**Nthabiseng Motsemme**

# The Mute Always Speak: On Women's Silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Kunyarara hakusi kutaura?[1] (Mungoshi, 1983)

## Introduction

Various studies exploring the ways ordinary women speak about their traumatic pasts under violent regimes have consistently shown how they tend to place their narratives within everyday lived experience, rather than nationalist concerns (Passerini, 1992, 1998; Ross, 1996; Das, 2000; Motsemme, 2003; Zur, 1998). Home, domesticity, relationships and quotidian lives are employed to map their experiences of human rights violation. In other words, women's recollections are often interested in the contexts of daily life in which they attempt to make and maintain their homes and relationships. In many ways the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was not an exception to this form of remembering past violence. Given this general structuring of their testimonies, these accounts give us an opportunity to explore how the violence of apartheid insinuated itself into people's everyday lives: that is, how apartheid violence and violation came to be incorporated into the meaning and feeling structures in relationships between wives and husbands; between mothers and sons; and between women themselves. These accounts also alert us to how violence and violation are not only contained in time, but have effects that far exceed the original moment of violence (Srinivasan, 1990). So often these are aspects of violence construed as unrelated to actual moments of violence. Some include ways in which the brutality of racist and capitalistic systems such as apartheid also lay in what state terror could do to alter the ways individuals

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and communities relate to each other. More importantly, they allow us to bear witness to the texture of the lived experiences of self, family and community fragmentation. The numerous strategies women had to employ to protect and maintain their families, and which at times failed and broke down, are also allowed to surface. In addition, these stories also reveal the formulation of new forms of agency by women in unexpected places under daily conditions of horror. Further, they draw us to the focus of this article – women's articulation of their languages of 'pain and grief' through the language of silence.

The central argument put forward is that evidence of these processes of fragmentation and agency can also be located in expressions of silence embodied and narrated by women during the TRC hearings. The article proposes that we begin to read these silences, just as we invest in reading speech and action in the social sciences. Reinterpreting silence as another language through which women speak volumes, allows us to then explore other, perhaps hidden meanings regarding the struggle to live under apartheid.

The article also highlights how these moments of silence form part of a collective 'narrative' of how many of the testimonies became less about nation, and more to do with 'a wholeness of self, body, the family, the home, that had been breached in ways that left victims bereft of something precious' (Bozzoli, 1998: 181). It recommends that women's silences uttered at the TRC should then be viewed as part of a range of 'languages of pain and grief' to narrate often hidden but troubled elements of their recent past. In expanding our conceptual tools to understand the workings of silences, I show how this also reveals the invisible but agentic work of the imagination to reconfigure our social worlds. Finally, the article highlights how introducing more nuanced interpretations of silence adds to growing attempts to elaborate on notions of South African women's subjectivities and forms of agency with living in urban ghettos during the height of apartheid. Overall, what the article demonstrates is that when we reject dominant western oppositional hierarchies of silence and speech, and instead adopt frameworks where words, silence, dreams, gestures, tears all exist interdependently and within the same interpretive field, we find that the mute always speak.

The article explores these ideas by first discussing the institutional and symbolic features of the TRC, within which women's recollections were framed. Second, it identifies the limits of verbal language in the narrative of remembered violence, and proposes that we reinterpret silence as language by outlining why and how. Finally, it locates ways of reading these silences present in TRC testimonies through a discussion of the following themes: silence as resistance and courage; silence as illusion of stability; and silence as a site for coping and the reconstitution of self. Overall, I suggest that it is when the language of silence, which forms part of the 'economy of the

invisible', is also uncovered that we have a better view of those privatized experiences of living daily in violent contexts.

## The Institutional and Symbolic Significance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The collapse of apartheid opened up a space on which the new South Africa could be inscribed with the help of particular memorial acts. This process of constructing a democratic society out of a past replete with personal loss and political evil has been shaped by key moments. The most notable was when the white-led National Party relinquished formal political authority to an African National Congress-led government. In the process leading up to this, during the 'talks-to-democracy',[2] an amnesty agreement was written into the interim South African constitution. This negotiated settlement between the past establishment and the new dispensation gave birth to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Among other things, the Commission was required to get to an understanding of the 'antecedent circumstances, factors and context of gross human rights violations as well as the causes, motives and perspectives of the persons responsible' (Section 3[1] of the Promotion of the National and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995). The Commission was formulated to be a transitional body. One of its tasks was to allow 'perpetrators' and 'victims' to come face-to-face and confront the past. This process was envisioned as a means of facilitating healing and, perhaps, forgiveness in a brutally racially divided society. It was also intended to encourage individuals to narrate their experiences of past abuses by providing testimony or witness to the past. These individual stories would then provide the text for a collective memory of the past and a future South Africa. Framed largely by a nationalist discourse, the Commission sought to celebrate a heroic and selfless past that gave birth to the new South Africa. In its performance and ritualization,[3] it created a space in which the spoken word would be transformed into truth and history.

