critique of public leaders like Pericles, whom Aristophanes calls a tyrant and a womanizer (Tracy, 2009, p. 97). In comedies like Aristophanes' (ca. 411 B.C.E./2002) *Lysistrata*, critique is not only vocalized

but also acted out as women occupy the Acropolis and withhold sex from their husbands until they negotiate an end to the civil war between Sparta and Athens. But the social efficacy of such critique was often limited to the stage, as becomes clear in Sophocles' *Antigone* since the protagonist's call for social change is ultimately curtailed by the tragic form. Antigone may be seen as a spokeswoman for the underclass, yet portraying her as a heroine of radical change is complicated by her inability to bring about actual change, since she neither succeeds in burying her brother nor avoids being exiled. Similarly, Shamsie's Aneeka participates in this dramatic tradition of dissent even as she cries in vain for justice to be done.

The complex politics of Greek tragedy are also reflected in the notoriously difficult concept of catharsis, which has alternately been seen as a conservative force and an opening for progressive change. Catharsis has been a key feature of tragedy since Aristotle's famous definition established catharsis as an outcome of tragic performance, but the impulse to affect catharsis can absorb women's voices into established social orders. For example, women's voices are prominent in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as Cassandra, Clytemnestra, Electra, and a chorus of slave women lament and cry out for justice. The final play of the *Oresteia*, the *Eumenides*, presents the furies as a group of women whose desire for revenge threatens to perpetuate the cycle of violence that drives this set of three plays. Athena breaks the cycle by convincing the furies to exchange "brute force" for "reasoned persuasion" (Aeschylus, ca. 458 B.C.E. 458/1999, p. 189), thus offering a hopeful conclusion to the audience who has witnessed multiple homicides on the tragic stage. However, Athena's divine authority squashes the concerns of the furies, and their arguably subaltern voices are silenced for the sake of the greater good.[26] Tragedy can also

[26] The furies are outsiders in this play, and they are likely the same slave women who constitute the chorus in *Libation Bearers*, the preceding play in this cycle. In *The Captive Woman's Lament in*

generate catharsis by assigning meaning to suffering, as Eleftheria Ioannidou (2017) points out in *Greek Fragments in Postmodern Frames*.[27] One has only to recall the chorus's final lines in *Oedipus the King* suggesting that Oedipus suffered because he tried too hard to control his destiny (Sophocles, ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982, Lines 291-300). Similarly, the final chorus of *Antigone* admonishes the audience, based on Creon's experience, to honor the gods and not claim too much power for oneself (Sophocles, ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982, Lines 1466-1470). After Medea has killed her children in Euripides' (ca. 431 B.C.E./2011) *Medea*, the chorus attempts to offer consolation by reiterating that Zeus controls most of what happens in his realm, including unexpected and undesired suffering wrought by the gods (Lines 1415-1419). This reminder of divine power underscores the importance of obeying the gods while also suggesting that Medea acted not only of her own volition but in accordance with her fate. Such messages provide audiences with relief by explaining why suffering occurred and how to avoid a similar fate, but they may subtly support conservative politics and social hierarchies as the chorus instructs the audience in how to interpret the play.

On the other hand, a choral conclusion may intentionally offer an inadequate response to the play, thus inviting audiences to continue pondering what they have experienced. Some of the greatest tragedies end with images of unresolved suffering: Oedipus blinds himself yet lives with the horror of his deeds, Creon stays alive to regret his decisions and mourn his family, and the chorus in *Medea* suggests that

Greek Tragedy, Casey Dué (2006) notes: "The captive Trojan women who lament at the tomb of Agamemnon in the *Libation Bearers* become the terrifying, vengeful Erinyes of the *Eumenides*" (p. 28).

[27] Ioannidou (2017) argues that tragedy interrogates not only the meaning of suffering but also whose suffering is meaningful (p. 3).

some things cannot be understood.[28] Similarly, *Home Fire* refrains from providing a one-sided resolution that affirms existing political structures or assigns meaning to the suffering represented. Shamsie further increases the tension of *Antigone* by installing a narrative silence that disrupts cathartic relief and augments the complexity of political tragedy. Through interpretive silence, I will argue at the end of this chapter, *Home Fire* brings a politics of resistance into a tragic narrative about British Muslim women's inability to speak politically in contemporary London. But first, we need to understand why *Home Fire*, a multi-voiced novel set in multicultural London, should be read as a tragedy. Beginning with structural differences, the next section compares *Home Fire*'s polyphonic form to the two-sided framework that dominates interpretations of the *Antigone* tragedy.

3.1 From dualistic *agon* to pluralistic polyphony

One of the goals of this dissertation is to practice listening to multiple voices, especially when they compete with each other, and to find a theoretical framework for lingering in the tension. Challenging the perceived dualism of silence versus speech, the previous chapter reframed verbal abstinence as a form of communication, rather than merely a symbol of traumatic suppression and exclusion. At the same time, I reject a wholesale celebration of silence because, like audible speech, it can be a vehicle for suppression, exclusion, and hate as well as for freedom, inclusion, and acceptance. Rather than simply inverting an aural hierarchy, my dissertation explores how specific contemporary novels center the margins by bringing multiple voices, including silent ones, into a conversation. This chapter further deconstructs

[28] Emphasizing human inability to understand the gods, the final lines of Euripides' (431 B.C.E./ 2011) *Medea* read: "Of many things Zeus in Olympus is keeper / many are the things the gods bring about against all reason, / and what is looked for does not happen after all, / yet a god finds a way for the unexpected" (Lines 1414-1417).

the silence-speech binary by examining how polyphony in *Home Fire* augments the complexity of Sophocles' *Antigone* and its subsequent interpretations.

As *Home Fire* adapts a tragic drama into a contemporary novel, its multi-voiced narrative structure prompts a reconsideration of the agonistic framework that has dominated interpretations of *Antigone*. One of the central tenets of Greek tragedy, *agon* is typically understood as referring to the conflict between protagonist and antagonist, or between a character and the chorus (Britannica, n.d.; Oxford Reference, n.d.). In classical Athens, *agon* also referred to a physical or internal struggle, and the verb form of *agon* (*agōnizesthai*) meant to compete for a prize, either in gymnastic games or on the dramatic stage (Wallace, 2007, p. 11). With these cultural, literary, and etymological layers, *agon* has become a key term for understanding the Greek plays in themselves and in relation to fifth-century B.C.E. Greece. Since Hegel's influential writing on dialectics, many *Antigone* interpretations have emphasized binary tensions between state and family, human and divine justice, tyranny and democracy, individual and collective, or male and female.[29] Such readings often center on the conflict between Creon, representing the manmade laws of the state, and Antigone, championing loyalty to family and emerging as an individual, to the extent that George Steiner (1986) has suggested calling the play *Antigone and Creon* rather than *Antigone* (p. 187). Even if Steiner's suggestion is merely a rhetorical strategy, renaming the play to emphasize the *agon*

[29] In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel (1807/2004) makes *Antigone* central to his discussion of the tensions that must be resolved in the modern state. He claims that the modern state, like the tragedy, comes into being through a dialectical tension between two equally opposed and equally valid positions. Such a conflict cannot be resolved by determining which position is right, because they are both right. This dialectical model has subsequently influenced many Western readings of *Antigone.* George Steiner (1986), for example, uses the language of dialectic to analyze the domestic and public tension in the play, writing, "In Antigone, the dialectic of intimacy and of exposure, of the 'housed' and of the most public, is made explicit" (p. 11). Simon Goldhill (1986) likens the Creon/Antigone tension to oppositions such as society versus individual, state versus family, masculine versus feminine, and secular versus divine law (p. 88).

reflects a hermeneutical tendency to reduce the tragedy's conflict to two representative voices.

To illustrate an agonistic interpretation of *Home Fire*, I want to close read a passage that conveys much of the analogous conflict between human and divine justice contested in both the novel and its dramatic source text. After Parvaiz's body has been sent to Karachi, Aneeka flies to be with him and make her plea for justice. She is determined to bring her brother home to London, even if it is only his corpse that gets repatriated. For this reason, she sits vigil with his body in Karachi, at a park located a few minutes away from the heavily guarded British Deputy High Commission. The scene is described thus:

> …there was a park lined with banyan trees, their ancient overground roots more enduring than wire rusting in the sea air or guns that jammed with dust or the calculations made today by politicians looking to the next elections.
>
> Here she would sit with her brother until the world changed or both of them crumbled into the soil around them. (Shamsie, 2017, p. 222)

In this scene, the detail of the banyan trees subtly incorporates the Sophoclean theme of natural versus political law, imbued with a Southeast Asian and Muslim tone. For example, in Indian Hindu culture, banyan trees are said to represent immortality and wisdom, in part because it is under a banyan tree that Buddha found enlightenment. Similarly, in Islam, trees often represent life and knowledge. Common in Pakistan, the banyan trees with their aged overground roots symbolize a timeless justice with which Aneeka aligns herself, denouncing the human forms of justice represented by rusting wire, jammed weapons, and political machinations. Natural and divine justice are pitted against each other in this scene, and there seems to be no solution to the conflict. Although Aneeka may have eternal justice on her side—unlike the natural

law that oxidizes wires and clogs guns—earthly time is against her, since she is likely to join her brother in death before the law changes in her favor.

Identifying agonistic tension can aid our reading of scenes like this one, but overemphasizing *agon* inhibits our ability to hear the multiple voices that converge in both the novel and its tragic pre-text. As Casey Dué (2006) points out in *The Captive Woman's Lament in Greek Tragedy*, Greek drama blurs and deconstructs oppositions like man/woman, Greek/foreigner, and slave/free just as often as it draws such distinctions. Similarly, Helene Foley (2001), author of *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, finds that tragedy both represents and complicates binary oppositions that were central to Greek thought, such as the logical analogy male is to female as public is to private.[30] Rather than concluding that tragedy either destabilizes or reinforces cultural norms, Foley (2001) writes, "tragedy offers a dialogue in which women, slaves, barbarians, and even divinities are represented in a complex and powerful public performance" (p. 333). Foley's insight addresses the limitations of and moves beyond a binary framework by focusing on how outsiders speak in and through tragic plays. Likewise, Shamsie's novel develops a complex dialogue by amplifying the voices of women from Muslim and immigrant backgrounds. *Home Fire* also moves beyond a dialectical conflict by separating the novel into five sections, with each section's semi-omniscient narration tied to a different British Muslim character. Isma Pasha is a devout and highly educated woman pursuing a PhD in the USA. Her sister Aneeka Pasha studies law at the London School of Economics, while Aneeka's twin brother Parvaiz joins the Islamic State. Eamonn Lone is a non-religious third-

[30] Dué and Foley are not the only scholars to emphasize the complexity of Greek drama. Focusing on Sophocles' *Antigone,* Simon Goldhill (1986) finds that ambiguity in the language of *philia* destabilizes ideas about personal and state relationships, and he argues that the apparent opposition between Creon's and Antigone's loyalties is unresolved at the end of the play (p. 106). Goldhill even asserts, "there is no simple opposition of 'household' and 'state'" in *Antigone* (p. 114). Moreover, the wealth of literature that adapts and interprets *Antigone* testifies to the complexity of Greek drama.

generation Pakistani Brit, and his father Karamat Lone is a secularized politician who manipulates religion to win votes. Because these characters are based on Sophoclean characters, Shamsie's structure highlights a conflict that is already more than two-sided. In *Antigone,* the individual/state conflict represented by Antigone/Creon is complicated by Ismene's position as she tries to remain loyal to the law and to her sister. Haimon's conflict with his father also complicates a binary approach because he conveys to Creon the people's criticisms, while he tries to reconcile his love for his father with his love for Antigone. Rather than creating a clear *agon* between the Pasha family (representing the individual and the family unit) and the Lone family (representing the state and public concerns), Shamsie's narrative draws attention to each character's distinctiveness so that it becomes harder to fit the novel and the play into a polemical framework.

Home Fire further multiplies vocal conflict by using digital media as a "chorus" that presents more than two opinions. In line with Shamsie's own remarks that the media is the chorus in her novel, Naomi Weiss (2022) writes, "the media plays an important role in producing some of *Home Fire*'s polyphony. In this respect, it functions as a sort of tragic chorus" (p. 253). Key in Weiss's description is the phrase "a sort of." Rather than singing in organized thesis-antithesis form like Sophocles' chorus, Shamsie's media chorus speaks through social media posts, sensationalist headlines, news programs, and newspapers that contradict each other. In contrast, Greek tragic chorus typically sings in strophe and anti-strophe to voice competing opinions. This structure reflects the Greek rhetorical tradition in which one party asserts a position, and the other party argues the opposing side (Hall, 2004).[31] Take, for example, the chorus's response to Haimon's confrontation of his

[31] Edith Hall (2004) points out that the rhetorical tradition of arguing antithetically is reflected in tragedy as characters speak and disagree with each other.

father in Sophocles' (ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982) *Antigone*. Haimon has reported to his father that the public believes Antigone acted heroically by burying Polyneices, and he questions Creon's judgment in condemning Antigone to death. Challenging his father's claim to have the only right opinion, Haimon declares that anyone who thinks he has sole ownership of truth is empty because there is no monopoly on truth. The chorus leader initially agrees with Haimon, saying that he is "speaking to the point," yet then the chorus affirms that Creon is also "talking sense" (Sophocles, ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982, Lines 810-812). Assuming that the chorus members sing all their lines in unison, one might conclude here that the chorus is playing word games or alluding to a philosophical truth that transcends the mutual exclusivity of Creon's and Haimon's arguments. On other hand, if these lines are sung in alternating pattern of strophe and anti-strophe, they highlight how the chorus contributes to the play's agonistic tension by asserting one argument and then offering a counterargument. Nevertheless, in both interpretations, the Sophoclean choral structure vocalizes a dualistic tension.

Compared to the two-part chorus of Sophocles' tragedy, *Home Fire*'s chorus presents a multi-voiced conflict that can be described in Bakhtinian terms of polyphony and heteroglossia. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) conceptualizes multi-languaged consciousness as a defining characteristic of the novel, which presents an ever-developing world view and sets it apart from older literary traditions that present a complete worldview. While drama and lyric poetry contain a "monologic unity," according to Bakhtin (1929/1984) in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (p. 10), the novel contains "a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world" (p. 22). Bakhtin's (1981) claim that polyphony emerged with the novel genre is debatable, yet his attention to voice as

representing a consciousness can help us to listen for the coexistence of multiple worldviews in a single utterance. One example of this in *Home Fire* is a newspaper article titled "'SHATTERED AND HORRIFIED': SISTER OF PARVAIZ PASHA SPEAKS" (p. 204). This title directly quotes Isma's words but embeds them in the perspective of the media outlet. Beginning with Isma's statement to the press, this article brings together voices that support the state with those that criticize it. In a statement carefully crafted to represent the Pasha sisters as law-abiding citizens, Isma states that she and her sister were "shattered and horrified" by Parvaiz's actions, yet they acted in the state's best interest by reporting his terrorist activities immediately (p. 204). Even now, Isma is cooperating with the state by reading this statement, a fact we learn later in the novel. Because Isma's statement is read, it was evidently prepared beforehand, perhaps even by a government representative. As a result, it might be more appropriate to say that Isma does not speak as much as she parrots, using her physical voice to channel the state's voice. Uncovering these layers of motivations and hidden voices in Isma's statement to the press also casts doubt on the authenticity of the local mosque's statement, quoted in the news article, that they will not hold funeral prayers for Parvaiz (p. 205). Although the mosque declares their loyalty to the state, one cannot help but wonder if the religious Muslim community, like Aneeka and other characters in the novel do, disapproves of the ease with which the home secretary has deprived Parvaiz of his citizenship. These dialogic layers present a polyphonic chorus that departs from the dominant strophe-antistrophe structure of Sophoclean chorus.

Shamsie's choral polyphony also moves beyond *agon* by multiplying competing voices. In addition to the statements from Isma and the mosque, the "Shattered and Horrified" article includes a statement from a mother whose daughter

married an ISIS fighter. Aggrieved by the "'lies and propaganda'" that "'tricked'" her daughter into joining ISIS, the mother offers a tongue-in-cheek criticism of the home secretary's decision to ban Parvaiz's body: "'My only disagreement with the Home Secretary's decision is that it deprives me of the chance to spit on the terrorist's grave'" (p. 205). The mother seems to wish for a harsher punishment to shame Parvaiz, while her use of the word "terrorist" echoes the home secretary's rhetoric. The article's compilation of criticisms against Parvaiz is rounded out with a reference to the home secretary's opinion that citizenship is not a right or a birthright.[32] Following this barrage of voices justifying the state's decisions to strip Parvaiz of his rights as a citizen, the article ends with an opposing quotation from a human rights group arguing that removing citizenship is "'a tool of despots not democrats'" (p. 206). This strongly worded counter position clashes with the other opinions that have been voiced in the article, and none of them resolve. Because each quotation also contains layers of meaning and allusion, this "choral" interlude sounds highly polyphonic.

Listening to the polyphony in *Home Fire*'s structure and media chorus can revise understandings of the *Antigone* pre-text by drawing attention to the layers of loyalty and conflict running throughout the play. Prior to discussing the chorus in this section, I argued that *agon* is a central framework in Greek tragedy and it has limited our interpretations of the plays. An agonistic framework and a two-part chorus, as discussed above, highlight the antiphonic qualities of Greek tragedy, but it may obscure the polyphony in the play. Edith Hall (2004) contends in "The

[32] Karamat's statement echoes a statement made by British Prime Minister Theresa May. In 2014, shortly after signing Immigration Act amendment that would permit citizenship deprivation of naturalized citizens even if it rendered an individual stateless, then-Prime Minister Theresa May declared, "citizenship is a privilege, not a right." Such a position contravenes international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both of which protect citizenship as a human right.

Sociology of Athenian Tragedy" that Greek tragedy is polyphonic and "definitively dialogic" because it gives voice to characters from many social groups, including women, slaves, lower classes, servants, patriots, and traitors (p. 119). Drawing largely on Hall's work, Simon Critchley (2019) writes in *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* that tragedy is both polyphonic and antiphonic because it imagines political egalitarianism that did not exist in Greece. Critchley argues, therefore, that we need a "bifurcated" reading to account for the "ideological import" as well as the subversiveness of tragedy (Ch. 13, para. 8). Reading *Antigone* next to *Home Fire* can develop a bifurcated hermeneutic that acknowledges the tendency toward binary thinking while attuning our ears to the proliferation of competing voices in the tragedy. At the same time, this comparative method can rework understandings of polyphony by decoupling it from egalitarian speech. In other words, the existence of a multi-voiced chorus does not correlate to flattened hierarchies in the play or the novel.

Comparing Sophocles' chorus to Shamsie's chorus reveals how moving from tragic drama to the novel also entails shifting from a two-voiced agon into an open-ended polyphonic structure in which diverse voices meet without resolving into a unified whole. Because this shift from the dualism of *Antigone* to the polyphony of *Home Fire* does not progress toward egalitarian democracy or inclusion, Shamsie's tragedy confronts the illusion of polyphony as literary symbol of liberation. In "Problems of Literary Polyphony," Kathryn Lachman (2015) writes, "Polyphony in literature carries seductive and misleading associations with orality and democracy because it refers to a sonorous, complex, and collective phenomenon" (p. 36). Lachman argues that polyphony is a seductive yet illusory literary technique because it does not lead to egalitarian inclusion or communication in community. Shamsie's

twenty-first-century novel may be multi-voiced, but it cannot escape the limitations of its tragic pretext and the non-inclusive democracy of fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. The following section examines silences in *Home Fire* that speak of how Muslim women are excluded from democratic belonging in British London, just as women were ineligible for citizenship in classical Athens.

3.2 Parallel silences in *Home Fire* and *Antigone*

Despite the polyphony that characterizes *Home Fire*, some of the loudest speakers in this text are the silences that bear witness to Muslim women's political exclusion. In treating silence as a voice, I continue to argue that silence belongs on a continuum of speech and, therefore, we should listen to what it says, especially when it is associated with a marginalized group. One of the goals of this dissertation is to challenge the vocal suppression of immigrant women in London, not by speaking for them or by making them speak more, but first by listening to the absence of their voices. When we begin listening to apparent silences, we become more attuned to the surrounding atmosphere and thereby find meaning in what remains quiet. Because silence speaks most clearly through contrast, I use Sophocles' *Antigone* and its cultural background as a sounding board for *Home Fire*. Through this comparative method, we hear silences testify to precarious citizenship, marginalized identities, the impossibility of assimilating to a male-dominated political system, and the tragic condition in which women speak yet cannot be heard.

Home Fire invites plentiful discussion on sound because it seems to be fixated on aural dynamics, not only through character details like Parvaiz's penchant for audio recordings but also in its sensory attention to sound and its multi-voiced structure. Various aspects of sound in *Home Fire* have been examined in insightful

scholarship by Claire Chambers, Arin Keeble & James Annesley, Gabriella Pishotti, Naomi Weiss, and Rehana Ahmed. Leading the way in this discussion, Chambers (2019) provides a thorough analysis of how the novel is "saturated with noise" (p. 191), from dialogue and non-linguistic sounds to musical references and failures to listen. Asking if we need to listen to jihadists even while refusing to condone violence, Chambers argues that *Home Fire* links the sonic and the political in order to challenge stereotypes of Muslims. Analyzing acts of listening alongside failures to listen, Keeble & Annesley (2021) argue that *Home Fire* exposes the "qualified and arbitrary" nature of multicultural ideals, which requires listening to others and can be undermined by refusing to listen (p. 92). Although *Home Fire* portrays moments of listening, Keeble & Annesley assert that the novel's tragic ending arises from failures to listen thoroughly. In a more redeeming evaluation of sound in *Home Fire*, Pishotti (2022) treats sound as an intersensory experience that materializes grief for someone like Parvaiz whom the state has declared ungrievable. Considering the give and take between characters' unique voices in *Home Fire*, Weiss (2022) points out how the novel's polyphonic structure brings together diverse perspectives for the reader to compare with their own opinions (p. 243). Focusing on both aural and visual elements of the novel in "Towards an Ethics of Reading Muslims," Ahmed (2021) examines how *Home Fire* highlights heterogeneity among Muslims and uses other senses to disrupt the othering, surveillant gaze. She interprets *Home Fire*'s "concern with the sensory everyday—especially the aural—as a possible means of bypassing the violence of surveillance and the visual more broadly in connecting with others" (p. 1153). Treating silence as a sound, I join these scholars in examining not only the musical and vocal sounds of the text but also the unvoiced and suppressed speech that exposes the unequally gendered distribution of political power in Britain.

In *Home Fire*, as in *Antigone*, women's silences reflect their precarious citizenship. In Athens, democracy existed but not equally for all, since only men could be citizens.[33] While men could become *polites* (male citizens), women could not register as citizens, serve as jury members, participate in public assemblies, or speak in court (Foley, 2001). Women's lower social status is reflected in Sophocles' play when he uses the word *metoikos* to describe Antigone.[34] As Steiner (1986) writes in *Antigones*, this "famous keyword" can be translated as "half-breed" or "hybrid stranger" (p. 279), and it was used to describe someone who was a resident of Athens but a citizen of another polis. Antigone resides in Thebes, but because she is a woman, she is referred to as a citizen of another city.

In contemporary London, the gendered distribution of citizenship remains an issue for Muslim women who struggle to claim a British identity. This is evident from the opening scene in *Home Fire*, when Isma is interrogated by airport security on her way out of the country. Isma is a London-born British citizen, yet her citizenship and identity are interrogated in an interview that begins thus:

> "Do you consider yourself British?" the man said.
>
> "I am British."
>
> "But do you consider yourself British?"
>
> "I've lived here all my life." She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part, but the words came out sounding evasive.
>
> (Shamsie, p. 5)

[33] The restriction of Athenian citizenship to men has been well established. See, for example, Helene Foley's (2001) *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. For a more detailed account of Athenian citizenship, see Simon Goldhill's (1986) *Reading Greek Tragedy*, especially Chapter 3. See also Paul Cartledge's (1997) "'Deep Play': Theatre as Process in Greek Civic Life."

[34] The word *metoikos* appears in Lines 940, 956, and 977; Fagles translates this as "stranger" (Sophocles, ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982).

The officer's opening question reveals that citizenship is not a given for Muslim women in London, just as Greek women could not claim the identity of citizen (*polites*). For Isma, the answer to the officer's question is obvious: She is British. She was born and raised in London, and she feels connected to no other country. But for the interrogating officer, who represents the British state with its suspicion of covered women and bearded men, holding a British passport does not equate to being British. When asking if Isma considers herself British, the security officer is looking for a declaration of loyalty that would align her with British values, which he assumes are incompatible with her appearance as a Muslim woman.

When women lack full citizenship rights, self-censorship may become a survival strategy. During the airport interrogation, Isma tries to answer definitively, but her response sounds "evasive" rather than to the point (Shamsie, 2017, p. 5). She is aware of this because she knows that her speech is a text to be interpreted, and that the interpretation arises not from her words alone but also from her tone of voice, the space around each word, and the surrounding context. At the end of the interrogation, Isma thanks one of the security officials, "not allowing even a shade of sarcasm to enter her voice" (p. 7). Isma has learned to censor her speech as well as the tone of her voice, and so she passes the interview and is cleared to fly. But the occurrence of this interview foregrounds how British Muslims are treated as second-class citizens whose rights can be removed. Isma also suppresses her critical academic voice in Britain. During her undergraduate studies, she comes across as a reserved student until one day when she suggests that terrorism has been used to deprive British citizens of their rights. Her professor, Dr. Shah, remarks in surprise, "*Well, you have quite a voice when you decide to use it*" (p. 40). As she discovers her own voice, this remark spurs a physical sense of awakening in Isma. Later that day, she looks at

herself in the mirror, "pressing down on her larynx, and [feeling] the slight tremor of something on the cusp of waking" (p. 40). Now that Isma realizes she has a critical voice, she can begin to develop it. However, it remains hidden, and several years pass before she moves to the United States for her doctoral studies on the instrumentalization of terror. The fact that Isma moves to the US suggests that voluntary exile is necessary for her to have a voice. Deprived of full citizenship rights that protect freedom of speech, women like Isma can silence their opinions and submit to the state, or they can express their critique from outside of the state.

Through Isma's academic voice, Shamsie's novel suggests that inequity is a long-standing problem in Britain, despite common assumptions to the contrary. In the undergraduate class mentioned above, Dr. Shah asserts that the Control Orders "*overturned seven hundred and ninety years of precedent in British law*" (p. 39). Calculating 790 years backwards from 2005, when the Control Orders[35] were implemented, brings us to 1215, the year the Magna Carta invested the law with power that could contain even the king. Because it limited the king's power, the Magna Carta is seen as a symbol of equality and widely regarded as Europe's first constitution. Dr. Shah's oblique reference to the Magna Carta as a legal precedent implies that British law upholds civil liberties and has a history of promoting equality among citizens. Because the Control Orders limited civil liberties, Dr. Shah claims that they represent a new trend in British jurisprudence, but Isma draws attention to the colonies where Britain had a long history of disregarding individual rights. She

[35] Control Orders were designed as targeted measures to prevent, disrupt, and disarm terrorist activity. In 2005, these measures were implemented only against foreign nationals, but by 2011 they were used exclusively against British nationals. Control Orders have been criticized for unjustly preventing freedom of expression and association, for leading to unfair imprisonment and detainment, and for preventing individuals from mounting effective legal defenses because they were not informed of the charges against them. In 2011, Control Orders were replaced by the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act (Anderson, 2012).

argues that the Control Orders, which placed restraints on terrorist suspects in the UK, had long precedent in English laws. The difference, she says, is that now these laws are "applied to British citizens, and even that's not as much of a change as you might think, because they're rhetorically being made un-British" (Shamsie, p. 40). Isma goes on to critique the othering of British terrorist suspects, who are typically described in roundabout ways like "British of Pakistani descent" or "British Muslim" or "British passport holders" in order to dissociate their acts from British national identity (p. 40). While Isma's critique targets the current political situation, the historical basis of her argument also disrupts a narrative that treats the year 1215 as a turning point for English democracy.

Home Fire's historical critique extends further with the parallels between women in contemporary Britain and classical Greece. Shamsie's characterization of Isma as having a strong but suppressed voice echoes Sophocles' portrayal of Ismene. In *Antigone*, Ismene initially protects herself by remaining silent and putting obedience to the law above loyalty to family. Unlike Antigone, who speaks out for Polyneices, Ismene chooses to quietly submit to the state, as does Shamsie's Ismene (Isma). Both these seemingly submissive women later try to support their sister Antigone/Aneeka, but by the end of the story they disappear into a silence. Not only does Sophocles' title feature Antigone rather than Ismene, but Ismene disappears about halfway through the play. This is also true in *Home Fire*. Toward the end of the novel, Isma visits Karamat Lone to request permission to travel to Karachi, and she is told to do what she wants because she "won't matter" the next day (p. 252). After Isma is dismissed from Karamat's presence, we never see her again. In both the play and the novel, these women submit to and then quietly resist the state to protect

their places in society, yet in the end they are unable to overcome their inherited marginality.

Women's silences in *Home Fire* subtly critique the British model for belonging that requires submitting the self to the public good, as in the Greek city. In *Private Lives, Public Deaths: Antigone and the Invention of Individuality*, Jonathan Strauss (2013) examines the concept of the individual in fourth- and fifth-century B.C.E. Athens, where the *polis* subsumed the individual will into the public good. Despite this prioritization of the collective good, Strauss argues that a form of individual identity was available for those who, like soldiers, died in service to the state. Strauss reads Sophocles' *Antigone* as an attempt to conceptualize the emergence of the individual not in death but in life. What is evident but unstated in Strauss's reading of *Antigone* is that Antigone's attempt to emerge as an individual is doomed from the outset because she is a woman trying to claim membership in a male sphere. In a similar vein, Luce Irigaray (1984/2004) argues in "An Ethics of Sexual Difference" that Antigone is expected to exchange her individuality for the "immediate universal of her family duty" that establishes social order in the city-state (p. 100). Instead of becoming a wife or mother, Antigone fights for her "singularity" by trying to preserve a fecund brother-sister relationship (Irigaray, p. 100). Although Antigone refuses to exchange her individuality for a sexualized universality that would render her invisible as a woman, she nevertheless loses her agency when Creon exiles her. Thus, we can argue that Antigone does sacrifice her individuality, but because she does so for her brother rather than for the state, her self-abnegation leads to an eternal in-betweenness.

This gendered social structure, in which men but not women gain individuality through feats of self-sacrifice, is replicated in *Home Fire*. Unlike the

women in *Home Fire* who cannot enter society even through self-sacrifice, Karamat epitomizes the model of identity through self-abnegation as he sacrifices his religion, culture of origin, and family ties to demonstrate his loyalty to the state. Karamat comes from a working-class immigrant family, and he was raised as a devout Muslim. His first name (كرامت in Arabic) translates literally to generosity or high-mindedness, and in the Islamic tradition it refers to miracles performed by Muslim saints. Thus, his name connotes "miraculous power", "excellence," or "greatness," and it may summon ideas of the *deux ex machina*, which in tragedy denotes the sudden appearance of divine assistance to solve a problem. As if living up to the miraculous and noble aspirations of his first name as well as the exceptionalism evoked by a surname like "Lone," Karamat has climbed the political ladder to become Britain's first home secretary from a Muslim background. However, Karamat's altered public image makes his name ironic and suggests that his success has come at the expense of his individuality. When he first ran for public office, his religious identity won him favor with a predominantly Muslim constituency; but over the course of his political career, he has embraced more secular values to appeal to progressive voters. Now, he identifies as an atheist, and his critics call him "Mr. Striding Away from Muslim-ness" (Shamsie, p. 54). With this staunchly secular identity, Lone is poised to become the next prime minister, but his political achievements are enabled by suppressing his religious instincts. In a private moment, Karamat admits to Eamonn that he still recites the Ayat Al-Kursi "as a kind of reflex" in stressful moments (p. 110). The Ayat Al-Kursi, found in Quran 2:255 affirms Allah's sovereignty, foreknowledge, omniscience, and omnipotence, and it is often prayed after the obligatory ritual prayers. Karamat's silent recitation of this prayer shows how his religious upbringing is ingrained in his core. Although

Karamat comes across as confident, bold, and even power hungry in public, this private side of him suggests that he acknowledges the limits of his authority compared to the power of Allah. Yet Karamat has hidden this religious impulse from his own son, and even when he does reveal it, he asks Eamonn to keep it a secret because, as he says, "I'd be nervous about a home secretary who's spoken openly about his atheism but secretly recites Muslim prayers" (p. 110). This quiet admission reveals how Lone gains political influence in Britain by silencing his private individuality.

While Karamat's self-censorship problematizes the assimilation-oriented model of political belonging, *Home Fire* extends the critique by showing how women are excluded even from this limited, conditional belonging. In *Antigone's Claim*, Judith Butler (2000) argues that Antigone transgresses gender norms by trying to speak with political agency in a system in which only men have political power. Butler argues that Antigone speaks in male language and claims the power to act, but in doing so she also sacrifices herself because she "asserts herself through appropriating the voice of the other, the one to whom she is opposed" (p. 11). Antigone negates herself and speaks through another's voice because there is no room for a female voice in the public space.[36] Similarly, the official discourse of multicultural belonging in *Home Fire* requires a degree of assimilation not accessible for Muslim women. When speaking at a majority-Muslim high school in Bradford, Karamat urges students to embrace British identity because:

[36] While Butler (2000) claims that Antigone lacks full citizenship, must speak in male language, and negates herself, this is only the beginning of her analysis. Rather than situating Antigone as a figure of oppressed womanhood, Butler reads *Antigone* as pointing toward a politics that emerges at the end limits of representability. For Butler, the ambiguity of Antigone's incestuous family relationships establishes her as "the occasion for a new field of the human" that emerges outside existing notions of language, gender, and kinship (p. 82).

> ‘There is nothing this country won’t allow you to achieve—Olympic medals, captaincy of the cricket team, pop stardom, reality TV crowns. And if none of that works out, you can settle for being home secretary. You are, we are, British. Britain accepts this. So do most of you. But for those of you who are in some doubt about it, let me say this: Don’t set yourself apart in the way you dress, the way you think, the outdated codes of behavior you cling to, the ideologies to which you attach your loyalties. Because if you do, you will be treated differently—not because of racism, though that does still exist, but because you insist on your difference from everyone else in this multiethnic, multireligious, multitudinous United Kingdom of ours.’ (Shamsie, pp. 89-90)

With an almost-triumphalist air, Karamat claims that British youth can achieve any position of recognition or skill that they choose, but his speech establishes limits that reinforce the state’s power. As if Britain is a generous benefactor, Karamat declares that the country will “allow” (p. 89) its citizens to attain anything they want—a word choice that privileges collective approval over individual autonomy. Similarly, Karamat’s reference to crowns won on reality TV restrains individual aspirations: The only crown up for grabs is a television one. The royal crown, of course, remains off limits because it is inherited. For everyone except the monarch, being British is the result of personal action, not an inherited identity. Elsewhere, Karamat opines that citizenship should be determined on actions rather than race or birthplace. This reasoning appears to be inclusive because behavior, unlike race, is within one’s control. But Karamat’s speech exemplifies male, action-oriented language not available to women.

The women silently excluded from Karamat’s vision of multicultural Britain come into focus through Eamonn’s reaction to Karamat’s speech. When Eamonn

hears his father say on television, "'Don't set yourself apart in the way you dress,'" he imagines these words laid over a video of Aneeka finishing her prayers before removing her clothes and moving toward him wearing only a hijab (p. 90). Although the hijab is what visibly marks Aneeka's religious difference, Eamonn considers how such a video "wouldn't reveal the things that were most striking about her," like her intense concentration, quick shifts in focus, and confident actions (Shamsie, p. 90). Yet Eamonn knows that even if he sees Aneeka's hijab as a symbol of her devotion to love and prayer, for his father, the hijab is precisely the self-distinguishing dress not included in Karamat's vision of Britishness. Aneeka's exclusion is further emphasized by her audible absence from this scene: As Eamonn pictures his girlfriend, she is silent because Eamonn hears his father's words rather than her voice. In the absence of her voice, we see images of her interpreted through male eyes and language.

Even when women physically enter political spaces, their voices are noticeably controlled in both Sophocles' and Shamsie's texts. In his initial confrontation with Antigone, Creon asks questions designed to limit Antigone's words. He says, "You, tell me briefly, no long speeches—were you aware a decree had forbidden this?" (Sophocles, 1982, Lines 495-496). The yes-or-no structure of this question prevents Antigone from speaking at length because women and their voices have no place in Creon's court. After Creon sentences Antigone for her misdeed, he says, "Women were never meant for this assembly. / From now on they'll be kept in place again" (Heaney, 2004, p. 38). Just as Creon banishes Antigone and tries to limit her words, Karamat asserts his power by muting the television in his office that broadcasts Aneeka's public wake for Parvaiz. In this silence, Aneeka is relegated to the visual realm where she is controlled by Karamat's

spectral gaze. In a park across from the British consulate in Karachi, Aneeka waits for her brother's body to be delivered. She is dressed in white, which in Pakistan symbolizes a widow's mourning, and she sits amid rose petals on a white sheet that summons images of a bridal bed. This white imagery gestures toward the Sophoclean motif of Antigone as a bride for death, unable to marry her beloved. With these layered motifs of marriage and death, the scene can be considered a visual spectacle, placing Aneeka and her brother's corpse at the center of Karamat's controlling gaze. Karamat's internal dialogue dominates the narrative soundscape as he gazes on the "scene of martyrdom" (p. 234). This language not only emphasizes Parvaiz's status as a jihadi traitor, but it also associates Aneeka with martyrdom, implying that she is a terrorist because she is willing to die for this cause. In *The Daily Lives of Muslims*, Nilüfer Göle (2017) argues that the voices of ordinary Muslims in Europe remain marginalized, due in large part to the public rhetoric that frequently attributes violence and extremism to Muslims. Reflecting this reality, *Home Fire* emphasizes Karamat's power to shape public discourse as he silences Aneeka's ordinary voice and covers it with his extremist interpretation of the scene, which relies on the visual image.

As Shamsie's narrative shifts from the eye to the ear, this scene threatens to escape Karamat's visual control, momentarily breaking the Aristotelian ban on spectacle that drives the emotional impact of tragedy. In *Poetics*, Aristotle (350 B.C.E./1996) warns playwrights and critics to avoid letting spectacle become the engine of a tragedy. Even though spectacle is a component part of tragedy, Aristotle (350 B.C.E./1996) declares that it must be the plot, not the "production of visual effects" (p. 13), that generates fear and pity in the audience. In *Home Fire*, spectacle gains force when Aneeka is silenced against her will and her actions are confined to

the visual realm and thus rendered uninterpretable to Karamat (and perhaps also to readers). When Parvaiz's coffin arrives at the park, she forces the cover open and proceeds to dismantle the box. She lowers herself to her heels, examines her brother's body, jerks her hand away, checks for a pulse, and opens her mouth. This erratic motion is conveyed to the reader through Karamat's gaze, which cannot interpret the "iconography of suffering" (Shamsie, 2017, p. 233) produced by Aneeka's silent movements on the television screen. Despite his power to exclude unwanted citizens and voices from his London, Karamat lacks the insight to understand Aneeka's actions. With Karamat's interpretive powers waning, the spectacle of Aneeka's wake destabilizes the state's all-knowing gaze, and Aneeka's silence becomes a voice of resistance that takes center stage. As she leans over Parvaiz's body in Karachi, a dust storm kicks up, and the cameras tilt wildly. From Karamat's perspective, the narrative tells us:

> For a few moments there was only a howling noise, the wind raging, and then a hand plucked away the white cloth and the howl was the girl, a dust mask on her face, her dark hair a cascade of mud, her fingers interlaced over the face of her brother. A howl deeper than a girl, a howl that came out of the earth and through her and into the office of the home secretary, who took a step back. As if that were the only thing the entire spectacle had been designed to achieve, the wind dropped as suddenly as buildings collapse in 3-D models, and the girl stopped her noise, unlaced her fingers. (Shamsie, 2017, pp. 236-237).

Because the dust storm impedes the cameras' ability to transmit images, Karamat can no longer read Aneeka's physical signs. Instead, he suddenly hears the raging wind morph into a human howl that rises from the ground and moves through her vocal

cords straight into his office, even though the TV was never unmuted. In "Digital Subaltern Counterpublics," Nalini Iyer (2022) argues that Aneeka can be heard through the muted TV because she has created a "counterpublic" sphere of discourse that resists dominant narratives (p. 145). In this scene, Aneeka resists pathological state discourses that treat traitors as diseases to be eliminated and makes dissidents into terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. Her howl also cuts through state discourse and technology because it bypasses the visual realm, as Rehana Ahmed (2021) suggests. The transcontinental sonic movement disrupts Karamat's carefully constructed image and works outside the realm of spectral biopolitics. What both Ieyr's and Ahmed's analyses overlook is that Aneeka's howl elicits a physical reaction from Karamat. The sound transmitted from Karachi to London is so powerful that it causes Karamat to step back from the TV, and when Aneeka begins to speak, Karamat feels as if she is looking directly at him.

In a short speech pleading to bring Parvaiz's body home, Aneeka's voice transgresses the physical limits and power differences between her and the home secretary, but Karamat quickly reclaims his power by reducing Aneeka's actions to a performance. He describes her grief-stricken howl and subsequent appeal for justice as mere "noise and spectacle" produced by a "silly girl" (p. 237). Like Creon who believes that women should be silent and is bothered by strong women who challenge his power, Karamat refuses to recognize Aneeka as a woman who can think and speak coherently. From Creon in the fifth century B.C.E. to Karamat in the twenty-first century, men's attitudes toward women seem to be remarkably consistent. Karamat avoids considering that a wordless howl might convey more than empty noise. After the cameras zoom out and pan across the park, Karamat sees that the dust storm has covered everything except Parvaiz's face. His one-word response,

"Impressive" (p. 237), employs sarcasm to undermine the force of what just occurred. Further, Karamat's narrative hypothesizes that these events in Karachi were a "spectacle" designed to elicit a reaction from him (p. 236). The resistant potential of Aneeka's silence is rendered powerless as Karamat assigns performative meaning to it. By calling Aneeka's howl and her silent wake a "spectacle," Karamat reclaims his power and reinstitutes the dominant male gaze. This restores the balance between plot and spectacle that Aristotle finds appropriate for tragedy, and once again renders the female voice powerless.

Repeatedly, *Home Fire* and *Antigone* dramatize women's unsuccessful attempts to claim political agency through speech. In *Home Fire*, these attempts are doomed from the outset because the context is overdetermined by male language, and the criteria for claiming a British identity that can speak politically are not available to women whose religious and cultural differences are visible markers of otherness. As the next section will discuss, the novel's relationship to Sophocles' *Antigone* further emphasizes futility by framing women's speech as an impediment to the belonging they seek as they strive to be heard in public.

3.3 Burning home: The fire speaks

The link between voice and home is central to this thesis, which proceeds from the premise that audibility is a key indicator of belonging in society. Each of my focus novels portray a female search for belonging, with varying levels of success as characters confront racism, religious bias, anti-migrant sentiment, and political hierarchies that exclude voices labeled as Muslim, migrant, female, or other. While these marginalized voices express dissent, my dissertation frames these speech acts as a search for belonging, which is hindered by larger structures of oppression and

exclusion. In *Home Fire*, this overarching structure of exclusion is conveyed through the tragic form, which is both a literary structure and an essence. As George Steiner (2004) argues in an attempt to redefine the term, tragedy is always about "ontological homelessness" (p. 2). This existential lack of belonging makes tragedy an ideal medium for Shamsie's exploration of non-belonging, as I argue in this section.

When women speak in *Home Fire*, they seek a political home that they will never find in this tragedy. Analyzing postcolonial literature through a tragic lens, Ato Quayson (2021) posits in *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* that tragic protagonists evoke audience sympathy not just because they suffer but because tragedy shows they lack control over their lives: "[I]t is because tragedy demonstrates that the conditions for exercising meaningful ethical choices that have consequences for how a life is lived do not remain entirely within the grasp of the individual" (p. 12). As a postcolonial tragic character, Aneeka, like Antigone, lacks the power to make an ethical choice, even though she is convinced that burying her brother at home is the right thing to do. Her limited speech is not only futile, but it arguably destroys the home she seeks for her family. This futility becomes more evident through the motifs of home and fire that I explore in this section. As women's voices flare up and are smothered in this novel, fire grows from a silent image into a crackling conflagration that threatens the home of the family and the nation.

The impossibility of arriving home is most obvious from Aneeka's connection to Antigone, a figure who exemplifies non-belonging. When Antigone is led out to be buried alive, she cries:

> I go to my rockbound prison, strange new tomb
> always a stranger, o dear god,

I have no home on earth and none below,

not with the living, not with the breathless dead.

(Sophocles ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982, Lines 939-942).

As she is sent alive into a place reserved for the dead, Antigone enters a liminal place and takes on an indefinable identity. She is a stranger (*metoikos*) with no home, one who belongs neither to the land of the living nor to the land of the dead. For Steiner (1986), this makes Antigone homeless: "Antigone has a home neither on earth nor in the underworld, she can find dwelling neither in the city of the quick nor in that of the departed" (p. 279). While some scholars have celebrated Antigone for her defiance of normative politics and gender roles,[37] the fact remains that in Sophocles' play her in-betweenness firmly excludes her from all community. Antigone speaks alone of her estrangement, and she goes to her tomb alone, knowing she will never marry. Noticing how Antigone is estranged because she refuses to be assimilated to the pre-defined roles for Theban women makes it hard to miss the parallel in *Home Fire*: For in-between women like Antigone and Aneeka, there is no belonging.

If Antigone's solitary speech communicates her liminal estrangement, in *Home Fire* it is the opposite—aural synchrony—that communicates belonging and a sense of home grounded in a specific locale. For the Pasha siblings, family bonds are linked to their home on Preston Road, and they carry a high degree of aurality. Shamsie (2017) writes:

[37] Judith Butler (2000) holds up Antigone as a figure of non-heteronormative being who prefigures a politics that emerges at the limits of representation and representability. Luce Irigaray (2004) defines Antigone as an "anti-woman" because she does not fit into the master-slave dialectic that undergirds modern society (p. 101). Marta Wilkinson (2008) views Antigone as a figure who resists the standard roles for women (silent, obedient, marginalized, and in the domestic rather than public sphere) and seeks validation as an independent being. Jonathan Strauss (2013) reads Antigone as an individual trying to come into being through live action rather than through death.

> As children the twins would lie in the garden, fingers on each other's pulses, listening to the trains go by on the tracks behind their house. Waiting for those moments when their hearts were synchronized, first with each other and then with the sound of the train pulling out of Preston Road station. (p. 45)

This passage describes the soundscape of the Pasha family home behind the Preston Road train station. The twins are so in tune with the sounds of this London neighborhood that their heartbeats synchronize with the train and with each other, and this harmony creates a close correlation between relational intimacy and a sense of place. As a young adult, Parvaiz captures this soundscape in his recording project titled *Preston Road Station Heard from the Garden Shed*. Seated on top of a shed that overlooks the train tracks, Parvaiz records the sounds of everyday life, from the trains passing by to Aneeka's voice as she talks to him. Aural synchrony is also part of how Isma imagines her relationship with Aneeka. After Isma has moved to Amherst and Aneeka remains in London, the adult sisters rely on daily text messages, phone conversations, and video calls to stay connected. When Aneeka falls asleep during one such video call, Isma "stay[s] on the line, listening to their breath rise and fall together" and she remembers how they did this as children "until there was no sound except their breath in unison" (Shamsie, 2017, p. 28). This audible unity is quietly echoed in the "universe still around" (p. 28) the children as they fall asleep to the rhythm of each other's breaths, a synchrony from the past that Isma now hears over the phone line even when there is an ocean between them.

But these sounds of family harmony unravel as the Pasha siblings move away from Preston Road. With Isma in Amherst, Aneeka begins to spend nights at her boyfriend's flat, and Parvaiz, unaware that she is seeing someone, worries that she is drifting away from him. He recalls her flippant suggestion that they sell the family

home, a memory that makes him feel Aneeka is "unlinking the chains that held them together, casting him into darkness without the accompanying sound of her heartbeat" (Shamsie, 2017, p. 141). Parvaiz's concern about being left alone jars against the earlier image of his heart beating in time with Aneeka's; now he hears only his own heartbeat because the bond between them has loosened. Unlinking chains clang again on the next page, when Parvaiz observes a man on a bus tapping his wedding ring against the handrail. The round metal of the wedding ring hits the round metal of the handrail to produce what Parvaiz likens to the sound of "chains unlinking" (p. 142), an ominous soundtrack that accompanies Parvaiz's increasing distance from Aneeka. The connection between Aneeka and Isma is also broken when Aneeka discovers that it was Isma who reported Parvaiz to the British authorities. Because Isma has "made our brother not able to come home" (p. 43), Aneeka refuses to answer her sister's phone calls, like Antigone who avoids speaking to Ismene after their disagreement at the beginning of Sophocles' play. Instead of hearts beating and lungs breathing in unison, we begin to hear dissonance and silences as these relationships drift apart.

The sonic register of home in *Home Fire* is linked to heat through the title's allusion to an English tune popularized during the Great War. Alternately titled "Keep the Home Fires Burning" or "Till the Boys Come Home," the song encourages families of soldiers on duty to tend the fire while waiting for their lads to come home. An upbeat chorus proceeds thus:

> Keep the home fires burning
>
> While your hearts are yearning,
>
> Though your lads are far away,
>
> They dream of home.

The lyrics are accompanied by upbeat music in 4/4 measure, as if to replicate a march, with brass and drums that imitate a celebratory song. In a 1915 performance, Fredrick Wheeler's melodious baritone sings out over an orchestra that seems to represent the nation unified in the cause of helping Europe fight the Great War (The78Prof, 2019). Inspired by these lyrics, each family or individual singing this song metaphorically tends a fire to welcome the boys back from war with a warm home. Like the Victorian trope of the hearth tended by the angel in the house, the fire keeps women busy while the men are at war, and it gives soldiers a warm welcome to anticipate. In this way, the home fires across England offer solace and courage to men fighting in the dark days of war.

Departing from this morale-boosting song, Shamsie's (2017) novel inverts the dream of a warm welcome. In *Home Fire*, there is no angel tending a fire to greet soldiers returning from war, nor does the entire nation sing a song to encourage their boys fighting abroad. Unlike the figures in the song, Aneeka has no one urging her to sing a cheery song, nor a chorus to which she can add her voice, since no one is advocating for the return of a supposed terrorist. Although the song is only indirectly invoked by Shamsie's novel title, these differences unsettle the patriotic tune, making it an ironic soundtrack that plays underneath Aneeka's efforts to bring Parvaiz home from Raqqa. *Home Fire* also moves away from nineteenth- and twentieth-century patriotism by making no references to the Great War, focusing instead on the twenty-first century. Further, Shamsie disrupts the patriotic image of home fires by removing the plural and using the singular form of fire in the title. Rather than imagining small fires in hearths across the nation, we see one fire associated with the nation, an image that suggests the nation is alight with an uncontrollable passion for home.

The danger of unrestrained passion in search of home echoes the destructive force of heat *Antigone*, as Antigone's radical speech is fueled by her determination to give Polyneices a final resting spot. This was significant in classical Greece because of the belief that unburied souls would haunt the shores of Lethe and be unable to enter the realm of the dead (Steiner, 1986, p. 115). Seamus Heaney's (2004) translation of *Antigone* uses a double entendre to convey the importance of burial: When Creon and the soldiers finally bury Polyneices at the end of the play, they declare, "we piled his home ground over him at last" (p. 67). This home ground covering Polyneices' corpse is both the soil of his homeland and the soil that will allow him to enter the home of the underworld. But until the state carries out this final burial, Antigone will not be silenced. Because she refuses to act quietly, not even trying to hide her actions, Ismene warns Antigone that she is too hot-headed. In Heaney's translation, Ismene asks, "What are you, Antigone? / Hot-headed or cold-blooded? This thing cannot be done" (p. 12). In Fagles' translation, Ismene tells Antigone she is, "So fiery—and it ought to chill your heart." (Sophocles, ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982, Line 102). Similarly In Anne Carson's (2015) translation, Ismene says, "your heart's so hot, o sister" (p. 15). In all three versions, Ismene clearly compares her sister's loud speech and bold actions to a dangerous fire. More than it warms the home, Aneeka's dream of providing a home for her brother lights a dangerous fire.

With the Antigone/Aneeka parallel, *Home Fire* portrays unconditional love which is oriented toward home and family as a dangerous fire. Antigone's love for her brother and devotion to the unwritten laws of the gods may be driven by the fire of love, but this passion leads to her destruction and her transcendental homelessness. By insisting that her brother's body be returned to his earthly home so that he can enter the realm of the dead, Antigone burns up her ability to live in either

world. Similarly, Aneeka's quest to repatriate Parvaiz is fueled by an unconditional love. After Aneeka has flown to Karachi to seek a proper burial for Parvaiz, Eamonn releases a video defending her name. He says of Aneeka:

> She has been abused for the crime of daring to love while covering her head, vilified for believing that she had the right to want a life with someone whose history is at odds with hers, denounced for wanting to bury her brother beside her mother, reviled for her completely legal protests against a decision by the home secretary that suggests personal animus. Is Britain really a nation that turns people into figures of hate because they love unconditionally? (Shamsie, 2017, p. 258)

Eamonn describes Aneeka as a woman driven by love, and he emphasizes that her love is just, legal, and devoted to family. Yet this love has made her an object of hatred because it transgresses social boundaries. Aneeka put no conditions on her love; she does not allow religion, social class, political history, or accusations of terrorism to redirect her affections away from her brother or from her fiancé. But this loyalty, like a fire, seems to have leapt out of control, and now it will destroy her. Aneeka is made out to be an enemy of the state, slandered in the public media, and stripped of her British passport. Her devotion to the family home renders her politically homeless.

This conflagration emphasizes how women's agency is limited in tragedy. No matter how loudly she speaks, Aneeka cannot change the tragic essence of her situation. This point may be clarified by drawing on the work of two scholars who study women in Greek tragedy. First, Helen Foley's (2001) *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* examines the eloquent speeches of women in Greek tragedy, which stand in stark contrast to their exclusion from Athenian public life. Foley suggests that the

tragic stage allowed women to act outside of the conventional roles they held in real life, which in turn enabled male audiences to reflect on their own social order. In this way, the representation of women on the tragic stage may be seen as an engine for social critique. However, while Foley concludes that foreigners and women speak powerfully in Greek tragedy, she cautions against viewing women's role in tragedy as a force for social change (p. 333). Similarly, Casey Dué (2006) analyzes the laments of captive women in tragedies about the Trojan War, arguing that we hear distinctly female voices because the dramatic stage was the one place in Greek society where women could speak publicly. Even so, these women remained politically powerless because the tragic stage was not a forum for social change. Thus, Dué maintains that, despite containing political rhetoric, Greek tragedy was "not designed to preach or dictate policy" (p. 164). Both Dué and Foley highlight the powerful voices of women in Greek tragedy while simultaneously acknowledging their political impotence.

Likewise, Shamsie's Aneeka is a figure whose lament is audible but unheard in that it fails to achieve a proper burial for her brother. In fact, Aneeka's lament is widely heard when she performs a public wake in a Karachi park. As onlookers gather, their attention subtly defies the British state's attempt to stifle Aneeka's dissent. The wake also establishes a communal experience, much like Attic tragedy did in fifth-century Athens. As Goldhill (1986) explains, the annual festival to Dionysius drew huge crowds from the city and further environs to watch the dramas and participate in parties and ceremonies over a period of five to six days (pp. 75-76). The festival was not only a "civic occasion" marked by public ceremonies (Goldhill, p. 76), but also a religious gathering. Because the Athenian theatre was located right next to the main temple to Dionysus, the plays can be seen as offerings

to the gods, of which Dionysius was the most powerful. Due to this religious proximity, tragedy also fostered collective emotion, as Dué (2006) argues in *Captive Woman's Lament* (p. 164). These civic, religious, and emotional dimensions of tragedy are replicated in Aneeka's wake in *Home Fire*, which draws strangers into a communal act of lament and resistance in Karachi. In a public park across from the heavily guarded British Deputy High Commission, Aneeka sits with her brother's corpse, while onlookers gather to watch and participate in the vigil.

As Aneeka's vigil gains public attention, her inability to bury her brother is further emphasized by the contrast between her fiery passion and the ice used to preserve Parvaiz's body. Resisting the Karachi heat that accelerates natural decomposition, onlookers construct a coffin of ice, which they maintain by continually adding new ice to preserve the corpse. Despite their efforts, the ice melts so rapidly that those closest to the body cover their faces to minimize the stench of decaying flesh. Meanwhile, Aneeka insists that Parvaiz's face remain uncovered, a request that exposes his face to more rapid decay. Ironically, the heat that fuels Aneeka's passion to humanize her brother counteracts her efforts at preservation, since heat and ice work against each other. Ultimately, the rapidly melting ice coffin underscores the impotence of Aneeka's fiery determination to bring her brother home.

As *Home Fire* moves toward its final pages, fire speaks more loudly of destruction and futility. The title's connection to a patriotic song subverts tropes of the hearth fire, and rather than listening to harmonies sung in a warm home, we feel the cold chill of death and exile. In contrast, the fire of courageous love and passionate conviction burns so brightly that it consumes everything in its vicinity, including the lovers Aneeka and Eamonn. Having listened to this image of the fire,

as well as the silences and suppressed women's voices in this novel, reading *Home Fire* as a rewriting of *Antigone* makes it clear that Shamsie sees a tragedy in the condition of British Muslim women in London. But why write about these issues if nothing can change it? If Aneeka's voice cannot bring her brother home or create a home for herself in the form of love or national belonging, can Shamsie's narrative do anything more than describe a problem? To consider whether this novel can mitigate non-belonging in London, the next section will listen to the silence of *Home Fire*'s anti-cathartic ending.

3.4 Anti-cathartic silences

While writing on silence in a postcolonial context inevitably includes condemning vocal oppression and marginalization, the novels examined in this dissertation also use silence to express resistance. *Home Fire* clearly critiques silences by portraying how Muslim, immigrant, and female voices are suppressed in London. At the same time, the novel prohibits a wholesale condemnation of silence because absent voices are integral components of its non-conclusive ending. Having considered how the silenced voices of women and a crackling fire speak of Muslim women's exclusion in London, I now analyze two striking silences in *Home Fire* that amplify subversive elements of the *Antigone* tragedy. The first of these silences is the absence of a choral conclusion, which establishes an anti-cathartic aesthetic of dissent. The second silence is the reader's inability to hear Aneeka's final whispered words, a gap in the text that defers conclusive interpretations. Both of these silences convey a subtle politics of resistance that critiques the suppression of Muslim women in London.

One of the defining features of tragedy is catharsis, which can be understood as an attempt to offer the audience a pleasing resolution to complex problems. In his theory of tragedy, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1996) suggests that the dramatic representation of suffering evokes fear and sympathy which is purged by the end of the tragedy. Because tragedy moves relentlessly toward a negative reversal of fortune and characters can do nothing to prevent this, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1996) reasons in *Poetics* that tragedy leads to catharsis, commonly understood as the purification of excessive negative emotions like fear and pity.[38] In tragedy, this cleansing arises from the plot, which imitates an action, portrays suffering, and then resolves it, often by delivering a moral lesson or restoring political order. In *Antigone*, for example, the deaths of the main characters engender fear and pity, but the chorus's closing lines provide a moral lesson, affirm divine authority, and aid the audience in interpreting the play. After the unburied body of Polyneices and the suicides of Antigone, Haimon, and Eurydice have struck fear and pity into the audience, the chorus imparts comfort by singing:

> Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy,
> and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.
> The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
> with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
> those blows will teach us wisdom.
> (Sophocles, ca. 441-401 B.C.E./1982, Lines 1466-1470)

This passage begins with wisdom and joy, arguing that wisdom is even better than the feeling of joy. Not stated here but implied is that joy comes after fear and pity

[38] Aristotle's cryptic use of the word *catharsis* has been much debated, but it remains clear from his writing that tragedy should evoke fear and pity before providing pleasurable relief. According to Malcom Heath, Aristotle is concerned not with purging emotion altogether but with excising excess emotion to restore a proper balance of emotions (in Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1996, p. xxxix).

have been purged. The "mighty words of the proud" refer to Creon's assertions of his own rightness when he determined that Polyneices did not deserve a burial and that Antigone was a traitor deserving death because she wanted to bury him. Pridefully, Creon refused to listen to those who reasoned with him, such as Antigone, the chorus, Haimon, and Tiresias. But his misjudgments and stubbornness were repaid with "mighty blows of fate" when his wife and son killed themselves out of grief, and he was unable to undo his decisions. The repetition of the word "mighty" reminds the audience of how Creon's words sealed his fate and brought about his own suffering. This tragic ending strikes fear and pity into the audience, yet the repeated "blows" in the chorus's song draws out the cathartic message: By watching the tragedy unfold before our eyes, audiences can learn a lesson from Creon's mistake and remember to revere the gods. Thus, the final song can transform excessive fear and pity into the joy and wisdom of a moral lesson.