However, one of the single, most unifying symbols of the unfolding South Africa that we must take into account to contextualize and make sense of the TRC, is the insertion of the 'reconciliation text', as embodied in the 'rainbow nation' rhetoric. The most presiding image in South Africa is 'not the rough beast, but the rainbow,' comments Marx (1998: 211) on the transition. This founding text of reconciliation (i.e. TRC) in South Africa was simultaneously supported by a number of representations in the sphere of advertising, which privileged racial harmony, which at the time was overall a mythical view. Writers such as Prinsloo (1999) and Gqola (2001b), who have analysed the rhetoric of 'rainbow nation', have also noted these mythical

qualities in representations of the 'new' South Africa. Such images and symbols point to the extent this particular transition bears all the qualities of myth as opposed to history. This is because in attempts to outline 'what is now' the 'rainbow' vision must present the past as a distortion. Here Maake reminds us of Barthes' point that

> . . . myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear. . . . The aim of myth making is after all to cause immediate impression; it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it. (Maake, 1996: 146)

The truth body took on this myth-making function in addition to its ostensible task of addressing past political abuse. The Commission thus provided another canvas on which the discourse of the new South Africa would be written, produced and visibly shown. It then became another text about nation, or more specifically 'rainbow nation'. This remaking of a new South African society used testimonies about human rights violations. That a big part of the process was public, broadcast live or immediately after, reported widely in various local and international media, was not simply about transparency and accountability. Public testimonies were an integral part of the mythology and reconstruction of nation. Oral testimonies provided the opportunity for all South Africans to bear witness to the past, to 'memorize' it, to say, perhaps, after Mandela, 'never again', and to start anew. It was the beginning of the crucial process of building in the hearts and minds of locals the idea of a new nation built from the ashes of the old.

Further, it is important to comment on the use of the spectacular over the staid forms of due process. The idea of the TRC as performance, or rather political theatre, has been noted by several authors analysing its structural and symbolic form (Bozzoli, 1998; Brink, 2000; Cohen-Cruz, 1998; Marx, 1998; Wilson, 1995, 1996). Other scholars have shown how this theatre of power also privileged religious symbols of forgiveness and healing, as opposed to vengeance and anger (Wilson, 1996; Bozzoli, 1998; Guma, in Public Discussion, 1998). Wilson (1995, 1996) has argued that the weaving of especially Christian motifs[4] into the TRC was also an important element as it allowed individuals to feel part of an experience that had 'divine' symbolic meaning. Bozzoli (1998) and Wilson (1996) have also detailed how the process of revealing the 'truth' mirrored acts of confession. And of course it was crucial that it was Archbishop Desmond Tutu[5] who acted as symbolic head of the Commission, as he appealed to both the 'religious' and 'political' communities in South Africa. However, intellectuals such as Guma and Mamdani were particularly critical of this aspect of the Commission. Guma, a traditional healer and academic, asks whether the TRC was a nationalist project for the recovery of the national memory, or whether it was about the recovery and healing of individuals (Public Discussion, 1998). During these

discussions commenting on the unfolding process of the TRC, he also insisted that African perspectives of healing had been undermined. While Mamdani, in the same public forums, maintained that overreliance on this Christian discourse supported by a 'victim–perpetrator outlook' not only masked power relations operating during apartheid, but also failed to link power to privilege.

However, the practice of Christianity in South Africa is different to how it is practised in Nigeria or Spain, for example. This is because religious discourses are always mediated by one's own experiences which are influenced by gender, race, class, location, family, generation, etc. With this in mind, Nabudere (pers. comm., April 2004) argues that even though Archbishop Tutu symbolized the religious community, he also infused elements of *Ubuntu*[6] into the dynamics of the TRC that were largely influenced by his own upbringing in Klerksdorp in the 1940s. He continues that given this, we should not only view the TRC as merely a ritualized space of 'confession', but rather also as a social space in which individuals through acts of 'telling' the wider community of their transgressions become simultaneously part of a process of 'taking responsibility'. This idea of 'taking responsibility with the community as witness', he maintains, is an important aspect of communal justice systems. In other words, this is part of what authors such as Mazrui (1998) and Mamdani (2001) have called 'African ways of solving problems'. In this way, Nabudere suggests that the TRC became deeply imbued with 'African-centred' concepts of building moral community. While the gendered elements of such perspectives need to be problematized, they do however point to other aspects to consider when observing truth commissions emerging on the African continent.