However, this apparent didacticism may intentionally offer a false comfort that highlights the unspeakability of the dramatic events. In *The Tragic Imagination*, Rowan Williams (2016) defines tragedy as an attempt to represent, imagine, or narrate what is unspeakable, and he suggests that the value of tragedy is in its attempt to speak of the "failure and pain" without "comfortable lying" (p. 2). One way tragedy does this, as Rowan notes, is by not offering satisfying answers to painful questions. When the chorus speaks, they identify with the audience's desire for resolution, and they offer traditional, inherited wisdom. This is what we hear in the final lines of Sophocles' play. But these lines offer a woefully inadequate summary of what has just happened on stage. While the chorus attempts to fulfill the audience's desire for closure, their inherited wisdom may articulate an intentionally false conclusion. The discrepancy between the clichéd tone of the admonition and the

horror of the triple suicide gestures at the audience's struggle to comprehend what they have seen.

In contrast to the choral ending of *Antigone*, *Home Fire* uses silence to augment the complexity of tragic conclusions. In the final scene, Eamonn arrives at the park where Aneeka has staged a wake for Parvaiz. Journalists and TV cameramen surround Aneeka, and as Eamonn steps into the circle he is greeted by two men in shalwar kameez who open their arms, take him into what seems to be an embrace, and then run off after locking an explosive belt around him. Realizing that he is about to become an unwilling suicide bomber, Eamonn yells for help as the crowds run away. He shouts for Aneeka to flee too, but instead she runs straight to him. Their embrace becomes the final image of the novel, described thus: "For a moment they are two lovers in a park, under an ancient tree, sun-dappled, beautiful, and at peace" (Shamsie, 2017, p. 274). This progression of phrases describing Aneeka and Eamonn carries the reader into a romantic setting under a tree with soft lighting and a peaceful, beautiful atmosphere. This tranquil mood is extended by the period that marks the end of the novel, and it might even allow the reader to forget that the peace is only temporary. After that moment, we can presume that the two lovers are blown apart by the explosives on Eamonn's body, yet the novel does not show us this outcome. There is no evidence that the bomb has been detonated. Perhaps the bomb will not go off, and the moment of romantic bliss will continue. But this possibility does not purge the reader's pity or fear. We pity the lovers who are about to die, and we fear the explosion that will tear them to pieces. Caught up in these negative emotions, the reader cannot manufacture relief or closure.

This moment of suspension makes the novel not just non-cathartic but anti-cathartic, characterized by unrelieved suffering and unresolved conflict. Offering a

new reading of classical tragedy, Mario Telò (2020) argues in *Archive Feelings: A Theory of Greek Tragedy* that tragedy continues to appeal to audiences not because everything is resolved through catharsis but because the end portrays perpetual destruction and undoing. The final scene of *Home Fire* is anti-cathartic not only because the narrative stops before providing closure, but also because it is repeated. The last two pages describe a television broadcast that we are told is replayed endlessly. When the cameraman "flinches in expectation of a blast" (p. 274), we shudder with him, but the explosion never comes. The camera "judders," and the lens shows a couple embracing….and then the TV replays the non-event. Eamonn enters the park, he is locked into a suicide vest, the crowds flee, Aneeka runs to him, the cameraman flinches, the video display judders, the couple embraces. "Every television channel replayed it endlessly" (p. 273), we read on the second-to-last page. This endless loop causes a shudder in anticipation of suffering, but the fear is never relieved.

By replacing the final choral ode of a dramatic tragedy with ongoing fear and pity, *Home Fire* disrupts a conservative hermeneutic that punishes transgression and reinforces existing power structures. If Aneeka and Eamonn were to die at the end, they would arguably have been punished for defying the state, and their suffering would be over. The problem, from a progressive point of view, is that such an ending reinforces the status quo. Offering one such reading of tragedy, Mario Telò (2020) takes issue with Aristotelian catharsis for its normative orientation, which safeguards existing social structures by portraying the negative consequences of transgressing higher powers. Similarly, Ato Quayson (2021) sees catharsis as a conservative feature that is incompatible with postcolonial literature, an argument he develops by comparing Frantz Fanon's poetics of tragedy with Aristotle's theory of tragedy.

According to Quayson (2021), Aristotelian tragedy contains therapeutic value, which is unattainable for Fanon because the only therapeutic outcome is justice, and this is impossible because "the process of catharsis is itself entrapped within conditions of injustice" (p. 19). Aristotelian tragedy dramatizes an individual who suffers because they attempted to determine their destiny against higher powers, like Creon who disregarded the gods, and then provides the audience with relief only when that reckless upstart has been adequately punished and the social order restored. When we understand how tragic resolution can restore social order, we can see why Fanon would object to Aristotelian catharsis: To provide such catharsis would condone social injustice by punishing the oppressed. Bringing Quayson's reasoning to *Home Fire* suggest that Shamsie's novel avoids condoning British policies of citizenship deprivation in the name of counterterrorism. Aneeka and Eamonn defy the British state, but in the end, they embrace as lovers, still alive for the time being.

While this glimmer of hope inhibits a conservative interpretation, it also forestalls a politically progressive interpretation that would celebrate dissent and invert political hierarchies. This reflects the legacy of the Greek stage as a place for voicing critique and temporarily inverting hierarchies. For example, Aristophanes' (ca. 411 B.C.E./2002) *Lysistrata* destabilizes gender norms as Greek women declare their rights are under assault due to the Athens-Sparta war, and they exert pressure on male politicians to negotiate peace. National hierarchies are also inverted in Aeschylus' (ca. 472 B.C.E./2009) *The Persians*, which is set in the foreign land of the Persians so that Athenian spectators would have been prompted to empathize with the recently defeated Persians and to see themselves as the enemy. Similarly, *Home Fire* flips the script, making readers identify with actors from diverse political blocs. Readers in favor of using citizenship deprivation to curb terrorism hear how

such policies ruin the lives of second-generation Brits like Aneeka and Isma who consider themselves to be British and have no other country to call home. But the transgressive potential of these competing voices is tamed by the proliferation of competing voices, as discussed earlier in this chapter. To give just one brief example, readers who sympathize with Aneeka and refrain from seeing Parvaiz's actions as a threat to British values also hear the lament of a woman whose daughter was tricked into marrying an ISIS fighter. In the end, these divergent voices give way to a more ambivalent silence. Because the bomb does not go off, readers can imagine that Aneeka and Eamonn were not punished for their transgressions, as Antigone and Haimon were. By withholding the sound of an exploding bomb, Shamsie allows readers to imagine a better world where love is possible and a Muslim woman's speech can impact public policy. In this hoped-for ending, Aneeka and Eamonn might reunite as lovers and return home to London, and Parvaiz might be properly buried. But this is an unwritten ending. *Home Fire* neither ushers in a new world nor affirms the existing social order. The conservative and subversive potentialities of the tragedy are all possible in the non-ending of Shamsie's novel.

The open ending of *Home Fire* also avoids resolving competing demands for justice, like many Greek tragedies. For example, Euripides' (431 B.C.E./2011) Medea could be convicted of triple homicide after she kills her two children and her ex-husband's new wife. Instead, Medea leaves Corinth self-justified after having successfully exacted revenge on Jason. In leaving Corinth, Medea submits to the exile that she initially resisted, but she receives no punishment for the murders. Thus, Medea's and Jason's claims against each other remain unresolved, and the play makes it impossible to fully condone or condemn either character's actions. Similarly, *Home Fire* portrays the competing notions of citizenship through

Karamat's determination to combat terrorism and Aneeka's loyalty to her brother. Because no one is judged to be right or wrong, their differing notions of citizenship and justice remain in tension. As mentioned throughout this chapter, the proliferation of narrative voices also prevents readers from siding with one character or issue alone. This multidirectional stalemate is depicted abstractly because the novel ends before the consequences are made clear. Aneeka effectively loses the rights of her British citizenship for speaking out against the state, Eamonn suffers for defending his fiancée, Karamat is banished from his wife's bed, and he loses favor with his constituents. Yet the full extent of each character's fate remains unclear. Without a conclusive ending, we never see the full consequences of their actions.

Attempts to extrapolate a precise political message from *Home Fire* are also impeded by the silence at the end of the novel because Aneeka's last words are hidden from the reader. When Aneeka runs to Eamonn after he has been locked into the explosive belt, he initially resists her embrace, but then "she whispers something, and he stops" (Shamsie, 2017, p. 274). The reader never gets to hear what was said. Throughout the novel, Shamsie has given Aneeka a voice of her own, but here she foregrounds the woman's irreducible otherness by concealing her final words. We know Aneeka speaks, but we cannot know what she says, and this effective silence confounds our hermeneutical attempts. If we heard these lines, we would scramble to interpret them and categorize them into existing political and relational structures and concepts of identity. Concealing these final words keeps the story open and invites readers to continue pondering the end of the tragedy—if there is one.

Home Fire's anti-cathartic aesthetic also offers a feminist intervention in the *Antigone* canon by keeping women in focus. At the end of Sophocles' play, Creon is on stage with a messenger, the chorus, and the dead bodies of his wife and son.

Meanwhile, Antigone, whose plight has been at the center of the conflict, is nowhere to be seen, having died alone offstage. Ismene, too, is unseen after her last lines about halfway through the play. In contrast, Aneeka is still seen at the end of *Home Fire*, and her almost-inevitable death is broadcast for international viewers. Through this divergence from the source text, Shamsie's novel spurs readers to wonder what happened to the women in Sophocles' play, rather than accepting the male chorus' didactic resolution. Analyzing postmodern political adaptations of Greek tragedy, Eleftheria Ioannidou (2017) writes, "rewriting the Greek plays emerges as a radical act of reclaiming tragedy for the silenced, the excluded, and the oppressed" (p. 12). Although Ioannidou focuses on dramatic adaptations, Shamsie's novel reclaims tragedy for marginalized Pakistani British Muslims accused of terrorism, stripped of citizenship, and excluded from Britain multiculturalism. These are the figures in view at the end of Shamsie's novel, even though they remain unheard. This attention to silent women exposes an ongoing problem without offering a premature hope that it has been or can be ameliorated.

By using silence to suspend catharsis and problematize both conservative and progressive conclusions, *Home Fire* prompts consideration of silence's multivalent impact, even while critiquing the silences imposed on Muslim women. Shamsie's novel reclaims the *Antigone* tragedy for British Muslim women whose citizenship is threatened, and it gives voice to a variety of Muslim Brits seeking a home in London. Yet even as the novel amplifies voices of Pakistani British immigrant Muslim women, it raises awareness of the silences that continue to reign. As yet another figure that speaks, albeit silently, the fire exposes the tragic situation that inhibits Muslim belonging in London. But rather than merely lamenting this tragic situation, *Home Fire* also reclaims silence as a tool of resistance, opens up the Western canon

to marginalized voices, and presents new ways of listening to old voices. As a new voice in the *Antigone* tradition, *Home Fire* shows that tragedy speaks as much today as it did in fifth-century Athens, and that Muslim women must continue to struggle for political agency.

CHAPTER 4

INTERTWINED BELONGING: THE FIG TREE'S NARRATIVE IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES*

In contrast to the two novels discussed thus far, Elif Shafak's (2022) *The Island of Missing Trees* sounds more optimistic about the possibility of belonging for immigrants in London because it imagines that home is built on cross-border ties and that love can overcome all divisions. Much of the novel is narrated by a woman metamorphosed into a fig tree, who is committed to breaking silences and expressing the ongoing pain of the Cyprus Partition. This narrator undoes the muffling of history by bearing witness to trauma and recovering buried stories. She also translates unheard vegetal speech into human language and through metamorphosis blurs the lines between human and plant. Her interspecies voice is complemented by a metaphorical conversation between Cyprus and England, which come together as the two main settings of the novel. Traversing the physical distance between these two islands resists isolation and makes interconnection the foundation for belonging. The fig tree further emphasizes that love can transcend cultural divisions by fostering intimacy between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, yet her dominant voice risks eliminating the silences of alterity and the inexpressible. While listening to the fig tree's hopeful narrative, this chapter investigates how ongoing silences of loss and grief complement the fig tree's articulate celebration of interconnectedness.

In its examination of belonging, *The Island of Missing Trees* traces the intertwined lives of Kostas, a Greek Cypriot, and Defne, a Turkish Cypriot, whose forbidden love blossoms during the intercommunal turmoil leading up to the 1974 Partition. Amid growing political unrest, the young couple meets secretly in a tavern

where a fig tree observes their developing love. When violence erupts in Nicosia, Kostas leaves for England, and the couple is separated. Years later, they reunite and return to London together, along with a cutting from the fig tree, which they plant around the same time their daughter Ada is born. Although Ada grows up in a relatively peaceful city, she feels no sense of belonging to either England or Cyprus because her parents have buried their heritage. After Defne dies and metamorphoses into the tree, she begins to break this silence and unbury the pain of the Cyprus Partition, enabling the novel's characters to access deeper understandings of themselves and their heritage. Through the fig tree's narrative, the novel transgresses the lines that often seem to define belonging: history, nation, species, and religion. By intertwining different species and cultures, the novel proposes that belonging arises from border-crossing love, which can heal the lingering pain of the Cyprus Partition.

The novel's two island settings emphasize severance, beginning with the Cyprus Partition. About half of the novel takes place in Cyprus in the 1950s, 1970s, and early 2000s, periods marked by escalating intercommunal strife, culminating in Partition, and the enduring effects of the division. Since 1974, Turkish Cypriots have lived on the north side of the island, and Greek Cypriots have lived on the south side; a UN-patrolled buffer zone splits the island, and Nicosia remains the only divided capital in the world. Differences in language, religion, and political identity on each side of the border mirror this geographic demarcation. Physically, Cyprus is also detached from England, the novel's other primary setting. However, even as it emphasizes their geographic distance, the novel draws attention to historical links between the two islands: England began administering Cyprus in 1878 and then ruled

it as a colony for 82 years before decolonizing in 1960.[39] Against the backdrop of Britain's colonial presence in Cyprus, the novel's London-based sections mostly take place in the early 2010s, when Ada Kazantzakis is coming of age in England. As the daughter of a Cypriot couple who lived through the Partition, Ada embodies a ruptured bond because she knows little about her Cypriot roots even though she was conceived there. Her ignorance of this heritage foregrounds the alienation that the novel aims to undo by establishing a conversation between the two islands.

By establishing connections between England and Cyprus, the novel's historico-geographic dialogue implicitly compares London to Nicosia, suggesting that both cities are predominantly characterized by division rather than coexistence. Although London is known for its cultural diversity, especially since the end of Britain's formal colonial rule, *The Island of Missing Trees* highlights inherited differences that continue to divide the city. This rupture is most evident in Ada's divided sense of self, as she struggles to reconcile her Greek roots and her Turkish roots with her Britishness. Her Greek and Turkish heritage reflects the diversity of Nicosia, her parents' hometown, yet it is evident that these identities are in conflict not only with each other but also with Ada's Britishness. Thus, as the historical conflict in Cyprus enters present-day London, it causes internal division between Ada's roots in both Nicosia and London.

The close textual contact between these two cities on distant islands also decenters London even as it remains a key location in the novel. London is the destination to which the fig tree and the Kazantzakis family relocate, as well as the location from which the fig tree tells her story. However, the city is relegated to the

[39] For more information on Britain's colonial presence in Cyprus, see Andrekos Varnava's (2009) *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878-1915* and Tabitha Morgan's (2011) *Sweet and Bitter Island: A History of the British in Cyprus*. Shafak mentions both these books, along with several others, in the Note to the Reader highlighting some of the research she conducted for *The Island of Missing Trees*.

background in favor of a localized geography. Urban scenes appear only a handful of times,[40] with most of the narrative taking place in the Kazantzakis house or its garden, which is within hearing range of the house. From the back garden where she is planted, the fig tree describes what happens in the soil around her roots, in the air that touches her branches, and in the Kazantzakis house. If the family property is a microcosm of the city, this locale contains diverse life forms and cultures, from the fig tree with her Nicosian roots to Kostas's Greek culture and his daughter's multicultural upbringing. Yet here, too, separation dominates the emotional landscape as Ada drifts away from her father after Defne's death. Evoking an image of silence as a physical barrier. Kostas remembers fondly the days when he and Ada "would talk constantly," when "this awkward, painful silence had not yet lodged itself between them" (p. 41). The growing silence between father and daughter mirrors the distance between Greek, Turkish, and British cultures, which remain divided even when they exist side by side in London.

In response to the disruptive legacy of Partition, *The Island of Missing Trees* envisions a vibrant ecology in which home is defined by enmeshment. Etymologically, "ecology" refers to the study of home, since "eco" comes from the Greek word *oikos* (home). As Cheryll Glotfelty (2015) notes in "Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," the prefix *eco-* "implies interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections among constituent parts" (p. 123). This interconnectedness can also be conceptualized as a "mesh," the term Timothy Morton (2007) uses to describe the intimate bonds between life forms which may not know each other but are "entangled" nonetheless (p. 15). In *The*

[40] One brief glimpse of the urban landscape is given when Ada and her aunt pay a visit to an exorcist in East London (Shafak, 2022, pp. 240-247)). This scene decenters London by foregrounding the multicultural streets of Aldgate East, which feature "new-build flats, curry houses, pizza chains, halal restaurants, pashmina and sari stalls…" and the exorcist's home office (p. 240).

Island of Missing Trees, enmeshment is foregrounded through the fig tree's narration as her arboreality inherently brings an ecological perspective to the story. Underground, the tree's root system shares nutrients with other plants and sends messages through a vast system of soil, fungi, and bacteria which are all "interconnected" (Shafak, 2022, p. 30). Above ground, the tree communicates with birds, ants, mice, bees, a parrot, and a mosquito, deliberately incorporating their experiences into her reflections on life in Nicosia and London. This interspecies communion presents an ecological model for belonging in which each member audibly connects with multiple forms of life.

By bringing the sounds of trans-species interaction into post-partition Cyprus and London, *The Island of Missing Trees* leverages ecological insights to critique anthropocentric biases underlying imperialism. The two broad fields of ecological and postcolonial studies share an interest in redrawing lines of distinction, such as between species or cultures, that perpetuate oppressive hierarchies. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) explicate in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*:

> …in assuming a natural prioritisation of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth, we are both generating and repeating the racist ideologies of imperialism on a planetary scale. In working towards a genuinely post-imperial, environmentally based conception of community, then, a re-imagining and reconfiguration of the human place in nature necessitates an interrogation of the category of the human itself and of the ways in which the construction of ourselves *against* nature—with the hierarchisation of life forms that construction implies—has been and remains complicit in colonialist and racist exploitation from the time of imperial conquest to the present day. (p. 6)

Underlying Huggan and Tiffin's claim that ecocriticism can bolster postcolonial thinking is a realization that anthropocentrism fosters social hierarchies of imperialism and racism. The fundamental distinction between human and nature establishes a hierarchy of value that makes it all too easy to oppress forms of life perceived as lower or other than the human self. Similarly, *The Island of Missing Trees* problematizes the anthropocentrism of colonial hierarchies that downplay nonhuman suffering in comparison to human suffering. To subvert this hierarchy, the novel critiques ethnic conflict in Cyprus not only for the human suffering it causes but also for its impact on non-human lives. For example, as ethnic conflict ravages Cyprus in 1974, Kostas mourns not human loss but bats who are dying en masse from a heatwave. His mother scolds him for crying over "a bunch of bats" when young men are killed on the streets and their mothers do not know where they have died (p. 147). Kostas's mother Panagiota articulates an anthropocentric bias, which elevates human suffering over animal suffering. She is more concerned with human deaths than with animal extinction, and she is bothered by the fact that her son weeps for the bats yet failed to shed any tears when his brother died. Unlike his mother, Kostas inverts the human-centric hierarchy by asserting the value of bat life. The contrast between mother and son's reactions to dying bats reflects the risk, frequently mentioned by Jacques Derrida (1972/1981), that attempting to subvert a binary system may simply invert rather than displace the hierarchy (p. 59). Yet ecology offers a way out of this bind, as Huggan and Tiffin (2010) suggest in the passage quoted above when they state that the human-animal or human-plant hierarchy can be avoided by reconceptualizing the human in relation to the nonhuman. This is precisely what Shafak's fig tree narrator sets out to do as she draws attention to the vast network in which human, vegetal, fungal, and animal lives are enmeshed. Rather

than fixating, for example, on Panagiota and Kostas's opposing views of bat versus human lives, *The Island of Missing Trees* uses a hybrid narrator to consistently unsettle categories of human and nonhuman beings. By emphasizing intimate connections between diverse forms of life, Shafak's narrator challenges the anthropocentric hierarchies that marginalize human and nonhuman others.

Blurred distinctions between human and plant selves also revise conceptions of belonging, a transformation that is evident as the fig tree's voice fuses with a human spirit to establish a hybrid dwelling place. As Pelin Kümbet (2023) observes, the fig tree "enacts an intraspecies communion with nature" (p. 431), imagining that home emerges as species borders dissolve. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator, speaking as Defne, explains that after her death, she longed to stay with Ada and Kostas but had no body in which to live until the fig tree provided a solution. Recalling her bodily homelessness, Defne reflects, "where could I possibly reside now that I was no longer alive and lacked a body, a shell, a form? And then I knew. The old fig tree! Where else to seek refuge but in its arboreal embrace?" (Shafak, 2022, p. 343). Defne's new home in the tree meets her physical need for refuge and allows her to continue loving her husband and daughter. At the same time, Defne's presence imbues the tree with a new kind of agency by which she speaks and loves across borders. This intertwined relationship becomes mutually beneficial and asserts the tree as a model for cross-border symbiosis.

In tune with its hybrid narrator's multifaceted voice, *The Island of Missing Trees* uses intertextuality to reconceptualize home as a network of relations. As discussed in my introductory chapter, approaching any text as a "tissue of quotations" (Barthes, 1977, p. 146) or a "mosaic of quotations" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 37) replaces an illusion of a stand-alone text with a networked awareness of its

relationship to other voices. In other words, the text does not belong in isolation; rather, the text arrives home when it is produced and received in audible relation to others. Just as intertextuality positions the text within a larger discursive network, ecology asserts that home is a community composed of diverse beings who are all connected to one another. Shafak's novel offers an example of how intertextuality and ecology take place audibly in the literary text. Explicitly approaching intertextuality as a literary method conducive to producing texts that foster ecological sustainability, Maria Löschnigg (2020) writes, "Intertextual strategies also show an affinity to ecological processes through their principles of interconnectivity and creative transformation" (p. 38). When ecology and intertextuality meet in literary texts like *The Island of Missing Trees*, their shared emphases on cooperation and interaction coalesce to create an inclusive model of belonging among others. Emphasizing method, Timothy Morton (2007) declares in *The Ecological Thought*, that *how* we think is just as important as *what* we think (p. 7). Morton writes, "Ecology includes all the ways we imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence. No man is an island" (p. 4). This echo of John Donne's (1624/1987) famous line "No man is an island" textually embodies the ecological thought, which cannot occur in isolation. Similarly, Shafak draws multiple voices into the novel's exploration of coexistence. Direct quotations from William Shakespeare, Pablo Neruda, and Ovid, as well as subtle allusions to unquoted texts, position the novel in a literary habitat populated by voices from diverse times and places.

Overlooking this interaction among diverse texts, much of the critical scholarship on *The Island of Missing Trees* treats Shafak's fig tree as an ecological paradigm for examining issues ranging from otherness to the climate crisis. In

"Arborealities, or Making Trees Matter," Stephen O'Neill (2023) focuses on what the fig tree can "teach" us about interconnections between humans and plants (p. 9). Similarly, in "The Otherness of Trees," John Stotesbury (2022) explores how the human-arboreal narrative voice begins to decenter human perspectives (p. 160). Ethical implications of this intertwining have also been discussed: Rebecca Saunders (2024) sees the fig tree's ecosystem as a model for a "politics of susceptibility" that acknowledges the importance of support structures to overcome trauma (p. 10), and O'Neill (2023) argues that the tree's non-anthropocentric storytelling is crucial in the current era of climate crisis (p. 2). Although each of these articles mentions the novel's historical background, none explicitly links the tree's hybridity to her status as an immigrant in London, which is a primary setting of the novel. Examining this novel in the context of my dissertation's focus on immigrant voices in London adds a new perspective to the small body of critical literature on *The Island of Missing Trees*, as I consider how the fig tree's narrative amplifies marginalized voices in London.

An integral aspect of the fig tree's vision for harmony involves uniting silence and speech. Like the other novels discussed in this dissertation, *The Island of Missing Trees* resists silences of oppression and trauma, yet it does more than merely critique harmful silences. While giving voice to marginalized speakers such as a migrant woman-tree, the novel also attends to the quiet that testifies to loss. This attention to silence becomes more evident in the motifs of mourning and melancholia, which I will discuss in the second half of the chapter. These elements of memory complicate the fig tree's dissolution of temporal divisions because they imbue her speech with loss, which is necessarily silent to some degree. Rather than interpreting this grief as a contradiction to the fig tree's vocal praise of

interconnection, I return to the idea that silence and sound are both integral to communication. As the fig tree engages with audible and inaudible speech, she practices transtemporal grief: While remembering past suffering and mourning what has been lost, she looks forward to being reunited with her beloved. Resisting hierarchical dichotomies, this reunion triumphantly yet mournfully joins together Cyprus and England, human and plant, Christian and Muslim, and past and future.

Proceeding thematically, the following sections examine how the fig tree rejects separation to establish a vision for ecological, or intertwined, belonging. Section 4.1 considers how the novel's structure bridges physical distance between England and Cyprus, and Section 4.2 argues that the fig tree partially dissolves the human-plant barrier. Section 4.3 discusses how the fig tree uses love to transcend cultural differences, and the final section emphasizes how the tree's cyclical understanding of time undergirds its reconciliation of ongoing loss and hope for the future.

4.1 Inter-island conversation: Traversing geographic borders

To cultivate an ecological understanding of home, Shafak's novel establishes trans-geographic and transhistorical connections between Cyprus and England, rendering these islands into multivalent spaces characterized by both insularity and connection. An emphasis on multiplicity and fluidity aligns Shafak's island settings with the decentered and polyphonic image of London that emerges in this dissertation. Rather than approaching London in isolation, the novels discussed in each chapter of this dissertation imagine London as a space constructed in relation to diverse and distant places. *The Island of Missing Trees* furthers this decentering and diversification of London, a prominent city on a small isle, by overturning the perceived insularity of

islands and their inhabitants. Exploring the construction of postcolonial islander identities, Maeve McCusker and Anthony Soares (2011) remark that an island can be perceived "either as a space of isolation or as one of relation" in terms of "its seemingly firm borders, in its relationship to an often contested mainland, or, for example, in its connectedness to other archipelagic spaces" (p. xiv). Given that perceptions of the island can shift with attention to borders, mainlands, and archipelagos, Shafak's fig tree focuses not primarily on the island-mainland relationship but on redefining inter-island relations. Her narrative defies geographic insularity by emphasizing historical ties between Cyprus and its former colonizer, England. In addition to establishing a metaphorical conversation between these two islands, the fig tree redefines islander identity by crossing geographic and cultural borders. However, even though the fig tree initially presents its arboreal network as a prototype to overcome island alienation and bridge historical divides, she acknowledges that such imbrication can feel burdensome for immigrants. This complexity introduces the problem of excessively privileging contact, which adds a critical dimension to the fig tree's expressed preference for augmenting interrelationship. By drawing on concepts from island studies and the blue humanities, this section shifts focus from geographic boundedness to connectedness, while also considering how grief and trauma complicate an embrace of interspatial contact.

Varied representations of islands abound in literary studies, yet the theme of isolation consistently emerges as a primary characteristic based on island geography. While arguing for a multidimensional approach to studying islands "on their own terms" (p. 104), Grant McCall's (1994) article "Nissology: A Proposal for Consideration" emphasizes geographic and social elements that depict islands as

isolated, insulated places. Because they are distinct land masses surrounded by water, McCall argues, islands tend to have clear borders and limited natural resources on land, which makes them dependent on marine resources and susceptible to being claimed by continental states (p. 102). These geographic and strategic features of islands feed into sociocultural features, such as a sense of boundedness that establishes in-groups and out-groups, as well as a sense of being small or inadequate (McCall, p. 103). Initially, Shafak's fig tree associates islands with loneliness due to their geography. The first sentence of the novel emphasizes distance by telling readers that Cyprus is located "at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea" (Shafak, 2022, p. 1). This remoteness can be interpreted neutrally, and indeed, the narrator initially presents the island as a place for exploration and discovery. This inviting image arises in part from the island's ambivalence, which can be represented in varying ways.[41] To this point, Matthew Boyd Goldie (2011) notes in "Island Theory" that accounts of island seclusion carry positive connotations of offering security or possession as well as negative images of entrapment and extreme solitude (p. 5). Indeed, the opening of *The Island of Missing Trees* invites positive attitudes toward the island's distance as affording exploration and possession. However, the fig tree's perception of islands more consistently aligns with negative impressions like that written into John Donne's (1624/1987) Meditation XVII which uses the island as a symbol of alienation. The undesirable solitude of the island expressed by Donne is loosely echoed in the fig tree's comments on loneliness. She refers to Cyprus as a "lonely, beautiful island" (p. 5). Similarly, Defne defines an island as "'a lonely thing with water on all sides'" (p. 184). In both descriptions, the island's physical

[41] On the shifting images of islands, see also *Islands in History and Representation*, edited by Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith (2003).

separation correlates to social alienation, corroborating the fig tree's distaste for geographic and emotional distance.

Rather than perpetuating this antipathy toward island insularity, *The Island of Missing Trees* calls for a revised understanding of physical distance by juxtaposing human loneliness with the sociality of trees. Before Kostas buries the fig tree to protect it from an approaching storm, he promises to visit every day so she will not feel lonely. Silently, the fig tree responds, "…loneliness is a human invention. Trees are never lonely" (p. 30). She then explains that trees are always in contact with other organisms, like fungi and bacteria, through complex root systems. This arboreal ecosystem stands in contrast to the geography of islands, which seem secluded from other land masses. However, the fig tree's preference for arboreal networks does not imply that all islands are remote places of isolation. In fact, the fig tree's rebuttal to being perceived as lonely resonates with discussions in the field of the blue humanities, which decenter land by focusing on the connective and overflowing capacities of water. Frequently credited with creating the term blue humanities, Steve Mentz (2024) illustrates how bodies of water disrupt fixed categories such as land/water and wet/dry because they always overflow their containers (p. 2). Water also disrupts cultural divisions based on national and geographical distinctions. To this point, Mentz highlights the Mediterranean, in both its land and sea configurations, as a particularly diverse region: "The sea sits astride the continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia, and the region has been the cradle of many civilizations, from Greece, Rome, and the Ottoman Empire to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" (pp. 80-81). Approaching the Mediterranean Sea as a body of water in contact with multiple edges of land unsettles the tendency to home in on geographic divisions and replaces an image of cultural clash with a kaleidoscopic view of multiple

civilizations that have been nourished by the sea. This appreciation of multiplicity comes by shifting the perceived center and reframing the sea as a symbol of connection rather than separation. Drawing on the insights of nissology and the blue humanities, we can identify two islands on the Kazantzakis property: the garden inhabited by vegetal life and the house inhabited by Kostas and Ada. However, neither of these physical islands exists unto itself since they are surrounded by soil, which is a dynamic conduit like water, traversing physical space and reducing geographic distance. Rather than fixating on her physical distance from Kostas and seeing the soil around her as a barrier to intimacy, the fig tree articulates a sense of social connection across physical distance.

Acknowledging the dynamic link between water and land enables a more fluid understanding of how space shapes identity, as seen in Ada's developing sense of self. Initially, the contrast between isolation and connection is notably dramatized in Ada's incomplete understanding of her name. Ada first appears as a lonely teenager who is socially and culturally alienated because she lacks a sense of national belonging. Despite knowing that her name means "island" in Turkish, she has never been sure what island this refers to. The novel explains Ada's murky understanding of her name's origin:

> When she was younger she had assumed it referred Great Britain, the only island she had ever known, only later coming to the realization that it was, in fact, another isle, far away, and the reason was that she was conceived over there. (Shafak, 2022, p. 13)

Ada's impression of her parents' homeland emphasizes distance through phrases like "far away" and "over there." Here she does not even name Cyprus; it is just another "isle" to which she feels no affinity. Referring to Cyprus as an "isle" may further

emphasize its seclusion. In *The Aesthetics of Island Space*, Johannes Riquet (2019) points out that the Old English word "isle" means "water" or "watery," whereas the later-developed word "island" etymologically links water to land. As a less bounded word, "island" emphasizes that such land masses are "spaces where lithosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere interact" (Riquet, 2019, p. 8). But the spatial connection between land and sea denoted in "island" is lost in Ada's conception of Cyprus as a distant "isle." At this point, Ada's uncomfortable relationship to her name mirrors the tendency to associate islands with isolation and to see water as a separator. However, just as the watery isolation of "isle" evolves into the more imbricated connotations of "island," this understanding will expand for Ada.

As the novel proceeds, Ada begins to identify as an "islander" (Shafak, 2022, p. 339), a term that transcends differences between and within islands. Being an islander captures Ada's sense of connection to both England and her family's past in Cyprus. While integrating her English and Cypriot origins, Ada's new sense of self also reconciles internal divisions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Noticing that Cypriots suffer from an uncertain identity, Tabitha Morgan (2011) writes in *Sweet and Bitter Island,* "Few islanders today would refer to themselves as Cypriots without feeling obliged to prefix it with the term 'Greek' or 'Turkish'" (p. 256). Morgan theorizes that this urge to bolster Cypriot identity with an additional marker is a trickle-down effect from the British colonists' uncertainty about how to categorize Cypriots. She continues: "The elusive feeling of 'Cypriotness', of confidence in what it means to be from and of the island, will need to be more deeply rooted if there is to be any hope of creating an integrated Cypriot community" in the aftermath of Partition (p. 257). Morgan's statement calls for an identity that encompasses all the island's residents. Similarly, rather than dividing Cypriots into

"Greek" and "Turkish" or "north" and "south," Ada articulates an inclusive approach that can reunite the split island. When asked if she hopes to visit the North or the South of Cyprus, Ada replies, "I'll come to the island…I just want to meet islanders, like myself" (Shafak, 2022, p. 339). As an islander, Ada does not have to choose a distinctly Greek, Turkish, or British label; being an islander encompasses all the islands connected to her heritage. For Ada, island now designates community rather than isolation.

The novel's structure, bringing Cyprus and England into an ongoing conversation, supports this shift from alienation to affinity. Neither island speaks per se, but the narrative action frequently moves back and forth between these islands, with each chapter set on one island so that it is always clear which location is in focus. This narrative rhythm enacts an ongoing conversation between the islands, breaking down the physical distance that isolates them. The oscillation between Cyprus and England can also be likened to a wave or tide, moving in and out between land and sea. Meditating on how spring tides cause flooding in low-lying areas of a Connecticut suburb, Steve Mentz (2024) portrays the tidal rhythm as an "invasion" that "provides physical evidence, wet and salty, of the presence of the sea" on land (p. xi). The tide disrupts the land-sea boundary not only during seasonal flooding but also whenever a wave laps a shoreline. Water rolls in, makes contact with land, then recedes and repeats the movement, constantly blurring the boundary between wet and dry. Like a tide, Shafak's narrative moves onto the shores of Cyprus and then to the shores of England, replacing (is)land alienation with fluid connection.

Water also brings together several religions in *The Island of Missing Trees* as islanders like Defne identify with the goddess Aphrodite, regardless of their

affiliation with Roman, Greek, Christian, or Muslim practices of piety. When Ada begins researching Greek gods for a school project, Defne tells her about Aphrodite, who, according to legends, was born from the foamy waves in Paphos (southern Cyprus) and is therefore from the same island as Defne and Ada. Claiming an affinity based on this shared origin, Defne not only speaks of the goddess in familiar terms but also portrays Aphrodite as an archetypal Cypriot woman who transcends religious divisions through her various "incarnations" in Greek and Roman mythology (Shafak, 2022, p. 61). Later, as Colin Thubron's (1975) memoir *Journey into Cyprus* details, the Greek-turned-Roman goddess found her way into Christian and Muslim traditions in Cyprus.[42] In the village of Kouklia, for example, Thubron visits a church built over Roman ruins and notices that the column of a "pagan" shrine to Aphrodite is now part of the altar where Christian and Muslim women make offerings to the Virgin Mary, which suggests that the Virgin Mary is a newer incarnation of the Greek and Roman goddess (Thubron, pp. 124-125). This connection to multiple religious traditions makes transformation a key characteristic that Shafak's Defne highlights when she claims an originary affinity with Aphrodite. Like the women Thubron observed in Kouklia, Defne comes from a Turkish family, which would align her with the Muslim community, yet she has no qualms about claiming a relation to the goddess who has arguably shaped not just Greek but also Roman, Christian, and Muslim traditions. Thus, the figure of Aphrodite provides islanders with an example of how to navigate between religious labels. By refraining from aligning Aphrodite with a single religion, Shafak's novel shows how an identity

[42] Thubron's (1975) memoir is mentioned as one of Shafak's sources consulted while writing *The Island of Missing Trees* (pp. 345-346). While exploring Roman, Greek, and Christian ruins across Cyprus in the 1970s, Thubron encountered Aphrodite not only in Greek temples but also in Roman ruins and even under Christian chapels.

shaped by a figure born of water can wash away the divisions caused by religious labels.

Even while these layers of history and mythology transcend cultural and religious barriers to portray islands as liminal spaces, the imbrication of distant times and places imposes a heavy weight on Shafak's characters. Like the tragic form that silences women in *Home Fire* and the traumatic memories that AlAmmar's protagonist carries even after recovering her physical voice, the colonial past interferes with women's identities in *The Island of Missing Trees*. The burden of the past can be heard in the inter-island conversation facilitated by the fig tree's identity as a postcolonial subject. The fig tree was born in Cyprus in 1878, the same year that Britain negotiated with the Ottoman Empire to administer Cyprus (Shafak, 2022, p. 84). By sharing this detail, along with a brief history about how the British annexed the island after World War I, the fig tree presents itself as a former colonial subject who now speaks back to the colonizer. In the early 2000s, the tree becomes a smuggled migrant when Kostas takes a small cutting from the now-dying tree and plants it in his garden in London. Though physically cut off from her roots, she retains memories of her former life in Cyprus, like all migrants who carry their homelands with them.

The tree's connection to Cyprus parallels Defne's conviction that emigrants are always tied to their homelands, no matter how far they travel. When she agrees to move to London with Kostas, Defne makes this point by referencing Kostas's favorite poet, C.P. Cavafy. She says to Kostas:

> 'You were the one who made me read Cavafy—have you forgotten your own poet? You think you can leave your native land because so many people have done it, so why shouldn't you? After all, the world is full of immigrants,

> runaways, exiles … Encouraged, you break free and travel as far as you can, then one day you look back and realize it was coming with you all along, like a shadow. Everywhere we go, it'll follow us, this city, this island.' (Shafak, 2022, p. 285).

Defne supposes that immigrants, runaways, and exiles want an impossible freedom from their native countries, but they cannot break free from Cyprus. This tension relates migration to the novel's meditation on separation and union, suggesting that perpetual contact is not always desired.

Defne's statement that the city will follow them wherever they go likely alludes to "The City," one of the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy's better-known poems. Although Cavafy was not well-known in his lifetime (1863-1933), he is now considered one of the most distinguished Greek writers of the twentieth century, and his poetry influenced canonical English writers such as W.H. Auden, E.M. Forster, T.S. Eliot, and D.H. Lawrence.[43] Much of Cavafy's poetry, often set in ancient Greece or Rome, conveys a bleak worldview in which no one can escape their fate. For example, "The City" (1961) is addressed to a traveler who sets out to find a better land, only to find his heart buried like a "corpse" and his mind stuck in a "wasteland" (p. 27). The speaker declares to this disappointed traveler:

> You will find no new lands, you will find no other seas.
> The city will follow you. You will roam the same
> streets. And you will age in the same neighborhoods;
> and you will grow gray in these same houses.
> Always you will arrive in this city. Do not hope for any other—

[43]Introducing a collection of Cavafy's poems, Auden (1961) states that his own writing has been so influenced by Cavafy that much of his own poetry would have been written differently or not at all if he had not read the Greek poet, albeit in translation (p. vii).

(Cavafy, written ca. 1911, published 1961[44])

Always returning to the same city echoes the cyclicality of Cavafy's (1992) poem "Ithaka," in which an Odysseus-like traveler is destined to return home to Ithaka (p. 36). However, "The City" has the bleaker tone of a world-weary traveler who has seen it all; unlike the "Ithaka" traveler who will visit new cities and explore unfamiliar harbors before returning safely home, the traveler of "The City" will find nothing new. Despite leaving, they remain stuck in the same old place. The Greek text's rhyme scheme *abbccdda effggdde* mirrors this sense of captivity: In each stanza, three couplets are bookended by rhyming lines, which act as aural containers. Although the individual lines seem to move forward and they progress through various endings, the first and final lines of each stanza arrive at the same destination, conveyed through the rhyme scheme. This repetition makes Cavafy's poem an emblem of entrapment. Similarly, Defne and Kostas leave Cyprus, only to return to it in their memories. For Defne, anticipating such entrenchment is problematic because it prevents her from escaping the island. Like the Antigone story rewritten in Shamsie's *Home Fire*, Shafak's invocation of Greek myth highlights the persistent presence of the past. While layers of geographic and historical connections sometimes foster cultural transcendence, as when Cypriot Muslims admire Aphrodite, Defne's allusion to Cavafy's mythical vision speaks primarily of entrapment. Even geographic distance cannot release Shafak's emigrant characters from the city of old that follows them into the present.

[44] "The City" has also been translated into English by E. Keeley and P. Sherrard (Cavafy, 1992, p. 28). Here I quote from R. Dalven's (1961) translation because the line "the city will follow you" (p. 27) sounds closer to Defne's statement, "it'll follow us, this city…" (Shafak, 2022, p. 285). For comparison, Keeley and Sherrard (1992) translate the same line as "This city will always pursue you" (p. 28).

This unwanted spatiotemporal bond complicates the novel's commitment to overcoming separation. On the one hand, the fig tree's transplanting breaks down the perception that islands are characterized by distance and isolation. In this regard, the fig tree's narrative creates a conversation between Cyprus and England, and it opens the way to reimagining the island as a place of belonging. However, inter-island connection becomes burdensome for migrants like Defne and the fig tree because they are unable to cut ties with Cyprus. From this point of view, the metaphorical contact between Cyprus and England is constraining, even as it defies geography. To avoid privileging such ties at the expense of liberty, the fig tree embraces transformation, which the next section discusses.

4.2 Transformation and translation: Dissolving the human-plant barrier?

Beyond bridging the geographic distance between Cyprus and England, the fig tree traverses the human-plant boundary by speaking as a metamorphosed being that destabilizes binary categories. In *Positions*, Jacques Derrida (1972/1981) argues that a binary construction (such as self/other or man/woman) always privileges one item in the pair (p. 41). Central to this dissertation's argument is the idea that the unfavored term tends to be unheard: Woman is silenced in the man-woman binary, and Muslims are silenced in the self-other binary that shapes the politics of national belonging. Likewise, in the human/nature binary, it is generally assumed that humans speak while plants are silent or unheard. However, these hierarchies can be disrupted by listening to marginalized speakers, such as the fig tree. Not content with merely questioning hierarchical relations, the fig tree attempts to eliminate the human/plant dualism through transformation and translation, but ultimately her speech foregrounds ineradicable differences between species.

Physically, the metamorphosis of Shafak's arboreal narrator dissolves the species barrier. Throughout the novel, the fig tree narrator speaks in the first person, but in the final pages she refers to herself in the third person, saying, "Poor fig tree. When I metamorphosed into her, she suddenly found herself deeply in love with my husband" (Shafak, 2022, p. 343). The reference to Kostas as "my husband" indicates that Defne is speaking, and it confirms what has been hinted at throughout the narrative: Defne's consciousness has entered the fig tree. For a moment, the narrator allows readers to separate Defne and the fig tree into "I" and "she," but this distinction is merely syntactical. In fact, the speaker is both Defne and the fig tree. The two can no longer be separated. This dual identity escapes the human-plant dualism and points toward a way of being that is no longer rooted in categories of self-other or human-plant.

To further evade established categories of human and plant, the metamorphosed narrator embraces continual change. In *Trees in Literatures and the Arts*, Carmen Concilio (2021) conceptualizes metamorphosed trees as *becoming-vegetal*, a process whereby humans become trees. Developed from Deleuze and Guattari's work on becoming-animal, Concilio's becoming-vegetal is an ongoing process, as indicated by the *-ing* ending. Similarly, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) emphasize that becoming is non-teleological. It does not proceed toward an endpoint or "produce" anything except itself (p. 238). They state, "Becoming is a verb" (p. 239). *The Island of Missing Trees* associates open-ended becoming with life, since it gives Defne a way to continue living after her human death. The narrator, whom we now know is partly Defne, describes in biological detail how she became the tree: "I seeped into her vascular tissues, absorbed water from her leaves and breathed life again through her pores" (Shafak, 2022, p. 343).

The use of past tense verbs here belies the open-endedness of Defne's transformation. Defne did not absorb water and breathe water only one time; rather, these actions continue to occur as Defne and the fig tree live in this new form. As a becoming, Shafak's fig tree eludes teleological categorization, and it will continue to do so.

While defying species classification, Shafak's fig tree draws on another mythical intertext to attach herself to a Mediterranean lineage of women transformed into plants. Trees imbued with human spirits appear in a variety of well-known literary works, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Inferno*, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, and Torquato Tasso's epic *Jerusalem Delivered*.[45] Shafak's fig tree could also affiliate herself with a variety of talking trees. As Michael Marder (2017) points out in "To Hear Plants Speak," the talking tree is a figure in many cultures, appearing in Indian, Greek, Buddhist, Persian, Italian, and English literatures (p. 112). Given this range of literary predecessors, it seems notable that Shafak's fig tree delineates a specific genealogy, stating:

> Women, at least where I come from, and for personal reasons of their own, have, time and again, turned themselves into native flora. Defne, Dafne, Daphne … Daring to reject Apollo, Daphne became a laurel. Her skin hardened into a protective bark, her arms stretched into slender branches and her hair unfurled into silky foliage while, as Ovid tells us, 'her feet, so swift a moment ago, stuck in slow-growing roots'. Whereas Daphne was transformed

[45] For an overview of metamorphosed trees in literature, see Tzachi Zamir's (2011) article "Talking Trees." Zamir observes that arboreal metamorphosis often symbolizes deep sadness and grief, and he suggests that humanized trees provide the basis for a moral transformation wedded to the corporeal encounter with an other. Michael Marder's (2017) "To Hear Plants Speak" also provides a "partial list" of metamorphosed trees that speak in literature (p. 112).

> into a tree in order to avoid love, I transmuted into a tree in order to hold on to love. (Shafak, 2022, p. 343)

Without claiming to speak for women across the world, the fig tree identifies as part of a regional trend with a history in and around Cyprus. Playing with the name Defne, which sounds like the Greek "Daphne," the narrator uses orthographic shifts to visualize the idea that transformation has a long-standing heritage. Just as a name often assumes a new sound or shape when it moves between languages, women can change shapes in this literary tradition. Because she specifically references Ovid's Daphne, the tree aligns herself with an Ovidian type of metamorphosis.[46] This choice of intertextual relationship establishes a sense of female solidarity in a regional tradition.

From her position in this textual heritage, Shafak's fig tree intervenes in the reception of Roman mythology by reclaiming agency for metamorphosed women, a point that becomes evident in the contrast between Defne's transformation and Ovid's Daphne. In Book I of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Daphne is fleeing Apollo, who has fallen in love with her despite her desire to remain unmarried. As Apollo chases Daphne through the woods, she prays to be changed into a different form, saying, "If rivers have power over nature, / mar the beauty which made me admired too well, by changing / my form! (Ovid, ca. 8 C.E./2004, Lines 544-46). Immediately, Daphne becomes a laurel tree: Her bosom is "ringed in a layer of bark," her hair becomes the leaves of the tree, her arms turn into branches, her feet extend into roots, and her head becomes "confined in a treetop" (Ovid, Lines 549ff). This transformation is not

[46] Ovid's (ca 8 C.E./2004) *Metamorphoses* includes stories of Daphne who morphs into a laurel tree to escape an unwanted lover, Myrrha who becomes a myrrh tree to escape censure after falling in love with her father, Phaethon's sisters who transform into ever-mourning poplar trees after his death, and the nymph Lotis who becomes a lotus tree to escape a lover's unwanted advances. Among the many stories of arboreal transformation found in Ovid's text, the fig tree identifies most closely with Daphne, who became a laurel tree.

exactly liberating. Even though Daphne has asked for a new form to hide her beauty, she becomes stuck in the form of a tree that Apollo still finds attractive and is determined to possess. Apollo declares to Daphne the laurel tree, “Since you cannot be mine in wedlock, you must at least be Apollo’s tree” (Line 556). Apollo loves this woman-turned-tree so much that he plans to twine her branches into his hair and use them to decorate his lyre and the city gates, as one might display a trophy. Even though Daphne escapes Apollo’s sexual advances, she remains subject to his admiring gaze. When Shafak (2022) summarizes Daphne’s arborealization, she obscures this entrapment by idealizing the tree’s qualities: Daphne has “protective bark” for skin, “slender branches” for arms, and “silky foliage” for hair (p. 343). Even so, this representation echoes images of the Ovidian woman with thin arms and silky hair who cannot escape the unwanted male gaze.

In contrast to the Roman myth, active verbs emphasize how Shafak’s character shapes her own identity. Whereas Daphne “was transformed,” Defne actively “transmuted” herself (Shafak, 2022, p. 343). A word associated with alchemy, transmutation refers to material changes, and it often describes a change into a more valuable form. In Defne’s story, love seems catalyze this refinement. The fig tree recognizes Daphne’s bravery in rejecting Apollo, and she reflects on the difference in their motivations. While Daphne sought to escape love, Defne chose transformation as a way to “hold on to love” (p. 343). Daphne, driven by fear, pleaded for a new form and was turned into a tree by chance. In contrast, Shafak’s Defne deliberately becomes a fig tree. The shift from passive transformation to active transmutation highlights Defne’s agency in shaping her identity and her relationship to Kostas. By rewriting Daphne’s story, Shafak’s fig tree connects herself to a subset

of women who have transformed into flora, but she claims comparatively more agency for arboreal women like Defne who are motivated by love.

Moreover, Shafak's Defne continues speaking after becoming a tree, whereas Daphne falls silent after her metamorphosis. Upon becoming a laurel tree, Ovid's Daphne seems to "agree" with Apollo by waving her branches and "nodding her head in the treetop" (Line 566). Although Apollo believes she is communicating with him, readers have no access to her perspective. Moreover, Dafne's apparent agreement is conveyed from a male perspective. Thus, while acknowledging that Dafne's waving branches may be treated as an utterance, I consider this a verbal silence, which stands in stark contrast to the verbal eloquence of Shafak's fig tree.

Transformation is integral to the fig tree's speech, which translates the perceived silences of nature into human language. In "On Language as Such," Walter Benjamin (1928/1979) describes translation as a "continuum of transformations" (p. 117) that establishes contact between human beings and material things—such as lamps or foxes (p. 110). He associates human language with the production of sound, arguing that even though nonhuman things communicate through a "material community," they lack audible language (p. 114). For Benjamin, the sonic marks a distinction between human and nonhuman beings, yet this barrier can be broken by translation when human language gives voice to what otherwise seems mute. While Benjamin may be faulted for ascribing silence to other-than-human beings because they do not use audible human language, his writing reworks the notions of sound and silence in relation to human and nonhuman beings. Similarly, Shafak's speaking fig tree prompts readers not only to consider how the vegetal world speaks but also to reconceptualize silence as an inability to interpret another language.

The epigraph page of *The Island of Missing Trees* hints at the common idea that speech distinguishes humans from plants. Shafak quotes from the poet Pablo Neruda, "Anyone who hasn't been in the Chilean forest doesn't know this planet. I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world." In the opening pages of his *Memoirs* quoted here, Neruda (1974/1976) describes the Chilean forest where he spent his childhood as "silent" (p. 5). This hushed climate seems to have nurtured Neruda's poetic sensibility, since he suggests that experiencing it is crucial to understanding the world. Even so, Neruda establishes a clear distinction between the plant kingdom and the poet, and his lyrical language lures readers into agreeing with the premise that singing sets the poet apart from speechless plants. A similar logic lies underneath *The Island of Missing Trees*: The nonhuman world is perceived as mute, and it falls to exceptional storytellers like the fig tree to break this silence.

The apparent silences of nature are reinforced by the novel's second epigraph, an excerpt from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that suggests the speaking fig tree is an exception to nature's ordinary muteness. The quotation depicts a speaking forest: "It will have blood: They say blood will have blood. Stones have been known to move and trees to speak…" These lines occur in Shakespeare's play shortly after Macbeth kills King Duncan and his friend Banquo, and then struggles to maintain an appearance of sanity at a dinner party where he speaks aloud to Banquo's ghost (Shakespeare, 1623/2009, 3.4, Lines 152-153). After his dinner guests hurriedly depart, Macbeth's utterance suggests that even if he managed to convince the guests of his innocence, nature would reveal that he is the murderer. Macbeth's belief that trees can speak and stones can move of their own accord references early modern superstitious practices used to identify murderers. In a rather dated analysis of

Macbeth's speech, Albert Cook (1903) points out how stones and trees functioned as informers in a literary tradition extending back to Virgil, Euripides, and the Hebrew Scriptures. Even without analyzing these textual precursors, we can pick out Macbeth's suspicion that trees and stones speak to reveal unspoken truths. In a similar vein, Sarah Wood (2011) analyzes Macbeth's speech as an example of how poetic language brings forth "the incomprehensible monster that is a secret revealed" (viii). At this point in the play, the trees have not yet spoken; it is only in Macbeth's imagination that the trees have agency. This possibility of arboreal speech arises in response to a disrupted order. Macbeth's first phrase, "blood will have blood," indicates that vengeance is a natural law. One murder begets another murder, and death is the just punishment for murder. The following line—"Stones have been known to move and trees to speak" —supplements this natural law with supernatural phenomena to achieve justice. When the natural law against murder is transgressed, nature restores order by enabling stones and trees to expose the murderer. In short, the arboreal speech imagined in *Macbeth* is a temporary exception to restore harmony. Like the trees that Macbeth imagines speaking after he has murdered the king, Shafak's tree speaks of the blood that was shed in Cyprus as Greeks and Turks fought each other. By narrating this violence, the fig tree overturns the assumption that nature is silent, but only as an exception. It speaks to restore harmony. Moreover, Shafak's speaking tree is an anomaly, heard by readers only because it has been infused with a woman's soul.

For most characters in *The Island of Missing Trees*, nature is speechless because it does not produce linguistic sounds that they can interpret. Unlike readers who have access to the fig tree's narration, characters in the novel never hear her voice. Kostas is a partial exception to this generalization because he believes,

"Nature was always talking, telling things, though the human ear was too limited to hear them" (Shafak, 2022, p. 207). Despite his belief that plants can speak, Kostas is still unable to hear the fig tree's voice, even when she addresses him directly. For example, just before being buried for the winter storm, she expresses the thought, *"Farewell, Kostaki, till spring, then…"* (p. 36). From her perspective, Kostas reacts as if he might have heard this farewell: "A look of wonder passed across his face, so rapid and fleeting that for a second it seemed he might have heard me. A recognition, almost" (p. 36). Kostas' almost-recognition arises from his conviction that trees can talk, but his inability to hear the tree continues to emphasize differences between human and plant communication.

By showing how human characters are deaf to plant speech even when they want to hear, the fig tree's narrative treats the apparent silence of nature as a language barrier. Underlying this suggestion is the claim, recently given more attention in the field of critical plant studies, that plants also possess language. For instance, in "Breaking the Silence," Monica Gagliano (2017) approaches language as a "meaning-making activity" (p. 87), and she argues that humans tend to overlook vegetal meaning-making when it is not audible (p. 89). Similarly, Matthew Hall (2011) writes in *Plants as Persons*, "Plants may not be able to talk in human language, but they are aware and they have their own methods of communication" (p. 108). Shafak's novel engages in a similar discussion when Ada wonders aloud if the fig tree can feel pain and Kostas responds by foregrounding language: "The scientific consensus is that trees are not sentient in the way most people use the word…" (Shafak 2022, p. 41). Sentience typically refers to the capacity for experiencing feelings and sensations, which Kostas believes trees have, even though it has not been proven in scientific terms. He elaborates:

> ‘Well, I think there’s still so much we don’t know, we’re only just beginning to discover the language of trees. But we can tell with certainty that they can hear, smell, communicate—and they can definitely remember. They can sense water, light, danger. They can send signals to other plants and help each other. They’re much more alive than most people realize.’ (Shafak, 2022, p. 42)

With this attention to how trees communicate, Kostas introduces the idea that they have their own language. They are sensitive to their environment, and they can send signals to other plants. Nevertheless, Kostas’ hesitance expressed by the filler word “Well” indicates that he lacks the vocabulary to articulate vegetal speech. He speaks with uncertainty because this is a developing field of study, and he believes that trees speak their own language. Rather than speaking for them, Kostas admits that he does not understand arboreal expression. The impediment is not muteness but a lack of knowledge.

Unlike Kostas who cannot hear plant voices, the fig tree defies this language barrier by translating arboreal experience into human language. In the chapter following Kostas’s comments on sentience, the fig tree shares her reaction to the preceding conversation, affirming that trees do indeed respond to sensory input and communicate with other beings. She describes how trees “send[] signals through a network of latticed fungi,” convey warnings to their neighbors, record trauma in the rings of their trunks, release distress signals, recognize kin, feel touch, and emit chemicals when they are threatened or pained (Shafak, 2022, pp. 44-45). These forms of communication are not sonic, so they seem silent to the human ear. Nevertheless, they constitute a language that the fig tree interprets for her readers.

By using narrative language rather than solely arboreal modes of communication, the fig tree attempts to establish a social bond between humans and plants. In *Plants and Literature*, Randy Laist (2013) remarks that plants tend to get lumped into a general category of the plant kingdom, which humans see as "a category of things that are alive like we are, but alive in a way that is utterly different, closed off from our capacity for empathy, omnipresent but unknown, seductive but unresponsive" (p. 14). While emphasizing the alterity of plants, Laist suggests that interactions with plant others can foster more empathy for and recognition of human others. The qualities of empathy, knowability, and responsiveness are precisely what Shafak's fig tree emphasizes as she explains arboreal lives. Not only do they have elegant systems of communication, but they also care for other species. However, their empathy often goes unnoticed and unreciprocated by humans due to their physical alterity. The tree herself argues that visible difference is a barrier to being known when she hypothesizes:

> one reason why humans find it hard to understand plants is because, in order to connect with something other than themselves and genuinely care about it, they need to interact with a face, an image that mirrors theirs as closely as possible (Shafak, 2022, p. 46).

If visual similarity is a cornerstone of human-to-human empathy, visual dissimilarity presents a significant barrier to human-plant understanding. Bypassing the visual domain that highlights her otherness, the fig tree leverages narrative language to develop an extra-textual readerly relationship that can lead to understanding and caring for an arboreal other. Even though her communicative efforts with other characters remain constrained by humans' inability to interpret the language of

nature, her metamorphosis and translation complement her belief that love can bridge religious and political divides, as the next section will discuss.

4.3 Arboreal love: Overcoming political differences

Just as the fig tree uses metamorphosis and translation to cross species barriers, she presents herself as a figure of love that bridges cultural differences. Her ideals of harmony arise from her intertwined sense of self, which can be compared to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) use the rhizome, an underground plant stem that expands through a network of horizontal shoots, as a metaphor for anti-hierarchical relations. They write, "the rhizome connects any point to any other point" (p. 21). The rhizome does not distinguish between subject and object (p. 8). It does not have a single center or even multiple centers but it lacks centrality altogether (p. 21). The rhizome is like grass, spreading out and growing between things (p. 19) without returning to a taproot or center. These descriptions portray the rhizome as a paradigm of interconnectedness, a quality that Shafak's fig tree also claims to embody. Like a rhizome, which levels hierarchical distinctions, the fig tree rejects firm separations between types of species. She states, "Humans think they know with certainty where their being ends and someone else's starts. With their roots tangled and caught up underground, linked to fungi and bacteria, trees harbour no such illusions. For us, everything is interconnected" (Shafak, 2022, p. 30). Based on its arboreal mode of being, the tree thus offers several lessons in how to relate across difference.

Responding to the many divisions that mark Cyprus, the fig tree draws attention to religious differences. She says, "For the island was riven into two pieces —the north and the south. A different language, a different script, a different

memory prevailed in each, and when they prayed, the islanders, it was seldom to the same god" (p. 2). Although Cyprus is physically one mass of land, the word "riven" alludes to the violence that split the island. Now each side of the island has its own language, script, historical narrative, and religion. Turkish-speaking Muslims inhabit the North, while Greek-speaking Christians inhabit the South. These cultural differences are not necessarily the primary causes of the Partition, which was exacerbated by complex regional politics and nation-building enterprises, but the fig tree emphasizes religious differences that separate the two communities.