In addition to all these heated discussions, the question remains as to why the theatricality of the TRC was preferred over the legal process. That is, why, since the usual force of legal standing was constrained, and the power of the findings of the TRC would ultimately be more about rhetoric, sign and symbol, was the idea of telling stories favoured? Part of the answer lies in the nature of political forces at the time of the transition (Hamber and Kimble, 1999). There are other explanations though. Wilson (1995) has argued that the TRC became preferable over proceedings in courts of law because these types of commissions have proven to be more effective precisely in furnishing a dramatic medium for theatricalizing official history. Their interactive, public and visual images, inscribed with highly charged emotive language, provide a better appeal to their audience than formal and cumbersome court sessions. Further, the use of voices of those who were identified as 'perpetrators and victims'[7] of apartheid provided content for a powerful drama of history-in-the-making.

Recollections are also useful for other reasons, such as providing compelling accounts to chart people's lived experiences as life happened

around them. In other words, narrative can tell us how everyday identities become (re)formulated in various ways. In relation to violence, they provide some indications of how violent moments are enfolded into the everyday lives of people (Das, 2000). These testimonies are illuminating in that they not only tell us what happened, but also how and why it happened (Portelli, 1998; Sangster, 1998), centralizing the meaning of events.

There are two elements we should keep in mind when privileging these sorts of channels to comprehend past events. First, there are both positive and negative experiences to giving voice to a violent history. While it may provide a cathartic effect, it may also simply serve as a replay as the survivor has to call to memory a traumatic event. Second, memories are selective and comprise acts of recovery, repression and reinvention (Brink, 2000; Ndebele, 2000). And as we observe and read, we must also take cognisance of the content of the narrative and what Das and Kleinman (2001) call the processes of their formulation: how are institutions implicated in permitting or suppressing voice? What are the ways they assign a subject position from which suffering voices may be heard?

Finally, there is no doubt that the large numbers of women who testified on behalf of deceased sons, husbands and sometimes mothers, daughters and sisters at the TRC, has been a striking element. This immediately draws us to the highly gendered nature[8] of the recollection of South Africa's past during the hearings. However, this article focuses more on how women's narratives provide us with an opportunity to deepen our understandings of meanings of pain, suffering, resistance and loss experienced in South Africa's black townships[9] under apartheid. As survivors and witnesses to direct forms of terror, they allow us to glimpse at what Das (2000) calls speaking for the death of relationships and the fragmentation of selves and communities, and what these processes may entail.

After charting some of the institutional and symbolic aspects of the TRC, the article tries to locate women's stories within this already socio-politically determined space. To my surprise, what I encounter in some testimonies are 'silences speaking'. The next section of the article considers the limits of verbal language and moves on to suggest that we reinterpret the meanings of silence during violent times. It then shows the diversity of ways women used silence to formulate new meanings and enact agency in constrained surroundings.

## The Limits of Verbal Language

The TRC assumed that the world was only knowable through words, and thus the basis for beginning a process of healing South Africa's violent past would be organized through acts of testimony. Within this limited frame of

understanding past traumas, Ross (1996: 22) noted that those who could not give voice to their past, were seen as 'languageless, unable to communicate'. This should not strike us as surprising since we valorize verbal language to such an extent that we regard it as the primary means through which a person enters into the social and intellectual life of the community, and ultimately into connection with themselves. This thinking has a long tradition in western social theory and many western cultural accounts note how identity formations take place through the medium of linguistic communication. For example the works of social anthropologists Lévi-Strauss and Margaret Mead are grounded within this tradition. And more recently, poststructuralists such as Lacan have argued that we become social subjects through our subjection to the laws of language and our capacity to understand and articulate language (cited in Bakare-Yusuf, 1997). Underlying these assertions is the idea that to communicate is a 'natural' impulse for all human beings.