Religious discrimination in *The Island of Missing Trees* manifests as selective love for trees, as seen in one striking example. Kostas' mother, Panagiota, is described as "deeply religious," though many of her devotional practices are rooted in superstitions born of fear (Shafak, 2022, p. 106). The fig tree points out that islanders from Christian and Muslim backgrounds share many religious practices, yet Panagiota assumes that other religions are incompatible with hers. She articulates this exclusivity in her attitude toward trees, believing that "some trees were Christian, others Mohammedan, yet others heathen, and you had to make sure you had the right ones planted in your garden" (p. 109). While Panagiota does not seem to have a strong opinion regarding fig trees, she refuses to plant a Judas tree in her garden because of its Biblical association with betrayal, she avoids walnut trees because they can supposedly cause nightmares, and she believes one should never cut down a mastic tree due to stories about non-Christian rulers making it cry (p. 109). This selective reverence mirrors her religious bias and reflects the intercommunal tensions increasing in Cyprus throughout the 1960s and 1970s.[47]

[47] For a first-hand account of intercommunal tensions, see Lawrence Durrell's *Bitter Lemons* (1964), which provides a British perspective on how nationalist ideologies stirred up Turkish and Greek communities against each other between 1963 and 1964.

Extrapolating from Panagiota's narrow-mindedness toward trees, Kostas intuits that his mother harbors prejudice against people of different faiths, and thus he feels that "he could never tell his mother that he was in love with a Turkish Muslim girl" (p. 109). Kostas knows that his mother, who allows only "Christian" trees in her garden, will never accept a Muslim daughter-in-law. Unlike his mother, Kostas "loved all trees, without exception" (p. 109). His impartial love for trees reflects his non-discriminatory love for people, like Defne.

In contrast to Panagiota's exclusivity, the fig tree presents herself as an object of love that can transcend religious boundaries. First, she claims to be the tree whose fruit tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (pp. 31-32). This affiliates her with Abrahamic traditions like Christianity and Islam. Then she extends this association by claiming that every "religion and creed" incorporates fig trees somehow (p. 32). Later, she offers examples of how the *ficus* is important in ancient Roman fables as well as in the Torah, the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'an; and she describes how fig trees are seen as a source of blessings for Bedouins, the Druze, Arabs, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus (p. 65). By highlighting this worldwide reverence, the narrator positions herself as a universal symbol of unity.

The fig tree also sees herself, like many fig trees, as "a meeting point, a gathering place of sorts" (p. 64). Her very existence draws together people who are often divided by their faiths. As a gathering place, the fig tree nurtures intercultural interactions in her first home, The Happy Fig Tavern. Although there are many places for a fig tree to dwell in Cyprus, Shafak's fig tree grows up in the middle of this lively tavern, which was a place of cultural mingling before the Partition. The fig tree recalls, "The Happy Fig was a popular hang-out frequented by Greeks, Turks,

Armenians, Maronites, UN soldiers and visitors to the island who quickly fell in step with the local ways" (p. 87). Except for soldiers and visitors, each group mentioned by the fig tree lived on the island and was distinguished by their religious beliefs. In addition to the larger Turkish and Greek communities, Cyprus was home to Armenian and Maronite communities in the 1970s. For example, Colin Thubron (1975) writes about the 3,000 Maronites in Cyprus, who spoke an Arabic dialect but worshipped in Aramaic. Despite the religious differences significant enough to merit separate communities and names for cultural groups, in the tavern everyone comes together. Even the lines between local Cypriots and foreigners, such as tourists and British colonizers, fade in the tavern. The "local ways" are about unity as people from diverse cultural backgrounds eat, drink, and sing together.

A sound-image from the Happy Fig Tavern captures this cultural mingling. The tree remembers growing up surrounded by "the clatter of plates, the chatter of customers, the singing of musicians—songs in Greek and Turkish, songs about love, betrayal, and heartbreak" (Shafak, 2022, p. 55). In the first half of this soundscape,[48] there are no specific cultural identifiers: dishes clatter, customers chat, and musicians sing in many restaurants worldwide. The songs are more specific, since they are sung in Greek and Turkish, the island's main languages. Yet even these bits of the soundscape highlight shared human experiences. Regardless of their language, the songs played in the tavern reflect pain and longing as well as love.

The nonsegregated love that characterizes the Happy Fig Tavern seems to be rooted in the fig tree herself, who is the tavern's physical and metaphorical center. In fact, the fig tree perceives everything in the tavern as extensions of itself, saying:

[48] Soundscape is a term coined by R. Murray Schafer (1977/1994) to describe an acoustic environment, which "consists of events *heard* not objects *seen*" (p. 8). Unlike a landscape, which is apprehended primarily through sight, a soundscape speaks to the ear.

> My branches stretched out confidently, as if everything around here was an extension of me, not only the trestle tables and wooden chairs, but also the paintings, on the walls, the strings of garlic hanging from the ceiling, the waiters scooting back and forth, the customers from diverse parts of the world, even Chico flying around in a blaze of colours, all of it happening under my supervision… (Shafak, 2022, p. 92).

Here the tree is the center of the tavern, and everything is part of it; humans, animals, plants, and wooden objects are all extensions of the fig tree. She looks over all the activity in the tavern, and she claims responsibility for the "magical" atmosphere that exudes hope and happiness (pp. 92-93).

This description of cultural harmony portrays the Happy Fig Tavern as a "heterotopia," a term developed by Michel Foucault to describe spaces set apart from normative social rules. In a lecture entitled "Of Other Spaces," Foucault (1967/1986) examines how prisons, cemeteries, theaters, gardens, museums, and ships function as "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (p. 24). Although these sites exist tangibly within societies, they create alternative spaces that depart from the social norms of their surrounding societies.[49] Shafak's fig tree lives in a country fractured by religious and ethnic conflict, colonized by Britain, and occupied by United Nations peacekeeping forces. Yet the linguistic, religious, political, and cultural barriers that control life in Nicosia are magically transcended in the Happy Fig Tavern. Like

[49] In a later interview with Paul Rabinow (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984), Foucault provides a more succinct definition of heterotopias as "those singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others (p. 252). Along with highlighting the social aspect of such alternative spaces, this description emphasizes that heterotopic and nonheteropic spaces are fundamentally different.

Foucault's heterotopias, this utopic space is both real and not real. It is real because the tavern is a physical building where people eat and drink, yet it is not real because it stands apart from daily life in Cyprus, an idealized island of cultural harmony in a sea of strife. Even so, the fig tree's understanding of the tavern is more than a utopic dream or a delusion. In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault asserts that heterotopias play an important role in interrogating the spaces that they juxtapose because they "suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (p. 24). By bringing together Greek, Turkish, British, American, and other cultures, the Happy Fig Tavern interrogates the cultural divisions on the other side of its walls and projects an alternative vision of coexistence.

Nurtured under the tree's sprawling branches, Defne and Kostas's relationship spans cultural divides. When they begin spending time together as a couple, Defne and Kostas meet secretly because the intercommunal strife on the island makes their love taboo. The tavern becomes a safe meeting place for them, a liminal space outside the surveillance of both Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities. This is also where they first realize that they are "young lovers" (p. 91), a phrase that marks a turning point in their emotional intimacy. In a world that demands their separation, they find love and refuge under the fig tree's branches. The love between Defne and Kostas challenges the idea that Turkish and Greek Cypriots should be segregated. Because Defne and Kostas's love blooms in the summer of 1974, just before the Partition of Cyprus, their relationship comes to symbolize hope for unity.

Love at the Happy Fig Tavern also exceeds heteronormative lines, since the tavern is owned by a couple named Yusuf and Yiorgos. Not only are they from different ethnic communities (Yusuf is Turkish while Yiorgos is Greek), but they are

also a gay couple. When Kostas learns that the two men are "long-term lovers" as well as "business partners," he realizes:

> Yusuf and Yiorgos could be in greater danger than he and Defne had ever been. God knew there were enough people on the island who would hate to see a Turk and a Greek involved romantically, but the number of those people probably quadrupled if the couple in question were gay. (p. 152)

The political tensions that stigmatize intercommunal love in Cyprus are intensified by homophobia, which makes Yusuf and Yiorgos' relationship precarious. Yet this risky love finds sanctuary in the fig tree's presence. Here in the tavern, love that defies national and heteronormative expectations is celebrated.

Language barriers also fade at the Happy Fig Tavern. When Yusuf and Yiorgos are alone at the tavern, they speak Greek and Turkish, "alternating back and forth within the same conversation" (p. 151). Greek and Turkish are no longer distinct languages that present a barrier to communication; in this relationship, the two languages meet and mingle. As Yusuf and Yiorgos converse, these languages become an expression of intimacy rather than separation. More significantly, the stutter that marks Yusuf's speech disappears when he speaks to Yiorgos. The fig tree remarks:

> I loved to observe the change in Yusuf when he was alone with Yiorgos. He rarely, if ever, stumbled over his words when he talked to us plants. But he also stammered noticeably less when it was just the two of them. The speech impediment that had tormented him forever almost entirely evaporated when he was with his beloved. (p. 159)

If Yusuf's stutter manifests social anxiety, the smoothness of his speech with Yiorgos testifies to his sense of belonging. In this relationship, Yusuf's words flow freely because there is no fear of judgment.

However, the sonic bliss of life in the tavern is confined to the fig tree's spread. Outside the tavern walls, gunfire replaces the sounds of cultural harmony. In 1956, as Shafak's narrator explains in accordance with historical accounts, Britons, Turks, and Greeks alike became victims of terror attacks throughout Cyprus (pp. 119-120). In this atmosphere of heightened vigilance and paranoia, Kostas's grandfather, Kostas Eliopoulos, was shot dead while walking down a street in broad daylight. Despite repeated warnings issued in Greek, English, and then Turkish, the man refused to stop walking, so British soldiers opened fire. It was only when they reported the incident to the dead man's family that the soldiers learned Kostas Eliopoulos had been born deaf (p. 121). In this incident, speaking multiple languages provides no safeguard against cultural hostility. In fact, speech is useless because it cannot penetrate the wall of silence that surrounds Kostas Eliopoulos. Even though these British soldiers have learned a few words in Greek and Turkish, their language of violence, spoken through gunshots, silences all attempts to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. Kostas Eliopoulos' physical inability to respond to spoken language reveals the audible harmony of life in the tavern to be a fantasy confined to a single location.

Visions of intercommunal harmony are also audibly undermined by the fig tree's didactic tone, which predisposes her to espouse polyphonic principles without implementing them. For example, the fig tree laments that historical accounts of the Cyprus Partition overlook nonhuman loss, and she sets out to rectify this by

describing how trees and animals also suffered from ethnic violence. At the end of Part III, she declares:

> so long as I am able to tell this story, I am going to include in it the creatures in my ecosystem—the birds, the bats, the butterflies, the honeybees, the ants, the mosquitoes and the mice—because there is one thing I have learned: wherever there is war and a painful partition, there will be no winners, human or otherwise. (Shafak, 2022, p. 190)

The tree's explicit motive is to pass on the lesson that war produces no winners, and she plans to expound the lesson by incorporating multiple creatures in her story. In Part V, she begins to incorporate other perspectives into the story, retelling the stories of a butterfly and a mosquito to fill in the gaps left unexplained in Part IV. From the butterfly's account, we learn about the grave of a baby named Yusuf Yiorgos, an unusual bilingual name. Then the mosquito's story explains that the baby died of malaria. However, readers still hear only the fig tree because she paraphrases rather than giving voice to other creatures. The mosquito, butterfly, parrot, ant, honeybee, and mouse are referenced but not heard. Thus, the fig tree's incessant teaching suppresses the very voices that could embody the ideals of intercommunal dialogue.

This narrative homogeneity is particularly conspicuous in the absence of the parrot's voice. Partially fulfilling her promise to bring multiple perspectives into her narrative, the fig tree relays Chico the parrot's experience of surviving an airplane journey to Cyprus, observing the glamorous tourist life in Varosha, being neglected by his owner, and finding refuge in the Happy Fig Tavern until Yusuf and Yiorgos' disappearance. At that point, the fig tree tells us, "Chico worried that now Yusuf, too, was gone. Humans were all the same, he said. Untrustworthy and selfish to the core"

(p. 280). Chico's anxious judgment supposedly presents his point of view, but the absence of quotation marks indicate that his statement has been paraphrased or translated. This omission is not just a stylistic choice. On the previous page, the bird's owner's words are demarcated with single quotation marks, and on the following page, Chico's parroted sounds are presented in quotation marks when he calls out phrases like "'Come, birdie, birdie!'", "*'S'agapo'*", and "*'Aglama'*" (p. 282). Each of these phrases appears in quotation marks because they are sounds that Chico articulates in human language to "display his talents" for the fig tree (p. 282). More than any other animal in *The Island of Missing Trees*, the parrot can at least imitate human speech. Yet aside from these parroted words, the fig tree never brings Chico's voice into the text. Instead, she tells us what she has learned from the parrot, presumably in a side conversation unheard by the reader. The parrot, like the other creatures in this narrative, is not permitted to speak on his own terms.

Despite her failure to truly amplify other voices, the fig tree believes that arboreal love can overcome ethnic and religious barriers. The love stories between Defne and Kostas and Yusuf and Yiorgos represent the success of the fig tree's rhizomatic ideals in the Happy Fig Tavern. However, outside the tavern, ethnic tension leads to the 1974 Partition. No love songs sung under a fig tree magically reconcile Greek and Turkish Cypriots fighting for a nation of their own. In *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton (2007) argues that Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is a "post-structural fantasy" because it merely confuses difference and sameness by making it impossible to tell where one thing ends and another begins (pp. 52-53). Indeed, the fig tree's description of the tavern as an extension of herself sounds like a utopian attempt to eliminate alterity, and her didactic narrative sounds suspiciously monologic, as if she is deaf to how her over-eager inclusivity silences markers of

otherness. By the same logic, the disappearance of Yusuf's stammer can be heard as a leveling of linguistic difference. Meanwhile, the harmony experienced in the tavern is limited to the fig tree's environs, suggesting that the fantasy is not viable elsewhere. Nevertheless, the fig tree's witnessing of Partition and its traumatic legacy imbue the rhizomatic dream with a mournful tone, which melds into a less illusory hope for unity. As the following two sections will discuss, this hope arises not primarily from the fig tree's rhizomatic nature but from her belief that past, present, and future are all intertwined.

4.4 Voices from the past: Wounded trees, absent trees

In the interest of reconciliation, Shafak's fig tree explicitly sets out to unite past and present. Because silences in *The Island of Missing Trees* represent attempts to cut off the past, the fig tree restores connection by giving voice to buried stories and bearing witness to unspeakable histories. At the same time, because these are traumatic stories, her narrative challenges the neat associations of silence with oppression and speech with liberation. This disruption is prominent in the language of melancholy, which expresses the pain of continually recalling a past that is now absent. Despite their presence in memory, these missing voices from the past can no longer speak. Thus, as the tree expresses her ongoing grief, she also integrates silences into her narrative.

History is linked to silence from the opening pages of the novel, when the narrator describes an old well in Nicosia where two men were chained together and drowned, weighed down by a 3-liter tin filled with concrete to keep their corpses from floating to the surface. Since then, these men have been "trapped" under "mute and musty waters" (Shafak, 2022, p. 5) that prevent anyone from discovering their

bodies and learning how they died. Even if history seems to have forgotten what happened in Cyprus, Shafak's narrator declares that the past will be spoken of eventually because

> Sooner or later because, this old, dilapidated well on that lonely, beautiful island at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea will collapse in on itself and its secret will rise to the surface, as every secret is bound to do in the end. (p. 5)

Because buried things cannot be heard, these secrets must be uncovered. These secrets rise to the surface through the fig tree's narration, thus making the novel the fulfillment of this claim that what has been hidden will be uncovered.

Unsilencing the past is frequently articulated with liberatory language, as heard in Ada's 52-second scream. When a history teacher instructs her students to interview an older family member in preparation for an upcoming unit on migration and generational change, Ada enters a slightly dissociated state in which she can hear her teacher but is unable to respond appropriately to a question about her father's love for trees. Instead, she lets out a scream that releases unspoken trauma:

> …no sooner did she open her mouth than it spilled out and gushed forth, an underground stream eager to break loose from its confines. A sound both familiar and too strange to be her own surged from somewhere inside her—loud, hoarse, raw, wrong. (Shafak, 2022, p. 26)

Images repeated from the opening chapter link Ada's scream to the history of Cyprus. Her voice seems to come from underground, gesturing toward the buried secrets and the men thrown into a well. Metaphorically, this scream breaks off the chains that bind the men's hands, thereby escaping the muteness that has suppressed their story. Ada hears a sound that is both hers, since it comes from her body, and not hers, because it expresses a history she did not witness. This familiar yet strange

scream indicates how Ada has harbored inherited pain despite never hearing its origin story. As the scream "spills" and "gushes" from its confines, it cracks open the silence of history and compels Ada to begin exploring her family's history. Through this dialogue with the past, Ada becomes more aware of her islander identity and gains a new confidence that would arguably have remained inaccessible if the past had remained completely silent. Her scream also catalyzes the fig tree's narrative because it is after this incident that the fig tree begins to speak more clearly about what happened in Cyprus.

Meanwhile, the fig tree's discourse of inherited trauma emphasizes how pain transfers silently through generations. To explain how trauma can be passed from one generation to another, the fig tree says, "If families resemble trees, as they say, arborescent structures with entangled roots and individual branches jutting out at awkward angles, family traumas are like thick, translucent resin dripping from a cut in the bark. They trickle down generations" (p. 128). By evoking the image of a family tree, this metaphor brings together multiple generations. Just as sap can drip down the length of a trunk, trauma can affect each part of the arboreal system, or the family tree. This intergenerational connection problematizes historical continuity because what gets transmitted is trauma.

Just as resin surfaces through a cut in the tree, the past cries out through the fig tree's physical wounds. When Kostas returns to visit the Happy Fig Tavern in the early 2000s, he notices that the fig tree is covered in "festering wounds" due to a beetle infestation (p. 292). The fig tree's wounds call to mind Cathy Caruth's (1996) definition of trauma as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (p. 4). When Kostas sees the fig tree's oozing bark, he identifies the source of her suffering, the

insects that silently bore holes in her branches and trunk. The wounds tell Kostas that the tree has suffered, even though he cannot hear the story. However, the tree's physical wounds also speak silently of the trauma of Partition. Just prior to this, Defne reflects, "'Imagine, the fig tree has witnessed everything'" (p. 292). Although Defne does not clarify what "everything" refers to, it is logical to assume she means the events leading up to Partition. In fact, Defne's silence in this regard highlights the role of the fig tree as a witness to an unspeakable past. Thus, the juxtaposition of witnessing and wounds portrays the fig tree as a trauma survivor.

The fig tree's wounds resonate with intertextual echoes from Cathy Caruth, Sigmund Freud, and Torquato Tasso. Conceptualizing trauma as a psychic wound that cries out yet remains inaccessible, Caruth (1996) analyzes a story that Freud borrowed from Torquato Tasso's (1581/2009) epic poem *The Liberation of Jerusalem*. Written in sixteenth-century Italy, Tasso's story goes thus: In a battle, Tancred unknowingly kills Clorinda, his beloved who is disguised in the enemy's armor. After her death and burial, he goes into a magical forest to chop wood, and he strikes a tree with his sword, only to see Clorinda's blood flowing from the trunk and hear her voice crying out from the tree that now contains her soul. Just as Clorinda's suffering is made known but not explicated, Caruth and Freud observe that trauma cannot be fully apprehended even though it announces its presence. Although Shafak never directly cites Caruth, Freud, or Tasso, these figures silently enter *The Island of Missing Trees* to form a discursive lineage that extends back to the sixteenth century.

As pointed out above, one of the defining features of trauma is its inaccessibility, which constitutes a paradox because the traumatized subject must bear witness to their pain even though they cannot recover or fully express it. This "central paradox" of trauma has been outlined by literary theorists such as Cathy

Caruth and psychiatrists such as Bessel Van der Kolk (Sütterlin, 2020, p. 18). In trauma witness, then, silence becomes contiguous with speech, and it may be that verbal lacunae most adequately express the inexpressible, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. Structurally, *The Island of Missing Trees* seems to replicate this paradox. On the side of expression, the fig tree gives voice to buried stories and bears witness to the Cyprus Partition. On the other hand, most of the fig tree's narration takes place while she is buried for the winter. Because we can access her narrative while she is underground, the fig tree unsettles the idea that the buried are silent. Thus, her voice disrupts the association of burial with silence even as it breaks open historical silences.

The fig tree's melancholic disposition also conveys a complex understanding of post-traumatic silence and expression. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud (1917) theorizes that melancholia arises when someone maintains libidinal attachment to a lost object rather than redirecting their affections. This attachment inhibits the melancholic subject from finding freedom, and it problematizes dwelling with the past, as Shafak's tree does. In contrast to her implied belief that bearing witness to trauma is liberating, the fig tree also discusses memory as a curse. She says, "It is a curse, an enduring memory" (2022, p. 34). She explains that Cypriot women use memory as a curse when they say, "*May you never be able to forget. May you go to your grave still remembering"* (p. 34). Because the fig tree was born on the island, she identifies with Cypriot women and the curse of memory. Thus, she concludes, "So I guess it is in my genes, this melancholy I can never quite shake off. Carved with an invisible knife into my arborescent skin" (p. 34). Later, she declares directly, "I am a melancholic tree" (p. 189). In each of these statements, the fig tree laments her intense historical awareness, using the language of wounding again when

comparing melancholy to an invisible knife wound. Further, she claims to be melancholic by nature, since this disposition is in her genes. Like a person caught in melancholia, she still feels inextricably tied to an irrecoverable past.

Before metamorphosing into the fig tree, Defne clearly articulates the detriment of melancholic attachment. After living through the 1970s violence in her hometown and losing her first child to malaria, she found a way to deal with this trauma and seek restoration by working with the Committee on Missing Persons.[50] When she and Kostas reunite in the early 2000s, she is committed to finding the bodies of missing persons, returning their remains to their families, and helping families to grieve by sharing their stories. Defne says that working for the Committee on Missing Persons is not about "politics or power" but about "grief—and memory" (p. 222). At this point, her commitment to memory sounds like a component of mourning that leads to closure, because recovering a missing body is a crucial first step to providing closure for those who have lost loved ones in Cyprus. At the same time, Defne reveals a tendency to hold onto the past when she says, "Women mourn, men replace" (p. 222). This contrast between male and female relationships to loss parallels Freud's distinction between melancholia and mourning. Because she distinguishes women's work of mourning from men's tendency to replace their loved ones, Defne's speech reveals her tendency toward melancholia.

Defne's story suggests that attachment to the past is particularly dangerous when coupled with silence. After she has settled in London and given birth to Ada, Defne decides to stop talking about their past so that it will not burden Ada will not

[50] The Committee on Missing Persons is a bi-communal Cypriot initiative to investigate missing persons, recover their bodies, and return the remains to surviving family members. Their goal is to "close a long period of anguish and certainty" (MacLean & Danzinger, 2016, The Process). For more information on the work done by the CMP, see MacLean & Danzinger's (2016) *Beneath the Carob Trees*, one of sources that Shafak consulted while writing *The Island of Missing Trees*.

be burdened. Because listening to the painful stories of Partition survivors has led Defne to conclude that the pain never leaves, she believes:

> 'Once it's inside your head, whether it's your own memory or your parents', or your grandparents', this fucking pain becomes part of your flesh. It stays with you and marks you permanently. It messes up your psychology and shapes how you think of yourself and others.' (Shafak, 2022, p. 317).

Defne is right that the suffering and loss have become part of her, shaping her psychology and self-image, and relationships with others. However, she does not seem to realize that refusing to speak about the pain will not diminish its impact. Once Defne stops speaking about what happened in Cyprus, she starts drinking more, and before long, she becomes reliant on alcohol and pills. Before Ada reaches age sixteen, her mother has died, presumably from an overdose. Nevertheless, the novel encourages readers to attribute Defne's death to her silent enmeshment in the past. Kostas believes that Defne died because she was strangled by "the past, the memories, the roots" (p. 334), like a girdled tree that can die from its own roots growing in a circular shape around itself. As Kostas informs the reader, girdling is rarely preventable because it occurs underground, out of sight. Similarly, he could not detect Defne's entrapment because she kept silent about it.

This melancholic suffocation further emphasizes the fig tree's conviction that silencing the past is unhealthy, but it risks privileging speech over silence. Proceeding from her conviction that unexpressed trauma trickles down through generations, the fig tree asserts that freedom comes from breaking silences. Although this logic accords with the discourse of trauma, it harbors a desire to unlink past and present. According to the fig tree, silence is harmful because it suppresses the past, which is still with us, and silencing the past perpetuates painful histories. Speech

makes this history audible, and therefore it allows us to embrace and express our whole selves. Speaking of the past should also be able to remove it from the present and heal the pain. Nevertheless, the fig tree remains melancholic throughout the novel, despite its role as a witness.

Rather than jubilantly verbalizing history, the fig tree's attachment to an absent past lends her narrative a mournful quality. In *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton (2007) develops a theory of ambient poetics, which "has a mournful quality even when its explicit topic is not mourning" (p. 75). Morton rejects the Freudian idea that melancholia is harmful because it traps one in the past, while mourning is healthy because it allows the griever to move forward. Instead, Morton uses the example of an echo to illustrate how ecological writing can be mournful yet not melancholic. Emphasizing that an echo can only be heard after an initial sound has passed, Morton (2007) writes, "The moment of contact is always in the past. In this sense we never actually have it or inhabit it. We posit it afterward. An echo can only reach our ears after the sound has caused the medium to vibrate" (p. 76). In a poetic sense, the echo symbolizes loss because it embodies the afterlife of presence. The echo replays a sound that no longer exists—that sound was the contact between a hard surface and a movement of air. We can think of the fig tree's speech as a sustained echo because it re-sounds events from the past. Her narrative does not revive the past; it remains absent, just like the initial sound that precedes an echo.

The novel's title also dwells on absence by evoking missing trees as symbols of lost lives. Like many historians who mention the lack of trees in Cyprus, Tabitha Morgan (2011) titles the first chapter of her book "Where are the Forests? 1878-82." Even in 1878, when Britain began administering Cyprus, some saw the island as a strategic asset, while others believed it was a forgotten backwater stripped of its

natural resources, such as trees. Shafak's (2022) fig tree quotes from the first High Commissioner of the British administration in Cyprus, who wrote in dismay, "'Where are the forests we thought Cyprus was covered with?'" (p. 85). As if answering the High Commissioner's question penned in 1878, the fig tree explains how trees suffered from locust swarms, excessive logging, war, and colonialism: "Constant logging, multiple fires and sheer ignorance were all responsible for our disappearance, not to mention the blatant neglect of the previous administration" (p. 85). Trees that survived these events then had to face nationalist turmoil in the 1950s. In this way, we can see how the novel's title gestures toward absent trees, which have no voice. A second look at the word "missing" underscores the continuation of loss. The trees that remain feel the absence of those that are gone, and they bear witness to the lives that were lost. The living trees continue to mourn the absent ones.

Rather than claim that the fig tree's melancholic disposition undermines her efforts to liberate history, I propose that the tension between holding onto and releasing the past enables the fig tree to practice a more inclusive form of grief that is simultaneously oriented toward the past and the future. In "Becoming-botanic," Shannon Lambert (2021) proposes replacing pathologized melancholia with ecological grief, which remains open-ended. Departing from a Freudian framework that understands grief as a process of working toward resolution by replacing the love object, Lambert introduces ecological grief as diffused, non-linear experience that resists closure (p. 52). Drawing on this concept, we can say that Shafak's fig tree enacts ecological grief through her unique relationship to the past. As she says, "A tree is a memory keeper," with history woven into its roots and trunk (p. 211). Because trees store memories, the fig tree advises readers to listen to their stories: "All around the world, wherever there is, or has ever been, a civil war or an ethnic

conflict, come to the trees for clues, because we will be the ones that sit silently in communion with human remains" (p. 211). The fig tree's role as a memory-keeper and witness binds her to human loss. For as long as she remembers what happened, her grief will continue through her "communion" with the remains, maintaining an almost-sacred relationship not through conversation but through quiet presence. By sitting in communion, the trees will continue to bear witness, bringing an absent past into a future not yet here.

4.5 Expressing a mournful hope

By remaining in touch with the past, the fig tree transcends temporal separations and reconciles grief with hope. Rather than following a chronological timeline that demarcates past and present, the tree offers an alternative understanding in which past, present, and future exist simultaneously. She observes:

> Human-time is linear, a neat continuum from a past to that is supposed to be over and done with towards a future deemed to be untouched, untarnished. (Shafak, 2022, p. 47)

In contrast:

> Arboreal-time is cyclical, recurrent, perennial; the past and the future breathe within this moment, and the present does not necessarily flow in one direction; instead, it draws circles within circles, like the rings you find when you cut us down. (Shafak, 2022, p. 47)

The fig tree clearly articulates a dualism between human and arboreal time, a contrast that she then extends to "story-time" (p. 47). Like trees, stories do not grow in straight lines. Instead, they circle and curve by throwing out shoots and branches. Story-time and arboreal time are not threatened by historical silences because they

reject the idea of linear movement away from the past. Rather, moving in circles suggests the future encapsulates past experiences, even if they are not fully recovered or experienced again.

These competing conceptions of time are juxtaposed throughout *The Island of Missing Trees*. On the one hand, human time structures at least half of the novel, with each chapter accompanied by a subtitle that positions the narrative in the 1950s, 1970s, early 2000s, or late 2010s. Around the middle of the book, when the conflict in Cyprus intensifies and events unfold more quickly, the chapters are even labeled with the month and year. This straightforward progression helps educate readers and enables cross-referencing of the book's events with historical records. As a result, the fictional story of Kostas and Defne maps clearly onto historical events like the British arriving on the island, the usage of pipe bombs, a coup attempting to oust the president, violence in the streets, and the bomb at the Ledra Palace Hotel. However, between most of these historically marked chapters lie chapters narrated by the fig tree and conspicuously not subtitled with a time or place. This dual temporality challenges the strictly linear mindset that fears history can be permanently silenced.

The fig tree's cyclical sense of time underlies her certainty, expressed in the novel's opening pages, that the past will speak again. After describing the two men trapped at the bottom of a well and silenced by the water that covers them, Shafak's narrator declares, "No captivity is forever" because

> Time is a songbird, and just like any other songbird it can be taken captive. It can be held prisoner in a cage and for even longer than you might think possible. But time cannot be kept in check in perpetuity. (p. 5)

As indicated by the English name, songbirds are known for their voices. If time is a songbird, its nature is to sing, even if it has been silenced. The image of time as a

bird in a cage also seems to subtly reference Maya Angelou's (1969/1997) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a memoir about the power of literature to overcome trauma and racism. In Angelou's autobiography, the singing bird symbolizes hope and resilience amid racism. Similarly, Shafak uses the songbird to anticipate a time when the past will speak again. Resisting the idea that history is lost as time passes, Shafak's narrator sees time as part of a natural cycle in which history speaks and hope prevails. In this way, Shafak suggests that a buried history is not lost but is merely awaiting expression. Silence, even when prolonged, does not signal disappearance; rather, it is part of a larger rhythm in which memory resurfaces and sings again.

This cyclical temporality enables the fig tree to continue mourning what is lost while looking forward to the future. In the final chapter, the fig tree anticipates being unburied as spring arrives. She says, "I can feel the harsh winter beginning to relax its grip, the wheel of seasons revolve once again" (Shafak, 2022, p. 341). The return of spring reinforces arboreal time, which circles through decay and renewal like the seasons, and the voices of nature emphasize this movement's non-linearity as the past resounds in the present. In addition to the sounds of fruit bats, honeybees, goats, snakes, and dripping water, the fig tree also hears "[t]he salt lakes narrate tales of warfare and homecoming; the field roses chant in unison when the *meltemi* blows; the citrus orchards recite odes to eternal youth" (p. 341). These are sounds from her homeland, because, as she says, "The voices of our motherlands never stop echoing in our minds. We carry them with us everywhere we go" (p. 341). Even though she is buried in London, the fig tree still hears Cyprus sing. This aural association signifies how memory transcends time and space. The past is not sealed off but is carried into

the present and projected into the future. This convergence allows the fig tree, so closely connected to the past, to anticipate healing and a future reunion.

Dissolving borders between past, present, and future allows grief and hope to coexist. As the fig tree waits for the arrival of spring, she looks forward to being unburied so that she can see Kostas again. This anticipation contains the past because her reunion with Kostas will be full of memories. She says:

> But I know and I trust that, any moment now, my beloved Kostas Kazantzakis will come out to the garden with a spade in his hand, perhaps wearing his old navy parka again, the one we bought together from a vintage shop on Portobello Road, and he will dig me out and pull me up, holding me gently in his arms, and behind his beautiful eyes, engraved in his soul, they will still be there, the remnants of an island at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea, the remains of our love. (Shafak, 2022, p. 343)

Each detail in this passage links together two or more time domains. The fig tree knows that Kostas cares for his garden, and having observed this habit over many years, she trusts that he will unbury her. In the future scene she envisions, Kostas wears a jacket that he and Defne bought together in London. This jacket evokes a specific memory from the past, which the tree recalls in the present and projects into the future. Held in Kostas's arms, she will see in his eyes the "remnants" of Cyprus, where their love was born. This forecasting joins the past in Cyprus to the present moment in England, as the fig tree has done throughout the novel. The language of "remnants" and "remains" also recalls the turmoil experienced in Cyprus, echoing the loss and grief woven throughout the novel. Defne and the fig tree no longer have all of Cyprus with them, nor is their love as present as it once was. Something is

missing, but the tree finds comfort in knowing that their love carries on, albeit in a new form.

In keeping with the fig tree's vision for unity, the final paragraph of the novel resolutely dissolves each line of separation. Past and present mingle with the future. Plant and human fuse into each other, and the metamorphosed narrator reaches back over the species barrier to continue loving Kostas. Cyprus enters England through the fig tree's memories, which are vocalized for the reader. However, this transcendent movement through time, space, and species remains marked by grief, which tempers the novel's utopian tones. Through this blurring of boundaries, Shafak's fig tree both offers coexistence as a remedy for division and acknowledges that this remedy will not absolve the pain of Partition. Ultimately, this attention to absence enriches Shafak's hopeful narrative with an awareness that border-crossing love will remain marked by lingering pain. By allowing the language of loss to destabilize the distinction between silent absence and vocal presence, *The Island of Missing Trees* expresses ongoing pain along with a hope for harmony across dividing lines.

CHAPTER FIVE

SPEAKING OF LOVE: MARRIAGE AND DISCURSIVITY IN MONICA ALI'S *LOVE MARRIAGE*

To resist the perpetual marginalization of Muslim women in London, Monica Ali's (2023) *Love Marriage* disrupts conventional ideas of love and marriage, yet it begins by enticing readers with the promise of a romantic wedding that will transcend religious and cultural differences. The daughter of Muslim West-Bengali immigrants, medical doctor in training Yasmin Ghorami is engaged to Joe Sangster, a doctor from a secular white upper-class family. This focus on engagement sets the novel in conversation with courtship narratives, which flourished in nineteenth-century British literature and emphasized love as the foundation for marriage. However, as feminist scholarship has established, romantic ideals often obscure economic and class considerations that shape the politics of marriage and silence women into domestic roles. While conversing with the Victorian domestic novel, *Love Marriage* strategically mutes canonical English novels and highlights alternative approaches to love in modernist texts. *Love Marriage* also deromanticizes marriage by exposing histories of covert incest and endogamy that inhibit interethnic marriages in Britain. Although these repressed histories of emotional and sexual abuse destabilize Joe and Yasmin's engagement, the novel also uses this curtailed engagement to reject the traditional courtship narrative inherited from Victorian England. Moreover, *Love Marriage* critiques the sentimentalization of marriage by exposing how it is discursively constructed on women's silences. Ali writes back to this silence by strategically suppressing canonical Victorian texts and drawing on intertexts—from classical Greek tragedy to Muslim love poetry and modernist British novels—to

articulate women's unheard experiences of love. As British Muslim women converse with literary voices from diverse times and places, *Love Marriage* expands the textual basis of love and marriage beyond the restrictive views inherited from nineteenth-century England.

The title of this chapter points to a shifting relationship between love, marriage, and discursivity, in which writing not only represents but significantly shapes understandings of matrimony. Examining the role of conversation metaphors in Victorian conceptions of marriage, Erik Gray (2014) asserts that marriage "is inherently a discursive phenomenon, as much as a physical and spiritual one" (p. 270). While physical, emotional, and social realities all contribute to the joining of two people's lives, it is language that defines a relationship as a marriage. Language also impacts understandings of what it means to be married and how one progresses toward that state, and these conceptions frequently change with discourse, as this chapter's title emphasizes. As it appears on the preceding page, this chapter's title consists of two parts, separated by a colon. This colon suggests that marriage and discursivity are the verbal manifestations of love and that it is through marriage and writing that we hear love speak or come to grasp its nature. When read aloud, however, the punctuation dissolves, and a more ambiguous title emerges: We are speaking of love, marriage, and discursivity in Ali's novel. Or are we? Perhaps we are examining love marriage and discursivity by probing the relationship between writing and marrying for love. This aural ambiguity emphasizes how the relationship between love, marriage, and discursivity can be interpreted and reinterpreted in various ways. This exercise in moving from the written text to its aural signification enacts in miniature what Ali's novel does as it portrays how British Muslim women's conceptions of love are shaped by various cultural texts and examines how those

textual conceptions manifest in multiple ways. As characters enact their ideas about love and marriage—in effect speaking them into being in their own lives—the relationship between love and marriage evolves.

Like this chapter title, the title *Love Marriage* contains syntactic ambiguity that invites proliferating interpretations. When read as a compound or modified noun, "love marriage" denotes marrying for love, frequently seen in opposition to the arranged marriages common in non-Western cultures.[51] However, defining love marriage in contrast to its perceived opposite establishes an implicit hierarchy, which this chapter aims to destabilize in line with the dissertation's overall goal of challenging the presence-absence dualism that feeds into the sound-silence hierarchy. As Derrida (1967/1976) argues repeatedly in *Of Grammatology*, binary systems inherently privilege one term over the other. When arranged marriage is viewed as the alternative to love marriage, the two form a binary in which marrying for love becomes superior to other types of marriage. Accordingly, we might read the title of Ali's novel not as a neutral description of marriage but as an idealization of marrying for love—a privileging of romantic aspirations that relies on delegitimizing and thereby silencing other forms of marriage.

Yasmin's dualistic description of her parents' relationship reflects Western the tendency to idealize love marriage. For instance, when her work supervisor and temporary partner Pepperdine, a white man, assumes that Yasmin's parents "had an arranged marriage—all planned by their own parents," Yasmin points out that her parents had "a love marriage" (Ali, 2023, p. 281). Her response corrects Pepperdine's misconception but upholds a hierarchical view of marriage. Yasmin's

[51] For example, in an article examining how arranged marriage is represented in Western media, Roger Penn (2011) treats love and arranged marriage as the two main types of marriage systems that shape today's world (p. 637).

impulse to emphasize her parents' romance also reflects a reaction against the pervasive misconception that Muslim women are forced into arranged marriages. As Ayesha Mattu and Nura Maznavi (2012) write provokingly in the introduction to *Love, InshAllah*, Muslim women are frequently seen as "oppressed, submissive, and forced into arranged marriages by big-bearded men" (par. 1). For Yasmin, the story of her parents' love marriage establishes a counternarrative to this reductive stereotype. Through the partially omniscient narration tied to Yasmin's perspective, readers learn of her long-standing obsession with the story of her parents' love marriage. She believes that her mother, raised in a wealthy home with an influential father, took a risk for love when she courageously told her father that "she wanted to marry a penniless boy without a college degree" (Ali, 2023, p. 115). While this story of Anisah and Shaokat's countercultural romance distances Yasmin's mother from the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim wife, Yasmin's repeated invoking of the event demonstrates how she has absorbed the dualism and become infatuated with a supposedly superior view of marriage.

The perceived superiority of love marriage can be partially displaced by tracing the evolution of how marriage has been conceptualized and defined in different cultures, a process which reveals that marriage has only recently come to be linked with private romantic desire. Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1969) research on tribal societies, for example, demonstrates that marriage was primarily a diplomatic mechanism for forming and strengthening intertribal relations. In such societies, a bride was given as the final and ultimate gift to consummate peace between two tribes. Early English definitions of "marriage" also emphasize social relations rather than private emotion. According to Etymonline (n.d.), the fourteenth-century word "marriage" meant "action of entering into wedlock" and "the state or condition of

being husband and wife." The word entered Middle English via French from the Latin *maritatus*, which is the past participle of "to marry." This equation of the past participle ("married") with its noun form "marriage" emphasizes social status. Note that there is no mention of emotional romance between said husband and wife. As F. Jacob and J. A. Mohammed (2022) explain, the institution functioned for centuries as a legal and political arrangement with no connection to "the romance of human emotions" (p. 17). Yet, by the nineteenth century, as Stephanie Coontz (2006) demonstrates in her book subtitled *How Love Conquered Marriage*, private emotion rather than social or economic strategy came to dominate wedlock. By the twentieth century, sexual attraction was also seen as a crucial ingredient in a successful marriage (Coontz, 2006). This brief overview of marriage highlights two primary models of matrimony: one based on communal arrangements for economic and social stability, and the other based on private pursuit of emotional and sexual fulfillment. These two models compete for attention in Ali's novel, and Yasmin's obsession with her parents' love story prioritizes private desire over socioeconomic strategy as the proper basis for marriage. However, as this chapter will argue by drawing on a deconstructionism to unsettle dualistic hierarchies and foreground the interrelation of binary terms, *Love Marriage* ultimately resists a hierarchical valuation of marriage by displaying diverse combinations of love and social strategy in each couple's relationship.

Ali's novel also problematizes an obsession with love marriage by implicitly conversing with the Victorian courtship plot to highlight how marriage has come to be seen as the proper destination for love. In a study of courtship in nineteenth-century literature, Jennifer Phegley (2012) points to famous Victorian novels as evidence that "The Victorian period was an age of love" (p. 1). Not only was love

seen as the foundation for a successful and happy marriage, but the structure of courtship novels reflected this romantic aspiration. Often coinciding with the end of the novel, marriage is such a prominent theme in nineteenth-century literature that scholars such as Ian Duncan (2018) consider it a "key to the novel as a genre" (p. 6); and it has been coded into the term "marriage plot," which Jill Galvan and Elsie Michie (2018) describe as "an internal drive towards blithe marital endings" (p. 1). The opening scene of *Love Marriage* establishes a marital trajectory as Yasmin and her parents prepare to meet her fiancé's mother Harriet. To ease her worries that this meeting will be ruined by cultural differences between her sexually conservative Indian parents and Joe's radically feminist mother, Yasmin invokes the goal of marriage, telling herself that the two families will "discuss wedding plans and make polite conversation" (Ali, 2023, p. 2). She adds the phrase "Big deal," implying a sarcastic tone, to convince herself that there is nothing to worry about (p. 2). Yasmin's self-assuring rationale evokes a narrative goal reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel and invites readers to embrace this conjugal telos. If marriage is the culmination of the story, then social mishaps and family tensions are merely part of the conflict to resolve on the way to the wedding.

However, *Love Marriage* rejects the courtship plot by canceling the wedding and exploring silenced infidelities within existing marriages. As Yasmin and Joe cut off their engagement due to histories of covert incest and adultery, *Love Marriage* turns away from the Victorian pursuit of marriage. By embedding narratives of incest and adultery into a courtship novel, *Love Marriage* invokes a Hegelian dialectic because each character initially pursues or maintains a socially approved thesis before turning to an alternative (antithesis), such as an affair with a coworker or a lesbian relationship. This dialectic corresponds to an aural dichotomy: The pursuit or

maintenance of marriage conforms to dominant discourse and can be openly discussed, whereas alternative forms of love are silenced as taboo. Just as a Hegelian dialectic sublates the thesis-antithesis tension and resolves into a synthesis, *Love Marriage* eventually transforms the marriage-adultery dichotomy by uniting speech and silence into a complex articulation of love that lies outside the existing discourses. This dialectical integration is most evident in Yasmin's nonverbalized expression of love, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter. Matrimonial ideals are also disrupted by Yasmin's younger brother Arif and his girlfriend Lucy, who have a baby before deciding to get married. Despite their financial instability, they are happily in love with each other and their newly forming family. Moreover, Yasmin's mother Anisah finds lesbian passion outside of marriage, yet she remains married to Shaokat, transforming their marriage from an isolating structure into an open and empowering relationship.

By weaving an adultery plot into a courtship narrative, *Love Marriage* expands the discursive construction of marriage, and the meaning of its title becomes more indeterminate. Rather than hearing *Love Marriage* as a compound noun or an imperative sentence, we can approach the title as two nouns sitting uneasily beside each other. Without a modifier such as a possessive pronoun or indefinite article preceding the title, both love and marriage can function as nouns. In the absence of connective syntax to guide interpretation, readers must fill in surrounding words to make sense of the phrase "love marriage." The act of interpretation consists of imbuing meaning into silences, which can be problematic, but it is liberating for the title's two words, which can be connected and disconnected in various ways. Similarly, the novel's portrayal of diverse platonic and romantic relationships suggests that individuals construct their own connections between love and marriage.

Read in this way, the title invites readers to approach love and marriage as independent entities that can be connected in more than one way. Just as the absence of restrictive syntax facilitates this openness, the Muslim women in Ali's novel find agency by rejecting dominant scripts for romance and matrimony. As each character pursues love regardless of their marital status, the novel rejects a singular framework that welds love to marriage. In the new framework, these concepts can be separated and combined in various ways. This freer approach to love and marriage is complemented by references to texts from various times and places, which will be discussed throughout the second half of this chapter.

The following section examines how Ali uses narrative silences to expose and resist the rigid courtship plot inherited from the Victorian novel. Subsequent sections of the chapter examine how the modernist intertexts in *Love Marriage* decenter a linear script for marriage (Section 5.2), which is further problematized by the histories of covert incest that act as homogenizing forces on the family and the nation (Section 5.3). Rather than allowing covert incest and dominant cultural narratives to isolate Muslim women in London, Section 5.4 argues, *Love Marriage* imagines a more inclusive relationship to love and marriage by forming a textual network of women who express their sense of love regardless of marital status.

5.1 [Mis]Reading love stories: The courtship plot

To critique the ideal of love marriage inherited from the Victorian era, Ali's novel strategically imposes narrative and intertextual silences that suggest the dominant marriage discourse relies on inattention to the absence of women's voices. By emphasizing the discursive construction of marriage, *Love Marriage* extends

feminist scholarship on the ideological impact of romantic fiction.[52] For example, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong (1989) links the history of the British novel to the history of sexuality, arguing that the social contract takes the form of a sexual contract in nineteenth-century novels. A central piece of Armstrong's argument is that both the social and sexual contracts were *fictions* constructed to contain individuals in society. While Armstrong analyzes how women writers used the sexual contract as a narrative paradigm to gain authority as writers, she ultimately argues that the novel's claim to fictionality confined women to a sexual contract that limited their political agency and suppressed their critical voices. Armstrong's work problematizes the fictions that silence women and helps to expose how married women like Anisah Ghorami seem to be silent figures in *Love Marriage*. Further, reading *Love Marriage* as a commentary on the sexual contract extends Armstrong's critique because Ali's novel exposes not just the silence resulting from marriage but also how the fiction of the sexual contract is established in the absence of women's voices. While subsequent sections of this chapter will discuss how *Love Marriage* departs from the structure of a conventional marriage narrative, this section analyzes how the novel exposes the infatuation with love marriage as a fiction grounded in misreadings and inattention to women's silences. By emphasizing gaps in storytelling and subconsciously inherited stories, *Love Marriage* calls for greater attention to the silences in and around marriage narratives.

Love Marriage exposes the fictional construction of marriage as narrative gaps give rise to a romantic fantasy about Yasmin's parents. When introducing Shaokat and Anisah's supposed love marriage, Ali (2023) writes, "Yasmin could not remember being told the story" (p. 82). Although she has physical memories of her

[52] On the discursive construction of marriage, see also *Approaches to Discourses of Marriage*, edited by Laura L. Paterson and Georgina Turner (2023).

mother telling stories from the Quran and Hadith, and she knows that her father loves to discuss patient histories, she has no tangible memories of hearing how her parents met. Even so, the novel continues, "It was as if she had always known. As though she had been born with the knowledge" (p. 82). The repetition of the hypothetical signifiers "as if" and "as though" suggests that the story is not in fact real, and attentive readers can analyze the clues: Yasmin never heard her parents describe how they first met. At age 10, Yasmin asks insistent questions about how Shaokat and Anisah first met, what they said to each other, and how their love developed. At age 14, she makes it her topic for a school assignment. Although her teacher praises the story and wants to submit it to a writing competition, Yasmin's father accuses her of writing lies rather than the truth. He tells her, "You have written things that you do not know. That you cannot know" (p. 85). Shaokat's response could have alerted Yasmin to her lack of knowledge, but she is convinced that she knows the truth about her parents' first meeting. Thus, her infatuation with her the supposed love story blinds her to the fact that she made it all up. When her parents divert the conversation or give vague answers, Yasmin fills in their silences with details that make sense to her. At age 26, Yasmin once again asks her mother to tell how she met Shaokat, and Anisah skirts the topic as usual. Despite receiving no additional information, Yasmin's internal dialogue replays the story she believes, and she is "greatly moved by her mother's love marriage" (p. 116). Rather than wondering what her mother's silence could signify, Yasmin uses it to corroborate what she already assumes to be true.

In addition to exposing this misunderstanding, *Love Marriage* problematizes the obsession with love stories by showing how it silences those with divergent stories, such as Yasmin's mother. Shortly after Yasmin asks again how her parents

met, Anisah laments living in Tatton Hill rather than Wembley, Southall, or Tooting, where there are more Muslims and Bengali speakers (Ali, 2023, pp. 116-117). Being isolated from those who speak her first language makes Anisah wonder, "'Why should we live here like mice?'" (Ali, 2023, p. 117). Although Yasmin does not understand Anisah's complaint, the mice simile invites associations with colloquial phrases such as "quiet as a mouse" and "timid like a church mouse." As a first-generation immigrant, Anisah feels silenced because she lacks a community with whom she can comfortably speak her first language. Perhaps because she intuits that "mice" suggests plurality rather than isolation, Anisah clarifies that she feels "'isolated'" and complains that she has been living under "'seg…reg…gation'" (p. 117) for too long. Even though Anisah is fluent enough to know this English word, her struggle to pronounce it reflects her sense of not belonging in English, underscoring how she feels silenced by living apart from Bengali speakers.

The repeated fiction of Anisah and Shaokat's "love marriage" reinforces this isolating silence. The true story of the Ghoramis' relationship is that after Anisah was gang raped as a young woman in Pakistan, she was married off to Shaokat to save the family's reputation. Shaokat was willing to marry a ruined woman because he was poor, and this marriage gave him social mobility. The family accepted him because he showed potential to become a successful doctor, which he did. In short, the long-standing story of a love marriage was a business deal. Moreover, Anisah and Shaokat have never loved each other romantically, since Anisah is lesbian and Shaokat has fulfilled his sexual drive by sleeping with other women under the guise of visiting patients at home. Furthermore, by the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the Ghorami family lives away from other Indian and Muslim neighborhoods because this isolation makes it easier to maintain their family honor. In Tatton Hill,

"everyone mind[s] their own business," and Shaokat can "keep himself to himself" (Ali, 2023, p. 118), so it is easy to conceal the true reason for their marriage. Apart from Yasmin, no one pries into their family history, so the fiction of their love marriage remains uncontested. Yet this narrative isolates Anisah not only from the Muslim and East Asian community but also from her daughter, since Yasmin continues to believe a false story about her parents, which arises from and reinforces their silence on the topic.

Paradoxically, an obsession with love stories also indicates how Yasmin's voice is suppressed, as she habitually hides her reading preferences. Growing up, she read both "serious [novels] from the school library" and popular romance novels shared by classmates (Ali, 2023, p. 100). Throughout medical school, Yasmin continues to read novels despite her "guilty conscience about wasting her time" (p. 101). Her guilty conscience suggests that her preference for fiction and romance has become an illicit desire because it conflicts with her medical studies. While preparing for the medical certification exam, she discreetly reads celebrity gossip magazines and slides them underneath medical textbooks whenever family members interrupt her supposed study sessions. Despite her attraction to romantic scandals and love stories, Yasmin's concealment of her reading material indicates how she silences her desire for love and prioritizes career success over personal fulfillment.

Burying love stories under medical texts also highlights how Yasmin's voice is suppressed by her father and subtly critiques the patriarchal structures that silence Muslim women in contemporary London. Shaokat and Yasmin have a habit of reading medical journals to solve unusual case studies presented in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (Ali, 2023, p. 6. In these situations, she docilely agrees with Shaokat's assessments and plays the role of student so that he can be the teacher.

Rather than fostering father-daughter intimacy, this teacher-student relationship highlights Shaokat's authority over his daughter. The patriarchal dynamic also speaks as Shaokat elicits medical opinions from Yasmin, only to consistently dismiss them, even though neither of them knows the true diagnosis. Moreover, in front of her father, Yasmin routinely silences her divergent opinions on political issues, such as whether medical workers should participate in industrial action. Rather than disagreeing vocally with her father's conviction that junior doctors should refrain from striking, Yasmin votes in favor of industrial action and stands on the picket line with Joe during an all-out labor strike (p. 35). She considers this a significant part of their "budding romance," yet it is "one she prefer[s] to conceal" from her father (p. 35). While Yasmin makes decisive steps to develop a political voice and a romantic relationship, she continues to act submissively toward her father. This contradiction reveals the extent to which Yasmin has internalized her family's gender hierarchy, which remains intact due in part to her silence.

The patriarchal structure that silences Yasmin is both reflected in and obscured by her consumption of romantic novels, such as Charles Dickens' (1853/1994) *Bleak House*. Considered one of Dickens' most wide-ranging novels, *Bleak House* endorses marriage as a happy ending, tracing the courtships of several couples who marry for love despite adverse social pressures, economic difficulties, and political differences.[53] In a study of divorce and failed marriages in Dickens' novels, Kelly Hager (2016) finds that *Bleak House* conveys "stories of undying love,

[53] Bringing marriage, domesticity, and law into a social problem novel, *Bleak House* can be read as an early detective novel (Ben-Merre, 2011, p. 47) or an experiment in portraying "the complexity and power of networked social experience" (Levine, 2009, p. 517), but it undoubtedly plots a trajectory toward marriage. For example, Caddy Jellyby marries a dance instructor even though her mother wants her to devote her life to philanthropy rather than marriage. A housemaid named Rosa marries a rising politician even though her employer's worry about the class difference. Ada marries her cousin Richard despite his financial insolvency and her guardian's vehement warning against the match. Esther is willing to marry an older man out of a sense of duty and affection, but she marries for love rather than duty. Even Jarndyce, the jilted suitor, encourages Esther to choose love over duty.

unshakeable faith, and firm commitment" (p. 155). Because this narrative arc stands in stark contrast to Dickens' tendency to narrate the dissolution or non-achievement of marriage, Hager argues that in *Bleak House*, Dickens seems "unable or unwilling to plot the failure of marriage" (p. 155). Thus, *Bleak House* stands out as one of Dickens' most staunchly pro-marriage novels, and this theme becomes more prominent in its relation to Ali's novel. Readers of *Love Marriage* can imagine Yasmin finding pleasure in the Victorian romance, which provides a light distraction from her medical studies. It allows her to daydream about falling in love and marrying the man of her dreams, even though her father urges her toward a demanding career in medicine. However, *Bleak House*'s emphasis on marrying for love obscures the patriarchal structures that subsume women into domesticity. Near the end of *Bleak House*, Esther is engaged to her legal guardian, an older man named Jarndyce, despite her love for Alan Woodcourt. Before Esther's sense of moral obligation conquers her feelings, Jarndyce retracts his offer of marriage so that Esther can marry Woodcourt. Nevertheless, this triumph of love is undermined by the patriarchal authority that continues to shape Esther's life. She marries the man she loves only because Jarndyce reinstates himself as a father figure and presents her to Alan, saying, "'take from me a willing gift, the best wife that ever man had'" (Dickens, 1853/1994, p. 790). Rather than emerging as a self-determining woman who chooses to marry for love rather than out of duty, Esther is presented as a gift to be given and a wife to be had.[54] Although a feminist reading, such as the one proffered by Norbert Lennartz (2020), exposes this patriarchal authority, Dickens'

[54] Esther's continual subjugation to male authority figures undermines her narrative authority, despite her status, highlighted by Deborah Epstein Nord (2025), as the only female narrator in Dickens' fiction (p. 185).

emphasis on love conceals the extent to which Esther is domineered by men and passed from one patriarchal figure (her guardian) to another (her husband).

Rather than explicitly challenging the patriarchal content of *Bleak House*, *Love Marriage* symbolically silences the novel by throwing it into a bonfire. An anecdote in *Love Marriage* informs readers that after beetles and silverfish crawled out of a stack of secondhand books, "Shaokat made a bonfire of them while Yasmin was halfway through *Bleak House*" (Ali, 2023, p. 101). This bonfire subtly problematizes Shaokat's excessive influence in Yasmin's life, as he burns the book before she has finished reading it. Assuming that Shaokat destroyed the book without Yasmin's permission, this episode shows how he squashes Yasmin's desire for love. At the same time, the destruction of *Bleak House* problematizes outdated narratives, since the beetle and silverfish infestation occurs largely because the book is old. The physical corruption of the book mirrors its content, which threatens to bring patriarchal ideals into the twenty-first-century home. Thus, the burning of *Bleak House* symbolizes *Love Marriage*'s interest in resisting Victorian narratives that subsume women's voices. As in the other novels examined in this dissertation, this resistance occurs through a strategic silence that draws attention to unheard voices.

Love Marriage also challenges Victorian marriage ideals by invoking but never naming Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, thus exposing how readers unconsciously absorb cultural scripts around love and marriage. In a podcast interview, Monica Ali points to Jane Austen as "a particular influence in the writing of *Love Marriage*" (Messer, 2022). She makes a similar statement on the Frequently Asked Questions page of her personal website, describing how Austen uses a relatively narrow focus on engagement and marriage to address social issues related

to money, class, and power (Ali, n.d.).[55] However, this key Victorian writer remains absent from Ali's novel, invoking a silent intertextuality that troubles the marriage script activated by the focus on Yasmin and Joe's upcoming marriage. In *Love Marriage*, the initial trajectory toward marriage resonates with the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice:* "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (Austen, 1813/1994, p. 5). This statement clearly links marriage to financial success, yet readers generally view Austen as a romance writer rather than a social critic because her novels often end in happy marriages. Such inattentive reading inflates the importance of love not only in impressions of the nineteenth century but also in contemporary dating relationships. While revealing the enduring view of marriage as a supreme destination for love, this silent intertextuality implicates readers in the fantasy of romantic fiction.

These romantic scripts feed into unconscious biases which are problematized in both *Love Marriage* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's novel clearly highlights the danger of selective reading when Elizabeth Bennet acknowledges that her prejudice clouded her judgment. After rejecting Darcy's first marriage proposal and reading his explanatory letter, Elizabeth admits that she was "blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd" (Austen, 1813/1994, p. 162). She then laments her "despicable" actions and the fact that she allowed herself to be blinded by "vanity," concluding, "'I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself'" (Austen, 1813/1994, p. 162). Elizabeth's language emphasizes her lack of understanding and her willful misunderstanding. The courtship metaphor highlights how Elizabeth has actively

[55] See also C.S. Bhagy, 2022, p. 35

pursued prejudice and ignorance rather than using reason to understand both Mr. Darcy and herself.

This scene from *Pride and Prejudice* echoes quietly in *Love Marriage* when Yasmin realizes she has misinterpreted the people around her. Yasmin reflects:

> Looking back, she'd understood so little. She'd been wrong about Arif and Lucy. She hadn't understood Baba. She'd made all sorts of mistakes and assumptions. She'd taken Ma for granted, thought of her as just Ma, and not a person. Certainly not the impressive person that she was. Also, she'd misjudged Ma's relationship with Harriet… She'd force-fitted false narratives onto Pepperdine… (Ali, 2023, pp. 412-413)

Here, Yasmin acknowledges that she actively constructed inaccurate narratives about those closest to her. For example, she viewed Arif as a lazy, irresponsible father who had a baby out of wedlock, although this impression is revised once Yasmin sees Arif's genuine love for Lucy and realizes how their newborn baby unites the family. Similarly, Yasmin assumed that her immigrant mother would never fit into British society due to her mismatched clothing and imperfect English. After listening to her mother, Yasmin realizes that Anisah is a bold, resilient woman who finds alternative ways to satisfy both her family's needs and her own lesbian desires. Understanding this requires Yasmin to silence her preconceived notions about her parents so that she can hear Anisah speak on her own terms. Moreover, because Yasmin wanted Pepperdine's actions to fulfill her desire for a passionate love affair, she failed to recognize that she was using him to escape her personal issues. Yasmin's reflection emphasizes how her lack of understanding and misjudgments arose from her own preconceptions. Ultimately, she admits, "It's me…it's me who had to be right all the time. And mostly I was wrong" (Ali, 2023, p. 413). By insisting on her version of

truth, Yasmin constructed false frameworks that silenced the voices of her mother, brother, best friend, and short-term lover. However, in this scene, Yasmin, like Elizabeth Bennet, finally examines her reading practices. Rather than making assumptions, she examines the assumptions she has made, thereby reconsidering her interpretations of the texts.