But what happens when those who have been denied the occasion to tell their stories, and whose bodies and cultures have been systematically violated and dehumanized, discover that there are things that remain unspeakable? In a society that regards articulation as primary to formulate meaning and structure interactions, what do social science theory and analysis have to say about these moments that some individuals and communities experience? Are these bodies simply forgotten in history? Or as Bakare-Yusuf (1997) asks, is the notion of the inexpressible then relegated to non-existence?

Scholars have shown how narratives of extreme human rights violation leave many individuals with the inability to articulate their felt pain, loss and suffering. In these instances the words we have available become inadequate to the task of conveying the systematic degradations and humiliations experienced, thus rendering victims, survivors and witnesses impotent. Reflecting on examples outside the TRC, Rosh White (1998), analysing the absences in Holocaust testimony and history, identifies the difficulties in expressing the 'unspeakable'. She describes how in the process of vocalizing traumatic events survivors expressed sensations of impotence and powerlessness; as well as feelings of having been diminished and humiliated'. While Butalia (2000) noted that when she was speaking to individuals and families about their memories of the India–Pakistan partition, speech would suddenly fail them as they encountered something too painful or frightening in their memory. This encounter with 'unspeakability' is also echoed in many analyses of slave narratives written by black women such as Toni Morrison, Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, bell hooks, Alice Walker and several others. Bakare-Yusuf (1997) argues that this 'unspeakability' is part of a struggle and a longing to speak fully about the experience of violence against the human flesh, and the near impossibility of doing so. This, she continues, confers to histories such as slave history the experience of horror, or what Gilroy has termed the 'slave sublime'. Kompte, during her testimony at the TRC, grapples with the

dilemmas of expressing her past daily traumas under apartheid, and the difficulties of ultimately explaining subjective violence coherently:

> Can one actually say it's violence . . . it is not so serious as my husband being killed in jail? One could say it's not like my having left my own country going to sit thirty years outside. So that's what I say to myself, what is this violence? How can one express it to somebody who can actually feel sympathetic? (See Kompte's testimony in Goldblatt and Meintjies, 1998: 12)

It is during such moments that we witness a complete breakdown in language, and the role of language to capture and make sense of experience fails (Rosh White, 1998). On the other hand, Cavell (1994) insists that this breakdown can be located in our failure as social scientists to formulate languages of pain through which we can gaze at, touch or become textual bodies on which this pain is written. Analysing pain and its 'unspeakability', Scarry (1985, cited in Bakare-Yusuf, 1997) provides an illuminating explanation of the relationships between terror, pain, the body and language by asking the question of how we bring extreme experiences of negation into the realm of representation. She argues that physical pain (I would add any systematic abuse to one's basic humanity) has the ability to destroy the sufferer's language, as it has no referential content in the external world. She adds that it is, then, this non-referentiality that prevents and inhibits the transformation of the felt experience of pain and suffering, ultimately leaving it to reside in the body. This is why, she explains, sufferers revert back to what she calls pre-linguistic states of crying, whimpering and inarticulate screeching, which all form part of bodily expressions that are framed as outside language. And it is from this position that Scarry argues that the body in pain cannot participate fully in civic life, as pain destroys the capacity of language making those who cannot 'speak' these stories intensely embodied subjects. However, Bakare-Yusuf (1997) maintains that analyses such as Scarry's, and I would add the TRC's, remain problematic as they continue to adhere to the Cartesian body/mind split. Rather, she asserts that we should reconceptualize pain and suffering as having their own 'morphology and [their] own logic which governs [their] expression and representation and which produce [their] own meaning' (Bakare-Yusuf, 1997: 175). In other words, pain, suffering, humiliation and joy do not necessarily only find their expression through verbal language, but a number of other representations such as song, dance and, as I argue, even via silence.

## (Re)Interpreting Silence

Within feminist and women's writings, the importance of speech for women to articulate their story, which has often been distorted or suppressed, is well established. In fact, this is what has informed the feminist project which seeks

to give those who have been previously silenced the occasion to speak and to allow their feelings, thoughts and actions to come to full view (Popular Memory Group, 1998). In these works to keep silent is seen as giving someone else the permission to inscribe and thus dominate you. For many black feminists and womanists,[10] breaking silences is viewed as a gesture of defiance that heals and makes a life of sanity, dignity and full-selfhood possible to reclaim for black women. Further, womanists such as Gqola (2001b: 20) argue that, 'central to this space (the space that women occupy linguistically) is the creation of a new language'. And Das (1996) remarks on how difficult it is to disagree that the image of empowering women to speak is indeed a heroic one. Then there are also the cathartic elements embodied in speaking what has been silenced.