Despite this thematic parallel, *Love Marriage* distances itself from the hegemonic courtship plot by burying its key intertext. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's recognition triggers her gradual realization that she loves Darcy. Their happy marriage at the end of the novel reinforces the patriarchal order and makes personal insight a catalyst for assuming the social role of wife. In contrast, Yasmin's moment of understanding comes after she and Joe have ended their engagement and moved apart. This divergence prioritizes self-discovery and truth-telling for their own sake, rather than as a precursor to marriage. Considering this plot difference, the omission of direct references to *Pride and Prejudice* underscores Ali's rejection of Victorian domestic ideals that link female identity formation to marriage. By interacting with Austen's novel without naming it, *Love Marriage* simultaneously enables readers to reflect critically on an absent text and diminishes its power over the popular imagination. Silencing Victorian intertexts like *Bleak House* and *Pride and Prejudice* resists their patriarchal domestic ideology and makes room for new voices to emerge. As the next section discusses, *Love Marriage* also further departs from the courtship narrative by disrupting its implied linearity.

5.2 Disrupting the courtship plot: Modernist intertexts

In addition to silencing Victorian intertexts that bind love to marriage, *Love Marriage* challenges the linear structure of the courtship plot by emphasizing

discursive connections between past and present. Moving beyond the courtship novel, *Love Marriage* establishes a subtle conversation with modernist works like *The Voyage Out* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, novels that reflect skepticism toward marriage. As Davida Pines (2006) points out in *The Marriage Paradox*, early twentieth-century novels call into question the preceding era's idealization of marriage (p. 2). Likewise, contemporary novels interrogate not only former eras but also the values they have transmitted to the current generation. By bringing modernist texts into a neo-Victorian British Muslim context, *Love Marriage* imagines how romantic love can develop apart from a marital trajectory.

The courtship plot, like the bildungsroman, reflects nineteenth-century ideals of progress toward a pre-defined destination. By the end of prototypical novels, the bildungsroman hero acquires an identity as a formed individual, and the marriage novel hero achieves matrimony. Invoking the dialectic that resolves tension between individual and social desires, Hegel (1835/1988) suggests in *Lectures on Fine Art* that marriage represents a synthesis when a defiant young man pursues a young lady but then becomes "as good a Philistine as others" when the couple settles down as husband and wife (p. 593). While Hegel portrays the young man in this romantic fiction as the modern version of a chivalrous knight, Ian Duncan (2018) draws out Hegel's critique of marriage as a confining structure that exchanges individual potential for social belonging (p. 16). Although Hegel identifies marriage as a contradiction to the desire for self-development, both goals become normative when represented in narrative structures like the marriage novel or the bildungsroman. Similarly, in *The Way of the World,* Franco Moretti (1987) argues that the bildungsroman emerged from the modern emphasis on youth and individuality, which was in tension with the need for conformity and socialization. Like Hegel,

Moretti approaches the bildungsroman as a story of how an individual matures within a larger system by exchanging some of their freedom for social harmony. The primary example is marriage, in which an individual sacrifices some of their freedom for the security of a marriage contract. Thus, according to Moretti, marriage provides a resolution to the bildungsroman. Accordingly, the courtship narrative can be seen as a microcosm of the nineteenth century's fixation on progress and conforming to social norms.

In *Love Marriage*, the remnants of a Victorian sensibility impose a linear framework on the processes of love and marriage: A young couple should meet, flirt, fall in love, get engaged, marry, and have children. Although the sequence of the middle elements—such as flirting, falling in love, and getting engaged—might shift slightly, Victorian moral code dictated that the basic elements of courtship, marriage, and childbearing occur in the proper order. Yasmin's internalization of this mandated sequence is reflected in her opinion that her brother Arif and his girlfriend Lucy are "a cautionary tale" rather than "a love story" because they are having a baby despite their lack of financial or marital stability (Ali, 2023, p. 133). Their deviance from the neo-Victorian value of pregnancy within wedlock is compounded by Arif's apparent refusal to grow up. Rather than using a university degree to obtain a stable job before marrying and having children, Arif is a college dropout who dabbles in videography and lives with his family. Reflecting the value of progress framed by the bildungsroman and the marriage plot, Yasmin worries that as time passes, Arif "will be no further forward" but will remain "trapped by adolescence and dependence" (p. 14). This distinction between getting stuck in adolescence and moving forward into adulthood reveals a linear mindset that prescribes the proper order of major life events. Unlike Arif, Yasmin anticipates entering adulthood by marrying and leaving

her parents' house. This comparison between Arif's perpetual adolescence and Yasmin's marriage plans further underscores her adherence to a teleological journey into adulthood.

The linear path for love that Yasmin adheres to is juxtaposed with the circular imagery and relaxed attitude in Arif and Lucy's relationship. When they first meet on a video call, Yasmin imagines Lucy as "a series of circles" because of her pregnant belly, her round breasts, slightly swollen face, and large eyes accented by hoop earrings (Ali, 2023, p. 132). This roundness makes Lucy a perfect match for Arif, who has defied the standard progression from adolescence to adulthood. Lucy also departs from the normative ideal of the young adult who earns a university diploma, starts a career, and establishes financial stability before starting a family. Instead, Lucy lives with her mother and has paused her dental hygienist education due to her pregnancy. Ironically, Lucy and Arif are arguably the only couple in *Love Marriage* who seem truly in love, unaffected by their apparent deviation from the rules of courtship and family planning. Nevertheless, because Yasmin thinks that Arif and Lucy's situation is "a disaster" (p. 133), she is surprised by the couple's unperturbed attitude. When an unplanned video call turns into an informal medical consultation as Lucy asks for Yasmin's opinion, Yasmin assures her everything looks "perfectly normal" (p. 133). However, what Yasmin judges as not perfectly normal the fact that her younger brother's girlfriend is pregnant yet shows no concern about her marital or financial status. Lucy seems "at ease" throughout the entire call, and she casually asks Arif to pick up Fanta and batteries—a shopping list that to Yasmin seems trivial compared to the larger issues of Arif's unemployment and looming homelessness. Juxtaposed with Yasmin's worried judgments, Lucy and Arif's attention to small details reveals their genuine affection for each other and validates a non-normative

path for love, and their relaxed attitudes transcend the rigidity of the inherited courtship model.

Love Marriage also challenges the belief in progress by using neo-Victorian language to highlight stereotypes of sexual conservatism in shared between nineteenth-century English and twenty-first-century British Muslim homes. This historical dialogue is accentuated by old-fashioned language when Joe is referred to as Yasmin's "suitor" (Ali, 2023, p. 15) and described as "automatically suitable" to marry Yasmin because he is a doctor (p. 1). The language of suitability emphasizes notions of professional and social acceptability, relegating sexual desire to a lower, unspoken realm, as was common in the Victorian era. A similar silence around sexuality is prominent in the Ghorami household, which Yasmin describes as a "chaste and cardamom-scented" place where "sex was never mentioned" (p. 1). Again, the outdated language of chastity establishes a link between contemporary British Indian homes and Victorian England. The perceived value of chastity is also directly linked to Muslim religious values, epitomized by Yasmin's mother's discreet instructions on menstrual hygiene accompanied by a reminder to never touch the Quran while menstruating (p. 1). By invoking these views on Muslims and marriage through the lens of Victorian values, *Love Marriage* amplifies resonances between the English literary canon and British Muslim experiences. At the same time, these surface-level parallels, arguably drawing on stereotypes of Victorian and Muslim cultures, are complicated by Yasmin's nonadherence to her family's apparent chastity, as she has already slept with three men. Shaokat Ghorami's joking reference to a dowry (p. 19) also unsettles the assumption that a Muslim home is as strict as a Victorian home. Nevertheless, the language of chastity and suitors foregrounds a historical link between the Ghorami home and the Victorian past.

Love Marriage further emphasizes the presence of the past by conversing with twentieth-century texts such as Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. The first is read by Mrs. Antonova, one of Yasmin's patients, and the second is a gift from Mrs. Antonova to Yasmin. Mrs. Antonova's reading of modernist novels, like Yasmin's reading of Victorian novels, inherently resists a linear timeline that relegates the past to the past. These authors continue to speak as Mrs. Antonova reads them, and they gain a new life as they pass from Mrs. Antonova to Yasmin. In addition to establishing a dialogue between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these books foster an intergenerational connection between the elderly Mrs. Antonova and the young adult Yasmin.

As they depart from a linear path toward marriage, modernist intertexts disrupt the idolization of matrimony in *Love Marriage*. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928/1932), marriage is a barrier to passionate love. Early in the novel, Constance marries Clifford despite his war injuries that render him impotent, and she is satisfied with conversational rather than sexual intercourse. Before long, however, she finds herself in an affair with Oliver Mellors, who is also trapped in an unfulfilling marriage. The novel ends with Constance and Mellors in love but living in separate towns as they wait for their divorces to be finalized so that they can marry and have their happily-ever-after. Inverting the courtship narrative, Lawrence's novel makes divorce rather than matrimony the signal of fulfillment. However, the couple's eagerness to marry again seems to reinscribe the centrality of marriage, a paradox that Davida Pines (2006) identifies in many modernist novels that ultimately "reinforce the social norm" despite harsh critiques of marriage (p. 3). Nevertheless, such a nuptial conclusion is forestalled because *Lady Chatterley's Lover* ends before either couple receives the divorce that must precede their remarriage. By concluding

with an emphasis on Constance and Mellors' impeded desire for each other, the novel arguably establishes love rather than marriage as a primary goal.

Like many of the intertexts in *Love Marriage*, Lawrence's novel is only quietly mentioned, appearing when Yasmin takes care to ensure her patient Mrs. Antonova's reading table is comfortably arranged. As Yasmin continues her rounds after setting up the book, Harrison, a member of the cleaning staff, invites Mrs. Antonova to tell him about the novel. This missed opportunity highlights Yasmin's reluctance, albeit inadvertent, to listen to a story that departs from her neo-Victorian timeline for love and marriage. By the end of the novel, however, Yasmin's decision to break off her engagement echoes D.H. Lawrence's novelistic separation of love and marriage.

Love Marriage also disrupts the courtship model's progression toward sexual intimacy by redefining "chastity." In the Victorian era, chastity symbolized sexual and moral purity, although it has often been interpreted as a mechanism of social coercion, as Lisbeth During (2021) notes in *The Chastity Plot* (p. 37). Against the tendency to associate chastity with suppression of women, During argues that chastity plots "stage a struggle against the social insistence on marriage and reproduction" (pp. 29-30). While *Love Marriage* does not uphold sexual abstinence like the novels examined by During, it uses the language of chastity to interrogate the intertwined goals of love and marriage. The Victorian standard for chastity is invoked from the novel's first page and immediately overturned by the information that Yasmin has been intimate with three men. Nevertheless, this physical closeness invokes a sense of abstinence because it is devoid of the emotional intensity that Yasmin believes should accompany sexual intimacy. Yasmin recalls her first kiss with Joe as feeling almost "chaste" (Ali, 2023, p. 25). Compared to her first

boyfriend's rougher style, this innocent kiss initially seems "sweet" to Yasmin (p. 25), but as her sexual desire intensifies, she begins to feel that she and Joe have a defective lack of passion. Yasmin's initial embrace of followed by a discontent with this chastity resonates with the depiction of sexual desire in *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. At first, Connie is satisfied with her chaste marriage because conversation provides an intellectual connection with her spouse, but she eventually searches for sexual fulfillment with her lover Mellors. This desire for intimacy shifts again when the adulterous couple (out of necessity) abstains from sex as they wait to be together again. By the end of the novel, chastity symbolizes true love, as seen when Mellors writes to Connie, "So I love chastity now, because it is the peace that comes of loving" (Lawrence, 1932, p. 326). A similar evolution of chastity appears in *Love Marriage*. Initially, chastity symbolizes the Ghorami family's religious values. After Yasmin learns that her father regularly slept with other women to appease his sexual drive without disrespecting his wife's homosexual orientation, she realizes that the Ghorami home was never "chaste" because it was filled with deception and untold stories (Ali, 2023, p. 337). At this moment, chastity symbolizes honesty, which is absent in Yasmin's family. Chastity also conveys emotional intimacy when Joe gives Yasmin a final kiss after they end their engagement. Now that they have confessed their infidelities, the "chaste" kiss (p. 389) emphasizes honesty and intimacy, much like Mellors' chaste waiting at the end of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. This shifting symbolism of chastity displaces sexual consummation and marriage as the culmination of a romance narrative.

Decentering marriage also displaces the conservative family values surrounding Yasmin's reading of Virginia Woolf's 1915 novel. *The Voyage Out* tells the story of a young woman named Rachel who, for the first time, spends extended

time away from her father when she journeys to South America by ship. Away from her overbearing father and aunts, she falls in love but spurns the idea of marriage because it conflicts with her burgeoning individual identity. *Love Marriage* replicates this journey away from excessive parental guidance by emphasizing how Yasmin buries herself in *The Voyage Out* rather than studying for the medical exams that will formalize her entrance into the career her father wants for her. While poring over this novel, Yasmin clearly acknowledges that she is taking the exam "only to please Baba" (Ali, 2023, p. 198). Thus, reading *The Voyage Out* foreshadows Yasmin's movement away from her father's control as she abandons her studies to spend time with a love story. This literary voyage also distances Yasmin from her attachment to the ideal of a normal family. From time to time, Yasmin "surface[s]" from the Woolf novel to reassure herself that Anisah will never leave their family (Ali, 2023, p. 198). This repeated need for reassurance highlights Yasmin's attachment to the image of a traditional family and her need to believe that the Ghorami family will stay intact, yet reading takes her away from this worry, if only temporarily.

This double-layered journey away from traditional family values highlights a tension between finding love and speaking as an individual. *The Voyage Out* portrays a young woman discovering "the vision of her own personality" (Woolf, 1915/1978, p. 81) as Rachel falls in love and becomes engaged on a voyage to South America. However, the couple breaks off their engagement when they realize that their love cannot satisfy their desires. Similarly, in *Love Marriage*, Yasmin's engagement conflicts with her search for an individual voice. She struggles to name her sexual desire and to identify her vocational desire apart from the domineering voice of her father steering her into medicine. In both novels, engagement is a waypoint marker on a one-directional journey toward marriage. Thus, ending this engagement

represents a departure from the linearity of the courtship plot. Each novel resists the linearity of marriage and imagines a love story that does not end in marriage.

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf (1915/1978) uses silence to portray a journey beyond the usual script that links love to marriage. This silence is paradoxical because it arises as part of Rachel's search for self-expression. Throughout the novel, Rachel struggles to articulate her feelings for Terence. Although she prefers to express herself through music and she just wants to kiss Terence, she attempts to communicate by speaking about various topics. However, Rachel's rambling chatter makes Terence think that she is indifferent to him because he also wants to kiss rather than talk. In this scene, language hinders love rather than fostering it. Later, Terence and Rachel communicate clearly enough to recognize their mutual feelings for each other, yet they follow the dominant script for love that leads them to engagement. Before long, they are both miserable because the established discourse of love suppresses their more honest speech, and they believe that they want more than what their intended spouse can provide. Faced with the inadequacy of verbal expression, silence comes to signal an intimacy that transcends language. After Rachel suggests that they break their engagement, Woolf (1915/1978) writes:

> The words did more to unite them than any amount of argument. As if they stood on the edge of a precipice they clung together. They knew that they could not separate; painful and terrible it might be, but they were joined for ever. They lapsed into silence, and after a time crept together in silence. Merely to be so close soothed them, and sitting side by side the divisions disappeared, and it seemed as if the whole world were once more solid and entire, and as if, in some strange way, they had grown larger and stronger. (p. 310)

After ending their formal engagement, Rachel and Terence discover a new intimacy that joins them into something that cannot be described in words. They sit in silence because there is no language to approximate their relationship, which does not conform to the trajectory of dating, engagement, and marriage. *The Voyage Out* ends with Terence mourning Rachel's sudden death from an illness, thus making it impossible for their love to lead to marriage. Because the forever love between Terence and Rachel ends with her early death, the novel leaves us with the silence of Terence and Rachel's intimacy that could not fit into existing categories of marriage or romance. This silence constructs an open-ended journey that moves ever outward rather than returning home or arriving at a destination.

Similarly, *Love Marriage* departs from the teleology of the marriage plot by depicting an intimate end to Joe and Yasmin's engagement. While apologizing repeatedly for their infidelities, they embrace as if struggling to survive a storm: "The rain beat down on the shingle roof and the door swung on its creaky hinge and somewhere a crow called in alarm, and they held each other and swayed like two survivors on a life raft" (p. 386). The rainstorm sets a scene in which Joe and Yasmin become each other's lifelines, even as they end their formal engagement. While their loud environment enacts the storm (the rain patters loudly on the roof, a door squeaks, and a crow cries out), Yasmin and Joe seem to remain still on the "life raft" of their embrace. As Joe and Yasmin end their engagement, the life raft represents a departure from the marriage discourse that demands forward movement.

A life raft also appears in Ali's (2007) *Alentejo Blue*, a novel composed of vignettes from the perspectives of tourists and residents in a small Portuguese village. In one of these chapters, a character named Sophie is on holiday with her fiancé when she feels herself slipping into depression and considers postponing or

canceling their wedding. The chapter ends with the couple standing together on separate sides of a red car and linking wrists across the roof "as though they were drowning there in the parking lot, clinging on to this bright red raft" (Ali, 2007, p. 189). Although the narrative does not clearly cut off their engagement, this image suggests they are struggling to stay together. For Sophie and her fiancé, the idea of separating is so unsettling that they cling to each other for survival. Similarly, the discourse of courtship and love marriage provides a sense of security in *Love Marriage* by structuring Yasmin's feelings and providing a goal toward which she can progress. Faced with the prospect or reality of losing their formal engagement, the couples in *Love Marriage* and *Alentejo Blue* hold tightly to each other, as if trying to maintain the sense of security provided by courtship and marriage structures. Nevertheless, amid this sense of unmooring and anxiety, Yasmin and Joe's life raft conveys a clear suspension of the matrimonial trajectory.

Read as a rejection of progress-oriented marriage narratives, the life raft in the storm resonates with the apocalyptic image of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin (1968) describes an angel who looks back at the past and sees "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage," unlike the historian who sees "a chain of events" (p. 257). The angel wants to contemplate the entire pile, but he is propelled away from it by a storm that "we call progress" (p. 258). In this short sketch, Benjamin critiques the linear impulse to separate history into individual events strung together and left behind in the name of progress, as well as the onward drive that prevents anyone, like the angel, from reflecting on the havoc wreaked by the pursuit of progress. In *Love Marriage*, Yasmin and Joe are caught up in a storm of progress as they plan their wedding and barrel toward matrimony despite relational dysfunction, but they

finally stop to survey the damage around them. *Love Marriage*'s interaction with the courtship narrative foregrounds how ideals of progress push lovers like Joe and Yasmin toward marriage, but this pressure to move onward leaves disaster in its wake. Unlike the Angel of History, however, they find a metaphorical life raft that enables them to resist the storm of progress. Lacking automatic propulsion mechanisms, a life raft will typically be carried by the wind or currents unless its occupants actively row in resistance. In contrast, Joe and Yasmin's life raft, formed by their embrace as they break up, resists the storm because they have finally stopped striving toward a goal that does not suit them.

Moreover, Joe and Yasmin's stillness conveys an understanding that transcends language. After the storm passes, they move to the veranda and share a simple lunch in the sun. As they watch snails move slowly across the ground, leaves drip rainwater, and crows fight in the grass, their own bodies are so synchronized that they sneeze one after the other. Interpreting their synchronized sneezes, Yasmin thinks, "This is how it would be…if we'd been married for fifty years" (Ali, 2023, p. 387). This scene momentarily prefigures marital consummation and skips ahead by half a century to imagine Joe and Yasmin as an older couple well established in their marriage. Paradoxically, this marital intimacy is forecasted as they end their engagement. Like Rachel and Terence, Yasmin and Joe grow closer after ending their formal relationship, underscoring how *Love Marriage* upends the neo-Victorian march toward a perfect marriage.

Love Marriage also disrupts progress-oriented ideals by turning to slow discursivity, as Yasmin and Joe stay in touch by writing letters after their breakup. This mode of communication brings the past into the present, since it revives the increasingly outdated practice of putting pen to paper and sending a letter by postal

service, rather than sending an electronic message that can be delivered instantly. This medium also underscores the novel's connection to the nineteenth-century domestic novel in which letter writing is a key mechanism of courting, as Jennifer Phegley (2012) examines in *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*. While Phegley highlights how conduct manuals established guidelines for epistolary courtship and foregrounds the love letter as part of a path toward marriage, her work also underscores the love letter as a place where young couples could communicate away from parental surveillance (p. 56) and women could take more active roles in choosing their partners (p. 57). Despite this increased autonomy, Victorian love letters remain dominated by courtship's focus on marriage. In contrast, Joe and Yasmin begin writing letters *after* abandoning their plans to marry. This shift portrays their letter writing as a mode of self-expression freed from the strictures of epistolary courtship and the drive to achieve matrimony.

The interplay between nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitudes toward marriage, as discussed in this section, moves Ali's novel away from a singular focus on arriving at marriage. As Victorian and modernist texts enter the twenty-first century in Ali's narrative, they undermine ideals of progress and establish textual precedent for love to exist apart from marriage. However, histories of covert incest that haunt the two families in *Love Marriage* impede the liberation offered by this literary dialogue. By analyzing the disadvantages of contact between past and present, the following section resembles Chapter Three's assertion that the tragic pretext of *Antigone* undermines the liberating potential of polyphony in Shamsie's *Home Fire.* The following discussion of incest as a trauma also resonates with Chapters Two and Four, which analyze how firsthand and inherited traumas exclude immigrants from London because the overwhelming pain of the past silences them

physically and symbolically. More broadly, this chapter extends the dissertation's attention to trauma by focusing on the notoriously silent trauma of covert incest.

5.3 Ensuring sameness: Covert incest and the illusion of family

Love Marriage further deromanticizes marriage by exposing histories of covert incest. By narrating these buried histories, *Love Marriage* resists silencing and offers characters a chance to heal from childhood trauma. Furthermore, Ali's treatment of covert incest critiques British society's idealization of the traditional family unit, which allows parent-child relationships to destabilize romantic relationships that diversify kinship structures. By burying this homogenizing impulse in a narrative of silenced trauma, *Love Marriage* critiques how Britain obscures its endogamous desires. Thus, *Love Marriage* portrays covert incest not only as an individual or generational pathology, but also as a social illness that contributes to the exclusion of Muslim immigrants in Britain.

Covert incest can be seen as a narrative of infidelity, which is arguably as central to the domestic novel as is the courtship plot. In *Adultery in the Novel*, T. Tanner (1979/2019) makes a strong argument that adultery rather than marriage is the "generative form" of Western literature, yet it has been overlooked precisely because of its centrality (p. 11). The number of adultery and sensation novels in the Victorian period alone supports Tanner's argument that adultery, or infidelity, is central to the novel tradition. However, infidelity is also underacknowledged due to its binary relationship with marriage, which is also structured by a sound-silence hierarchy that encourages discussion of marriage and suppresses its detractors. If anything, looking for stories of infidelity in the Victorian canon emphasizes once more how the idealization of courtship and marriage rests on a silence—the silence

around infidelity. Neglecting to speak openly or at length about adultery, even though it drives novels like *Madame Bovary*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *Lady Audley's Secret*, reinforces the silences that allow a single conception of marriage to reign supreme. In contrast, by tackling subjects of infidelity and covert incest, which is a form of infidelity, *Love Marriage* invites readers to tune into a silenced narrative that can displace the hegemony of marriage discourse in British society.

Structurally, narratives of covert incest disrupt *Love Marriage*'s movement toward marriage because they maintain contact between the past and the present. Examining the prevalence of incest in Victorian domestic novels, Stephanie Hershinow (2020) discusses how the repetition inherent in an incest narrative challenges the teleology of the marriage plot. In "The Incest Plot: Marriage, Closure, and the Novel's Endogamy," Hershinow (2020) writes:

> If, as many critics have argued, the marriage plot is the novel's surest model for teleology—the propulsive forward movement that has long been understood to be built into the novel's very form—then incest is its countervailing model of tautological self-enclosure—the embrace of self-sameness, repetition, even redundancy, over change. (p. 150)

When incest appears alongside marriage, as in many Victorian novels and in *Love Marriage*, these two plot types work against each other. The forward motion through courtship toward marriage is in tension with the cyclical motion of an incestuous past that surfaces and repeats itself through family patterns. Thus, the histories of incest narrated in *Love Marriage* undermine the initial movement toward matrimony and offset linear progress with a pattern of inherited trauma.

Although covert incest challenges the unwelcome hegemony of the marriage plot, *Love Marriage* clearly presents it as a pathology that wounds both individuals

and the greater society. The term is introduced in the context of Joe's sessions with a psychotherapist named Sandor, who defines covert incest as "the term used when a parent turns a child into a surrogate partner but doesn't touch them sexually" (Ali, 2023, p. 210). Sandor explains that most victims of covert incest are unaware of the abusive dynamic, and they may even feel privileged or favored by their parents, unlike victims of overt incest who feel violated. The clinical setting and discourse around covert incest is augmented by textual references to psychotherapy practitioners, including Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, Salvador Minuchin, and Virginia Satir (Ali, 2023, p. 362). By placing discussions of covert incest in the context of therapy, Ali's novel makes it clear that this silent epidemic needs to be exposed so that its private and public harm can be curtailed.

Because it transgresses the incest taboo, covert incest threatens social heterogeneity and impedes the diversity heralded by Yasmin and Joe's relationship. In his foundational work on the incest taboo, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949/1969) famously argued that incest prohibition ensures intertribal solidarity because the exchange of women culminates a reciprocal gift-giving relationship between tribes. The incest taboo achieves intertribal peace precisely because it is opposed to the endogamous desire for intratribal relations and sameness. Although incestuous relations are not always racially homogeneous,[56] the parent-child relationships in *Love Marriage* are necessarily consanguineous, and they obstruct Yasmin and Joe's intercultural marriage. Because Yasmin and Joe come from very different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, their engagement projects an ultimate crossing of cultural lines. Therefore, when histories of excessive parent-child

[56] For example, Mary Jean Corbett (2008) points out examples of interracial incest among cousins nineteenth-century literature.

intimacy derail Joe and Yasmin's engagement, the multicultural union seems to have been stopped by intra-familial intimacy.

Generational patterns in *Love Marriage* show how covert parent-child incest keeps the family bound in upon itself. In both generations of the Sangster family, an excessively intimate parent-child relationships hinder long-term romantic relationships. When Harriet was fifteen years old, her mother died of ovarian cancer. Her father was wracked with grief and guilt, but as soon as his wife's funeral was over, he "recovered" and took Harriet skiing in Switzerland (Ali, 2023, p. 159). Despite the many women who pursued him, Harriet writes, "Daddy said he'd never marry again and he always kept his promises to her" (p. 159). Although Harriet does not recognize it, her father seems to be using her as a surrogate partner, taking her on a luxury ski trip that might have otherwise been a romantic getaway with his wife. On Harriet's eighteenth birthday, Daddy gifts her the mink coat he had previously given to her mother. This mink coat thus symbolizes how Harriet is treated as her father's wife, even though she continues to call him "Daddy." Although she views him as a father, he fulfills his romantic needs through her, making sure no other woman gains a permanent place in the family. As an adult, Harriet replicates this pattern after her husband's departure. Joe becomes her "confidant" and is "praised for being everything that the father had failed to be" (p. 209). For example, when Harriet exhausts herself and falls asleep on the sofa, Joe pulls a blanket over her and then goes to bed on his own, even though he is still young enough to be put to bed by his mother. In caring for his mother this way, Joe becomes Harriet's surrogate partner, even though he views her only as his doting mother. This pattern of using a child to fulfill emotional needs normally met by a spouse emphasizes how emotional incest fosters inbreeding.

Because covert incest masquerades as ordinary parental closeness, its endogamous implications may be apprehended only by attending to what is unspoken. When analyzing *Love Marriage's* plot after the pathology has been exposed, readers can easily draw a cause-and-effect relationship: Joe's childhood trauma manifests as a sexual addiction that causes him to cheat on Yasmin, which becomes part of her reason for calling off the engagement. But before the covert incest has been named, the novel uses more subtle narrative strategies to reveal how intimacy between Joe and his mother destabilizes Yasmin and Joe's relationship. For example, Yasmin is shocked when Harriet walks into the bathroom to speak with Joe while he is showering, yet she reasons that this is normal in their home because they are much more open than Yasmin's own family. Ironically, although Yasmin admires the fact that Joe and Harriet talk about everything, she says nothing about her discomfort with their lack of privacy. Instead, she quietly looks forward to having their own home to live in away from Harriet, because "Harriet was such a big presence it felt like Yasmin and Joe were never truly alone" (Ali, 2023, p. 79). Yasmin senses that Harriet's constant presence hinders her intimacy with Joe, but she does not know that the mother-son bond is exclusive and competes with the romantic bond between Joe and Yasmin. Later, after breaking off the engagement, Yasmin's reflection verifies her sense that something was not quite right in Harriet and Joe's relationship. She recalls the time that Harriet "went to talk to Joe while he was in the shower" (p. 413), and she tried to dismiss it as a small annoyance she should get over. Nevertheless, the fact that Yasmin remembers this emphasizes how the mother-son relationship interfered with Yasmin and Joe's relationship.

Focusing on covert incest, as opposed to overt incest, also problematizes rhetorical withholdings that allow such abuse to remain undetected. In a linguistic

corpus study of British newspaper articles from 2017 to 2022, Sophie Eyssette and Andrzej Łyda (2024) examine taboo language surrounding discussions of incest. They find that euphemistic discourse, such as using signaling nouns to replace the word "incest," makes it more difficult to recognize and assign meaning to instances of incest abuse. Similarly, Jen Shelton (2002) emphasizes that euphemism "seeks to conceal what it renames while simultaneously conveying the information it hides" (p. 240). Harriet's memoir provides several examples of how ambiguous syntax masks potentially inappropriate moments of intimacy. This is most evident in the scene recounting her mother's death:

> Mother died in her own bed with her face to the wall and Daddy lay his big warm body next to hers and sobbed. Do you forgive me? Do you forgive me? Harriet held his big, fine hand and said, Don't Daddy, don't. (Ali, 2023, p. 159)

While this passage initially suggests that Daddy lay beside Mother, the antecedent of "her" is undefined, leaving open the possibility that it was Harriet, not Mother, with whom Daddy lay. This reading is supported by Harriet's description of her father's body as warm, suggesting that she was close enough to feel his body heat. However, the passage is filled with narrative gaps because when Harriet records this memory, she has not yet recognized that she experienced emotional incest from her father. This lack of understanding is reflected in and perpetuated by her vague discourse.

In Harriet's memoir, a language of filial devotion further sanitizes paternal transgressions. Harriet continually refers to her father as "Daddy," a term that evokes childish innocence and suggests that she still sees herself as a little girl when she thinks of him. In the lines quoted above, this naïve and affectionate language masks a troubling role reversal in which Harriet tries to comfort her father rather than the

other way around. Despite hints of covert intimacy and emotional dependence, Harriet remains committed to portraying her father as a loving caregiver. She recalls how her mother flirted with other men in front of her husband, while her father was a generous man and a successful doctor. He "rose above" his wife's betrayal by training local doctors and establishing a free medical clinic in Thailand (Ali, 2023, p. 159). The contrast between her father's nobility and her mother's cold-hearted flirtation idealizes Harriet's bond with her father and his devotion to her. This narrative of family love conceals the underlying dysfunction in Harriet's childhood, and the idealized discourse functions as an extended euphemism. As Elizabeth Allen (2002) remarks, euphemism "at once elides and indicates what is elided" (p. 193). Elision becomes more evident in Harriet's next writing session, when she moves back and forth between describing and not describing the relationship with her father. Trying to remember where she stopped writing, Harriet summarizes, "Oh yes, she was writing about Daddy, how good he was at compensating for his wife's chilliness towards their sole surviving child" (Ali, 2023, p. 200). While reiterating the story of her father's love and goodness, this euphemistic narrative reminds Harriet of how her father used to slip into bed with her and stroke her earlobe when he could not sleep. This unbidden memory exposes the silences that Harriet's memoir avoids exploring. However, rather than probing this memory for signs of inappropriate intimacy, Harriet thinks about how much she misses her father, and how she will miss Joe when he moves out of the house. Harriet's relationships with her father and son are both tainted by covert incest that she is unable or unwilling to recognize. Her portrayal of fatherly love disguises the underlying history of excessive intimacy between father and daughter, and her own motherly love disguises the way she uses Joe for emotional support.

By using narrative gaps to articulate these buried histories of intrafamilial intimacy, *Love Marriage* reveals how the discourse of family engenders endogamy and diminishes diversity in Britain. The romantic union that would bring together a white English family with a British Muslim family is undermined by the covert incest that turns each family inward. Consequently, covert incest counteracts Muslim immigrants' search for belonging. Rather than cultivating unity and belonging across cultural borders, marriage becomes another tool of exclusion because it perpetuates endogamy. Accordingly, the discourse of psychotherapy in the novel presents incest as an illness to be cured. However, in *Love Marriage*, the goal of this healing is not to reinstate the traditional family unit but to foster diverse expressions of love and belonging, regardless of their alignment with traditional family values. This diversification can be heard in the range of texts with which Muslim women interact, as the next section will discuss.

5.4 Non-Western voices: Reinterpreted to subvert stereotypes

In contrast to the covert incest that silently homogenizes Britain, *Love Marriage* uses textual interaction as an act of discursive infidelity that increases heterogeneity, reinterpreting non-Western texts to articulate diverse understandings of Muslim women's identities in contemporary London. Framed by the novel's attention to extramarital relations, intertextuality in *Love Marriage* can be understood as an act of infidelity, not only because it abandons the courtship plot but also because it reinterprets various authors to support non-essentialist views of Muslim women. Rather than commenting on the moral or ethical implications adultery narratives, Elizabeth Amann (2006) treats adultery and fidelity as metaphors for textual interaction, focusing on how *Madame Bovary* has been imported into various

languages and cultures by writers who "constantly consort with other texts and genres" as they rewrite Flaubert's novel (pp. 6-7). Viewed as a "deliberate act of appropriation" (Amann, p. 8), discursive dialogue enables writers to adapt a source text for their own purposes. By suspending the need to be faithful to an original work, a novel like *Love Marriage* can engage with diverse texts to liberate women from normative discourses that silence their voices. This reinterpretation is especially evident in the way that Ali's characters appropriate Omar Khayyam and Rumi, the Quran and Hadith, and Sophocles to support feminist stances and justify non-heteronormative sexualities. As they are represented in *Love Marriage*, each of these referenced texts challenges stereotypes of Muslim women and inserts women's voices into a male-dominated tradition. As a result, intertextuality in *Love Marriage* positions British Muslim women as discursive agents who consciously shape their identities in conversation with other writers, sometimes through acts of narrative fidelity but more often by departing from normative interpretations.

References listed in Ali's "Acknowledgments" section align *Love Marriage* with efforts to displace dominant discourses that perpetuate stereotypes of Muslim women. One such collection is *It's Not About the Burqa* (Khan, 2019), compiled as a platform for Muslim women to speak on their own terms. Given the multitude of institutions and writers who purport to speak for minority women, editor Mariam Khan (2019) argues for a space where Muslim women can tell their own stories. She asks, "When was the last time you heard a Muslim woman speak for herself without a filter? Or outside the white gaze? On her own terms? Or outside the narrative built around us by the media and governments?" (Introduction, par. 2). By bringing together personal essays, *It's Not About the Burqa* enacts a conversation in which Muslim women speak for themselves rather than being spoken for. Similarly, *The*

Things I Would Tell You (Mahfouz, 2017) draws together voices of British Muslim women to broaden understandings of female Muslim identities. Authors in this collection include secular women from Muslim cultures as well as devout women who believe Islam should permeate every aspect of their lives. A wide range of Muslim women speak in *Love, InshAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women* (Mattu & Maznavi, 2012), which challenges stereotypes about love and marriage. By drawing attention to these books, Ali inserts *Love Marriage* into a collective, ongoing effort to speak for oneself rather than be spoken for. Even though Ali's novel is produced by one woman rather than many, it dismantles monolithic impressions of Muslim women by presenting diverse characters and engaging with a range of culturally Muslim voices through references to other literary works. However, Ali's novel differs by appropriating male writers to undermine stereotypes of Muslim women.

In *Love Marriage*, references to Omar Khayyam's and Rumi's writings on wine challenge the image of the devout Muslim woman. Yasmin's best friend Rania appears pious because she wears a headscarf, but she shatters the stereotype of the veiled woman as she swears loudly and gets drunk in a bar. By drinking in public while wearing a headscarf, Rania departs from the image of a pious, abstinent woman. This performative speech act is intensified by Rania's outspoken critique of a sexual double standard that tolerates men's consumption of alcohol yet condemns women who drink. At home, her father uses alcohol secretly, while both she and her mother pretend not to know. Meanwhile, at the bar, Rania must insist that she wants "wine with alcohol" because the server assumes that a covered woman would only order "no-alcohol wine" (Ali, 2023, p. 77). This interaction with the bartender critiques how stereotypes limit women's agency in London, yet Rania targets broader

cultural and religious constructs by arguing that Khayyam and Rumi, famous Persian love poets, wrote about wine. In Khayyam's (1859/1990) *Rubaiyat*, for example, wine often symbolizes sensual pleasure and embracing the present moment;[57] while Rumi (2008) uses wine as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment and mystical ecstasy as well as human love, depending on the interpretation.[58] These poetic references to wine are corroborated by the existence of "Islamic wine jugs from fifteenth-century Persia," as Rania points out (Ali, 2023, p. 79). Her argument is not only that wine jugs were produced in Persia but also that Muslims consumed wine. Rania also identifies a cultural double standard when she points out how the Iranian Ministry of Culture's textual ban on the word "wine" disregards the fact that some of their most famous poets wrote openly about wine. Rania's use of culturally Muslim poets to validate her argument is an attempt to deconstruct religious stereotypes from within the tradition that is typically used to argue against alcohol. By naming Muslim love poets and drinking wine, Rania shatters the dualistic mindset that assumes spirituality and alcohol are mutually exclusive for Muslim women.

Ideals of the pious Muslim woman are also internally destabilized through stories about women in the Quran and Hadith, as Anisah frequently mentions figures like Ibrahim and Sara and Hajira (Ali, 2023, p. 65), Khadija and Muhammad (p. 82), and Yusuf and Zulaikha (p. 82). Due to her repeated stories about husbands and

[57] Khayyam's (1889/1990) sensual references to wine are most evident in the poem "A Book of Verses beneath the Bough," in which sitting under a tree with poetry, wine, bread, and the beloved turns wilderness into paradise (p. 27). This poem emphasizes the pleasure of wine, suggesting that it should be physically enjoyed, like bread. In many of Khayyam's poems, images of consuming wine can also be interpreted metaphorically, as in "Come, fill the Cup" (p. 26), "Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears" (p. 30), "For some we loved, the loveliest and the best" (p. 30), and "As then the Tulip for her morning sup" (p. 34). Khayyam also associates wine with death yet nevertheless urges listeners to accept the cup of death when it is offered to them; see, for example, "And if the wine you drink" (p. 35) and "So when that Angel of the darker Drink" (p. 35).

[58] *The Quatrains of Rumi* (2008) contain myriad references to wine and drunkenness, many of which can be construed as metaphors for spiritual ecstasy or as descriptions of romantic passion between two lovers. See, for example, "He came out, drunk from the feast…" (p. 95) and "I am yearning, drunk, and crazy for you" (p. 325) and "Because of ruby-red wine, our natures became purified" (p. 386).

wives, Anisah comes across as a devout Muslim woman who articulates her faith through regular prayer and meditation on the Islamic tradition. However, this appearance of female orthodoxy obscures the subversive implications of her storytelling. For example, she emphasizes the love between Ibrahim and Sara but offers no explanation of why Sara offered Hajira to her husband (p. 65). Anisah's emphasis on heterosexual romance silences the more unusual elements of these stories, such as Khadija's financial support of the Prophet, Zulaikha's seduction of her husband's servant, and Sara's unjust treatment of the woman she used to gain a child from Abraham. These stories also predispose listeners, like Yasmin, to assume that Anisah identifies with married women like Sara, whom she portrays as deeply in love with her husband. In fact, Anisah quietly departs from heterosexual norms by subtly pursuing a lesbian relationship with Flame. Moreover, Anisah's non-normative sexuality finds validation in the Islamic stories she tells, such as the tale of a prostitute and a thirsty dog by a well. The dog is ignored by the many people who come to draw water or sit in the shade of a nearby tree. When a prostitute, mocked by the town, notices the dog, she removes her shoe and veil, using the shoe as a bucket and the veil as a rope to draw water from the well for the dog. The story elevates the marginalized woman by concluding that she received forgiveness because of her compassion for the dog (Ali, 2023, p. 255). Anisah's version of the story emphasizes the woman's compassion over her moral position, thus challenging the strict association of Muslim piety with sexual morality.

These subversive interactions with a predominantly male religious tradition underscore how women's voices emerge through acts of reinterpretation, such as Anisah's response to Flame's feminist retelling of *Antigone.* Previously, Flame had viewed the Chorus as simply a group of narrators (Ali, 2023, p. 247), but Anisah

views the Chorus as representing people with their own stories. When Flame praises her insight, she draws attention to Anisah's voice, which would otherwise be dismissed by Yasmin, who thinks her mother cannot have anything insightful to say about a Greek tragedy (p. 247). Because Anisah shies away from voicing her opinion, Flame retells it later:

> "Anisah…enriched the reading by seeing what I had failed to see: that the people in the shadows—the chorus—represent the many people in the world today who exist without full citizenship, either within or between states. Who are not accorded full human status. Who operate in a shadowy realm, and haunt the public sphere like Antigone haunts Creon." (Ali, 2023, p. 248)

Anisah's interpretation of the Chorus as in-between people who are seen as less than human and lack full citizenship reflects her experiences as a first-generation immigrant who has quietly lived in an upper-middle-class white neighborhood surrounded primarily by white English families. As she lamented to Yasmin previously, she feels isolated from other East Asians and Muslims. This suggests that she identifies with the people in the shadows because she lacks a community that affirms her unique voice. Although Anisah's comments on the Sophoclean chorus echo those expressed by many literary scholars,[59] her commentary's value lies not in its radically new perspective, but in its reception, which validates her voice and experiences as Joe and Flame affirm her insightful reading. Even though Anisah shies away from offering literary interpretation of a Greek tragedy her voice emerges as her interpretation is retold. Furthermore, as she shares her opinions, she emerges

[59] See Chapter 3 for a discussion of *Antigone* related to liminality and lack of citizenship. Examples of linking *Antigone* to lack of citizenship also include Kamal Kaan's (2021) *After Aaliyah*, which adapts the play to a contemporary context to examine the fragility of citizenship for Muslims in Britain, and Thomas Köck's (2019) *Antigone: A Requiem*, which critiques the contemporary dehumanization of migrants by replacing Polyneices' corpse with the bodies of migrants washed ashore.

from the metaphorical shadows and overturns the stereotype of the uneducated foreign housewife.

Along with reworking stereotypical images of immigrant women, *Love Marriage* thwarts an essentialist search for a Muslim identity by problematizing the notion of authenticity. The first problem with searching for cultural authenticity is that it is based on stereotypes, as evidenced by the suggestion that Harriet is "disappointed" that Yasmin is not "more Indian" (Ali, 2023, p. 5). In contrast, Joe opines that Yasmin's parents are "authentic enough to give [Harriet] an orgasm" (p. 5). Since Harriet has never met Yasmin's parents, Joe's conjecture can only be referring to what he imagines will be his mother's first impression. His crude language inflates Shaokat's and Anisah's otherness, dwelling on how obvious features such as their speech patterns and attire make their Indianness visible. Ironically, this fixation on a stereotypical impression contradicts the concept of authenticity, and it reduces Yasmin's parents to stereotyped images of Bangladeshi immigrants.

Ali further highlights how such misconceived "authenticity" is superficial by linking it to personal fashion and the subtle suppression of individual choice. When Anisah prepares to meet Harriet for the first time, she asks Yasmin for advice on what to wear. Yasmin has always been embarrassed by her mother's colorful style and wishes that she had learned "how to dress like a normal person" after so many years in London (Ali, 2023, p. 11). When her mother asks for wardrobe advice, Yasmin once again bemoans her mother's visible otherness, while suddenly remembering Joe's crude phrase "authentic enough to give her an orgasm" (first stated on p. 5, echoed on p. 12). As this imagined description reverberates in her thoughts, Yasmin appears to switch strategies. Rather than trying to make her mother

look more British, she advises a sari because it will highlight the Indianness that Harriet reportedly wants to admire. In this exchange, fashion becomes a sign not of self-expression but of conformity to a stereotype. However, Anisah resists Yasmin's attempts to exoticize her. Rather than accepting the seemingly "authentic" sari, she chooses a brightly colored floral-print dress with birds that Yasmin believes will make her look "eccentrically clad" (p. 11). In the matter of Anisah's dress, the notion of authenticity imposes limits on both Yasmin and Anisah. To make her mother fulfill Harriet's image of the authentic Indian woman, Yasmin subtly tries to suppress her mother's self-expression through her clothing.

Rather than eliminate visual and verbal stereotypes, *Love Marriage* explores how Muslim women like Anisah reclaim hegemonic language through acts of hermeneutical resistance. By the end of the novel, Anisah is no longer portrayed as an immigrant housewife who speaks broken English because she spends all day cooking and cleaning for her family and neighbors. Now she produces and sells pickled products with the label "Anisah's Achaars: Authentic Bengal Pickles, made in my own kitchen" (Ali, 2023, p. 404). In fact, Anisah has become a small-business owner, but her label emphasizes her Bengali culture and her kitchen, capitalizing on the stereotype of the immigrant woman hard at work in the kitchen. When selling her homemade chutneys and achaars at farmers' markets across London, Anisah makes sure to wear a sari because it boosts sales. As Anisah says, wearing a sari:

> did not make the pickles more authentic but if people believed it then what else should she do? She could make English-style chutneys just as well, and jams too, but the apple or fresh fig chutneys and the gooseberry jams and orange marmalades hardly sold at all, whatever she wore. (Ali, 2023, p. 410)

By wearing a sari and keeping her English-style products off the market, Anisah plays into a stereotype of the Indian immigrant auntie who sells traditional foods. Although her customers subscribe to a false belief when they associate a sari with chutney quality, Anisah uses this subconscious logic to amplify her presence in the marketplace. While preserving the cultural script of the sari-wearing chutney seller, she quietly leverages it to support her emerging identity as a strategic entrepreneur.

The idea that reinterpretation is the key to developing an individual identity is corroborated by the novel's use of slang to redefine and personalize authenticity. By incorporating slang, Ali defamiliarizes the concept of authenticity and emphasizes how each person has a unique expression of identity. This is evident when Arif encourages Yasmin to be "trill" and "keep it hundred" (p. 267), explaining that "trill" means "true and real," and "keep it hundred" refers to "acting in a way that's true to oneself and aligned with one's values, as well as being honest with and respectful towards others" (p. 268). Although easy to understand, this definition is nuanced and significantly longer than the slang term, which consists of just three short words. Even though Arif uses contractions and everyday language in his definition of "keep it hundred," the dissonance between the phrase and its definition suggests that authenticity is a linguistic phenomenon that can be learned and relearned as it evolves. Yasmin's ignorance of the slang reflects both this fluidity and her unfamiliarity with living according to her own values. This is highlighted in the subsequent conversation when Arif suggests that Yasmin is imprisoned by her father (p. 271) because she has forgotten how he abused her psychologically and emotionally. When Arif finishes the conversation by urging Yasmin to "keep it hundred," his words suggest that Yasmin needs to discover her true values and learn who she is, rather than prioritizing her father's values for her life. As Arif's use of

slang foregrounds the relationship between language and authenticity, it underscores the importance of speech in shaping and expressing identity.

Attending to individual speech in connection to diverse textual voices can further deconstruct the idea of an essential Muslim voice. Examining the philosophy, ethics, and linguistics of the voice, Mladen Dolar (2006) writes in *A Voice and Nothing More*, "The voice is like a fingerprint, instantly recognizable and identifiable" (p. 22). Taken alone, such a statement might suggest that the act of speaking inherently reflects an authentic self, but Dolar argues that the unique sonic qualities of a voice contribute nothing to the voice's signification, despite their role in making that voice recognizable and in threading together the signifiers that constitute a speech act (p. 23). In this book, Dolar offers a wide-ranging philosophical inquiry into the relationship between voice and subjectivity. In "The Burrow of Sound," Dolar's (2011) inquiry focuses more precisely on issues that concern my research: what is the relationship between the one and the many in any given sound? As he explores the liminality of sound, Dolar (2011) writes:

> the heterogeneous multiplicity inherent in the sound has to be accounted for in terms of one, hence made countable, enabling the sound to count for one and/or disentangling its discrete countable components. And even the simplest of sounds, isolated by this story, turns out to be more than one; there is a mixture in it, an ineradicable hybridity. (p. 132).

As Dolar makes clear, any sound is both singular and heterogeneous. This antinomy confounds the search for a purely individual expression of any Muslim woman's voice, not because it declares there is no individual voice but because it suggests that the individual voice is always composed of multiple voices.

This paradoxical combination of the singular and the multiple establishes a framework for identifying Yasmin's voice within the polyphony of her final statement. In the novel's final scene, which takes place six months after the broken engagement, Yasmin struggles to finish a reply to Joe's invitation to visit him in Edinburgh. After filling pages with newsy ramblings, Yasmin rereads Joe's letter and suspends her search for words. In this verbal silence, Yasmin begins to listen to her body: "Yasmin curled herself into a ball. She hugged her knees into her chest and closed her eyes and her smile was so big it was like her whole body was smiling" (Ali, 2023, p. 414). Rather than telling herself how to respond or what to feel, Yasmin listens to her body for the first time, and she allows silence to grow. Through this verbal silence, as she stops her own discourse, Yasmin finally hears her inner voice. In accordance with this dissertation's focus on silence, an intentional pause portrays how silence can foster the emergence of authentic speech freed from stereotypes and social expectations.

However, this speech is markedly intersubjective, as Yasmin's voice emerges in concert with other discourses. When she feels her body smile, Yasmin first turns to scientific terminology to explain the happy feelings as "Oxytocin. Dopamine. Norepinephrine. The release of hormones. That's what was happening. That's all it was. Physiology. Simple physiology" (Ali, 2023, p. 414). By listing hormones, Yasmin tries to provide a medical explanation and dismiss the new feeling she cannot explain.[60] She reminds herself that she "didn't believe in love," and she uses scientific terms to explain why her palms are clammy and her heart rate is elevated (p. 414). But this explanation of symptoms bumps up against an echo of Anisah's voice reminding Yasmin that "Life is not simple" (p. 414). With these voices from

[60] Scientific discourse also reiterates Yasmin's conviction that she does not believe in love. See Ali p. 404 and p. 414 in *Love Marriage* (Ali, 2023).

her mother and the medical world mingling in her mind, Yasmin continues to listen to her surroundings, noticing a sensation of warm sunlight on her eyelids even though it is not a sunny day (p. 415). This physical sensation manifests the "irrational hope and nonsensical joy" that fills Yasmin as she tries to figure out whether she is experiencing love or hormones. She still tries to rationalize and describe her feelings, but the best explanation she can find is her mother's statement that life is not simple. If this complexity can be articulated, it will emerge as a layered speech act that incorporates multiple perspectives.

As these various words contribute to her articulation of happiness, Yasmin's voice emerges on its own *and* in connection to others. She opens the window and calls out "'Good morning'…to everyone and no one" (Ali, 2023, p. 415). This unbidden greeting, loudly declared, is Yasmin's individual voice and bears the sonic markings of her unique expression, but it also emerges within a particular community. Right before calling out "Good morning," Yasmin notices the multiculturalism outside her window: a woman carrying Greek bread, an old man wearing thick winter clothing as if he were in Siberia, two boys playing football, a luxury car driving by, and a family walking to the Eritrean Orthodox church. It is into this diverse neighborhood that Yasmin's voice arrives and is acknowledged. After the father of this family returns Yasmin's greeting, she states, "'Life is not simple'" (p. 415), repeating her mother's phrase that has echoed throughout this chapter. As Yasmin speaks out to the city, she also amplifies her mother's voice. Moreover, when Yasmin offers her newfound insight to the city, the passerby verifies the statement with a nod, "As if Ma's words were worth repeating. As if they were worth something in this world" (p. 415). By repeating her mother's words, Yasmin affirms her mother's voice, once more resisting the isolation that has marked

Anisah's experience as an immigrant in London. Furthermore, Yasmin's interaction with the stranger sounds out an urban community comprising multiple cultures and faiths and blending her voice with her mother's.

This individual and communal utterance—"Life is not simple"—becomes a unique expression of love. Previously, Anisah used this phrase to suggest that Yasmin might eventually return to Joe (p. 403. In response to Yasmin's adamant insistence that she is not in love with Joe even though she misses him, Anisah states, "Life is not simple. You do not know what will happen with Joe" (p. 403). Anisah expresses hope for love, but it is an open-ended love, unlike the initial conception of romance as bound to marriage. By emphasizing the unknown, Anisah underscores her and her daughter's departures from traditional ideas of love. When Yasmin repeats this phrase a few pages later, she personalizes it to articulate her changing feelings for Joe. At the same time, by avoiding the word "love," Yasmin's expression further emphasizes the unknown. Her relationship with Joe is no longer bound to a marriage plot or suffocated by an incestuous history. Instead, her feelings for Joe are free to chart their own path, interacting with but not overwhelmed by other voices along the way. With this singular-multiple expression, *Love Marriage* articulates a new vision of love, delinked from ideals of marriage that limit women's voices. As she abstains from the word "love" in this final scene, Yasmin's multi-layered language gestures toward an alternative expression of romantic affection that may or may not lead to matrimony.

By the end of *Love Marriage*, Yasmin has departed from a linear path toward marriage, and she no longer assumes that romantic love belongs only in a neo-Victorian progression from courtship to matrimony. The superiority of love marriage has also been displaced, as Yasmin uncovered the infidelities and covert abuse that

haunt her family as well as Joe's family. Yet *Love Marriage* does not condemn marriage or love; rather, it moves toward a wider framework that can accommodate multiple arrangements of matrimony and romance, epitomized in the novel's plot and its intertexts. By the end of *Love Marriage*, Yasmin's story has exposed how idealized narratives of love marriage silence women, and readers have hopefully abandoned any infatuation with supposedly romantic stories, such as the popular narratives of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bleak House*. Like the heroines of *The Voyage Out* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, we are no longer in love with marriage, and we can delink love from wedlock. This journey beyond traditional frameworks both silences canonical narratives and creates a verbal gap, which is epitomized in Yasmin's complex articulation of a love-like feeling. At the same time, the strategic silences of *Love Marriage* amplify voices that the dominant discourse of love marriage would otherwise suppress. Ultimately, by engaging with diverse intertexts, *Love Marriage* sounds out multiple expressions of love from women representing a range of British Muslim identities. Thus, Ali's novel creates a textual network of belonging in which Muslim women can speak and be heard, interacting with the past and the present to forge a more inclusive future of love. Amid this polyphony, silence once again has the last word, as it is by abstaining from an unambiguous expression of love that the novel clears the way for new relationships among courtship, love, and marriage.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Challenging the sound-silence binary and its attendant hierarchies, this dissertation has analyzed how women speak through silence in contemporary British Muslim immigrant narratives. In Layla AlAmmar's *Silence is a Sense*, the protagonist-narrator's movement from physical muteness to audible speech parallels the emergence of her authorial voice, yet narrative gaps and the motif of unspeakable trauma reframe silence as an indispensable part of interacting with the world both physically and discursively. Emphasizing women's inaudibility in the political realm, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* rewrites the Sophoclean tragedy of *Antigone* to compare Muslim women in contemporary Britain to ancient Greek women, who were deprived of full citizenship rights in what is considered the birthplace of democracy. Sounding more optimistic about the ability to overturn oppressive silences, Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* gives voice to history and nature through a fig tree narrator who transcends boundaries between species, cultures, time, and space. However, silences persist in the form of grief, which counters the fig tree's utopian vision of intercultural harmony with a reminder that many voices remain absent from even the most hybrid soundscapes. Inherited silences are also undone by Monica Ali's *Love Marriage*, which invokes the nineteenth-century courtship plot and then rejects it to establish an alternative vision of love lying outside the dominant marriage discourse. While some silences continue to enforce suppression, exclusion, or censorship, these strategic narrative gaps declare that Muslim women do speak in Britain, even as ongoing marginalization and histories of trauma threaten to overwhelm their voices.

At the same time, a consistent motif of death brings a tone of urgency to these novels' attention to marginalized lives. Through the traumatic structures of *Silence is a Sense* and *The Island of Missing* Trees, absent voices speak across time and space as characters in both novels are haunted by lost loved ones. In *Home Fire*, the wake in Karachi draws strangers into a communal lament as they transport ice to preserve Parvaiz's body; the scene also crosses national borders because it is televised in London. The fear of death transcends division in *Love Marriage* when an estranged family comes together at the hospital, fearing that a newborn baby is about to die. In each novel, a looming silence of the grave overcomes the cultural and political differences that ordinarily divide people. But noticing how these novels use grief to transcend cultural divisions raises another critical question: Why are religious and ethnic prejudices set aside only in the face of death? The contrast between these temporary communities of mourning and the social differences that normally divide them underscores how Muslim women continue to struggle for recognition not only in death but also in life. We need to tune in to these inaudible voices before they can be heard only through narrative fiction.

Although narratives of and by Muslim women have increased in recent years, as this dissertation's focus affirms, the ongoing struggle for audibility issues a reminder that silence is a receding line. Close listening opens the ear to notice more sounds, especially when one attends to an apparent silence. The receding horizon of silence is demonstrated by John Cage's *4'33''* when a pianist draws attention to oft-unnoticed ambient noise by sitting on stage without touching their instrument. As the audience leans in expecting to hear music, the absence of composed music makes them more attentive to sounds of rustling and shifting in the auditorium, the unorchestrated music of human lives that typically goes unheard, even though it

exists. Similarly, the novels by AlAmmar, Ali, Shafak, and Shamsie install narrative gaps to bring attention to quiet expressions that are otherwise drowned out by language. Listening between the lines amplifies uncommon speakers like history, collective memory, and cultural distance. Analyzing verbal gaps also draws attention to voices that speak but often seem mute in comparison to dominant discourses that speak more loudly. Sometimes this aural hierarchy can be undone, such as when AlAmmar's protagonist begins to speak again or when Shafak's tree unburies the past and tells readers who was in the well. While this dissertation has unburied some of the quiet expressions of Muslim women in Britain, it has also demonstrated that there will always be a degree of silence to attend to, such as the ever-present silences of the past and of unspeakable traumas. The ongoing need to attend to silence is articulated by the ambiguous and inconclusive endings of each novel I study, as well as by the nature of silence as a relative rather than absolute phenomenon.

Listening to inaudible voices deserves continued engagement because silence is as necessary as speech. Try as we might, we cannot and should not replace all silence with speech. Without gaps to distinguish between words, sentences, sounds, or voices, we would be unable to make meaning. We need silence not only because it contributes to making meaning from the language it conditions, but also because it carries meaning. As emphasized in the introductory chapter and throughout this study, tuning into signifying silences can displace the privileged place of audible speech. However, even though my research has suggested that silence has a voice, the two concepts remain in a binary relationship. It is the difference between sound and silence that informs our understanding of what each concept is, and it is their intertwined nature that enables communication, as emphasized in the title "Speaking through Silence." The title of this dissertation also uses a gerund to indicate that as

long as women turn to silence as a form of expression, readers must attend to absent voices. Further, because the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are always receding, the work of listening to marginalized voices must carry on.

The need for constant adaptation is also reflected in the intertextual and multigenre textures of the novels examined in this dissertation. The confluence of diverse genres in these novels reflects the inability of a single genre to express what it means to be a Muslim British woman. Given the diversity of Muslim women's experiences and identities in Britain, no single genre or mode of expression can adequately represent them. Accordingly, these novels engage with religious writings, love songs from around the world, eastern and western myths, canonical European literature, Greek tragedy, and Arabic poetry to give voice to the rich, varied experiences of Muslim immigrant women in Britain.

Future studies on these novels may shift focus from women's silences to men's silences, further challenging the binary thought patterns that perpetuate stereotypes of Muslim men by associating women with silence and ignoring the overdetermined representations of male Muslim characters in contemporary Anglophone novels. These novels can also be approached through more explicit engagement with urban studies or the emerging field of sound studies, analyzing how ambient sounds in the settings of each novel contribute to an understanding of the city. The insights from this dissertation might also provide a basis for transatlantic studies, comparing immigrant women's silences in American and British settings, or they might be enriched by tracing how narrative silences have increased or decreased in relation to migratory trends and geopolitical events in recent years. This dissertation's destabilization of the sound-silence binary can also be used to expose and challenge social inequities that marginalize other communities around the world.

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