Negative manifestations of silencing and silence are plentiful, and can be observed in instances such as political repression and the suffocating silences of sexual violation. In these forms of silencing coercion, physical and emotional violence are always involved. The aim of this article is not to undermine the importance of giving voice to the voiceless, exposing oppressions and sexual assaults that have been exercised particularly against women, but rather to highlight how silence within a violent everyday can also become a site for reconstituting 'new' meanings and can become a tool of enablement for those oppressed.

In a collection of essays in feminist criticism called *Listening to Silences*, a number of the authors reflect on how silence, like speech, can smother and completely obliterate, as much as it can also soothe, re-energize and communicate in various political-cultural settings. Sasaki (1998) points to the different types of silences, where for instance silence can arise out of an inability to speak a violent memory – such as the case of the 'unspeakability' of terror – but it can also be an unwillingness to speak in order to protect others; or to choose to keep a secret or pact and therefore not to submit to another. In this way silence acts as a form of resistance to the 'invasive gaze of those who have historically held the power to interpret both speech and silence of the other' (Sasaki, 1998: 122).

## Silence as Resistance and Courage

Braxton and Zuber (1994) note that Foucault observed that while silence and secrecy are important shelters for power and a source for anchoring its prohibitions, they also have the capacity to loosen its hold, thus making it possible to thwart hegemonic power itself. The culture of silence and secrets which underpinned and shaped underground political activism surfaced in the testimonies as it became apparent that many testifying were revealing long-kept secrets about clandestine meetings held with loved ones. Narratives disclose

how this conscious form of silence was imperative when one wanted to protect loved ones or fellow comrades who were hidden in the house, neighbouring towns, or had crossed borders and the state, or from vigilante groups who were hunting them down. Ma Busang shares her secret of going to see her son, an ANC activist exiled in Botswana who was later killed by the South African police. She relates:

> I arrived and I found him there. He was so fat, he had gained so much weight. He had gained so much weight. I said Pat, he said to me Mamma, you know what, when I have seen you I am so happy, we are just nearing to coming home, we will be back home soon. I said Pat, we were talking through the night. We did not sleep that night. We were there, it was in 1979, we were with him until we came back.

While Ma Miya recalls how she kept the knowledge of her son's 'disappear[ances]' to Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Australia, Botswana, Angola and East Germany from the state. In her testimony, Ma Zokwe recalls how after the disappearance of her son to join the armed wing of the ANC, Umkhonto WeSiswe,[11] across South Africa's border, she knew she could 'never tell'. Ma Mabilo recalls the day she met her son after he had disappeared for several months:

> I think my son disappeared for a year and 7 months and I saw him on the 8th month. I saw him only one day – just one day. It was that night when he came to see and I was so happy to see him – he was so handsome. But I had troubles within me – I didn't know whether this child will live for me and I didn't know what was God's plan with my son.

In another context, Montiel (1995: 3), a student activist in the Philippines protesting the regime of President Marcos during the 1960s, recalls how:

> It [was] better to be quiet; it [was] safer. Know that information leakage may endanger other lives as well. If you feel something is important, do it, do not talk about it.

Ma Busang, Ma Zokwe, Ma Miya, Ma Mabilo and Montiel's 'confessions' highlight how the complex interplay of silence and secrets that shapes the cultures of many underground liberation movements also has repercussions that impacted directly on communities, and ways the self is formulated under these contexts. And it is when we begin to highlight these other elements of silence and secrets within violating contexts that we can identify the resistance elements of silence. If, as de Certeau (1984) indicates, the tactics of resistance of oppressed individuals and groups can be located in the ways they manoeuvre constraining spaces and thus subvert the logics and practices of the established order in everyday life (in the case of apartheid, the established order of terror and violence against the black body and its social practices and institutions), then silence as withholding information to protect loved ones can be argued to constitute an act of conscious resistance by

women. Silence in such political atmospheres can also be seen as a form of recognition, rather than ignorance about one's precarious position as a mother, lover and daughter in South Africa's urban ghettos. Through acts of refusal to submit to the state's invasive harassment to reveal the whereabouts of sons and husbands, ordinary women were simultaneously voicing their awareness of their sociopolitical situations.

Furthermore, we must remember, as Feldman (1991) demonstrates in his study of political violence in Northern Ireland, that it was rather the collective experiences of daily violation of local traditions, of 'moral right', community and familial and domestic integrity by the army and police, rather than a fully worked out resistance ideology, that contributed to ordinary women's politicization. In other words, if we are to fully grapple with the politicization and responses of ordinary township women, we have to look to everyday life, practices and daily encounters with apartheid to formulate a fuller picture. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) support this view of interpreting resistance, and illustrate how James Scott, who studies the tactics of resistance of the marginalized, also found among Malay villagers patterns of dissent which were different to 'official' ones. In his study he concludes that it was rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes which often become the vehicles for the powerless to critique power. My proposal of silence as resistance thus complements this interpretation as it proposes that silence used in this manner also became a way of critiquing apartheid power. Guzana (2000) supports this view when she argues in her essay on 'Women's Silences in IsiXhosa Oral and Written Literature', that silence can be associated both with power and powerlessness.

Interestingly, this idea of silence as resistance forces us to abandon stable, continuous and coherent notions of resistance, and instead adopt explanations that take into account that fragmentation and discontinuity are also vital components to the landscape of women's resistance to oppressive forms of power. For while women inhabit(ed) and in some ways supported certain apartheid structures that oppressed them, this did not cancel the fact that they were simultaneously engaged in processes of resisting them. In other words, women show us how the very domains and institutions that act to oppress them can also become the very sites from which they remap enabling forms of power for themselves. At this point we encounter the paradoxical nature of resistance where it simultaneously incorporates both tacit support and rejection for various power forms. McNay (2000) supports efforts to locate women in these ways as they add to what she asserts are much needed explanations of agency which incorporate ideas that when confronted with difference and paradox, individuals' processes of reflection and action may involve accommodation or adaptations as much as denial. Such conceptualizations, she continues, must also account for living through embodied potentialities and the anticipatory aspects inherent within subjectivity. This opens up the

space to ask afresh questions such as what does it mean for ordinary women to author a resistance discourse in a context such as apartheid, where at every turn their sense of self is being actively diminished by the state?

However, other testimonies show us how this need to keep secrets and not break silences also powerfully shaped the intimate sphere transforming familial and marital relationships. Ross (1996: 19) cites and contrasts the examples of Ma Mfethi and Govan Mbeki. Ma Mfethi remarks:

> We are not allowed to ask our husbands about politics in my culture.

While Mbeki complained that:

> After work we went into the townships to educate. The police were looking for meetings. So when you left you did not tell your wife where you were going, and when you returned, at twelve or one in the morning, they were asleep and your food was on the stove. . . . Women created problems for the liberation movement because they always wanted to know.

Such cases highlight how silence was then also used to reproduce culturally gendered taboos, and thus reinforce stereotypes of who must be the bearer of 'important' and 'political' information.

## Silence as Illusion of Stability

Das (2000) suggests that the project of (re)creating the 'normal', particularly within families and communities experiencing violence, has largely been women's work and is enacted in the realm of the everyday. In an earlier study, 'Black Women's Identities' (Motsemme, 2003), I have also emphasized that ordinary women's narratives of the past appeal that we actively acknowledge the agency they enact in their work of harnessing positive social and cultural meanings that are necessary for the delicate maintenance and repair of relationships across generations; and of refiguring the home as a place of safety for children in the face of open violence. In addition, Ramphele (2000) has also pointed out in her work with township women the ways they have precariously participated in sustaining some elements of the patriarchal structure to ensure the continuity of morally sustainable communities. She argues that poor women have negotiated this uncertain terrain by carefully,

> . . . tread[ing] a fine line between affirming the manhood of their men-folk and supporting themselves and their children. The myth of the man as supporter, protector, provider and decision-maker was carefully nurtured in an attempt to protect the family and community from moral/ethical breakdown. (Ramphele, 2000: 115)

I argue that demonstrations of this 'women's work' can be located in some testimonies where silence may have been used by mothers to create illusions of stability, of constancy and of matter-of-factness particularly for their

children to maintain some kind of moral order in their homes. Many of us who grew up during the years of the State of Emergency in the 1980s in urban ghettos are familiar with this form of shielding silence by mothers to carve an imaginary calmness amid constant violence. For example, gun shots and running footsteps just outside one's yard would awaken households in the quiet of the night. However, when families woke up in the morning, it was life as usual – porridge to be prepared for breakfast; uniforms to be ironed; baths to be timed; and other last-minute preparations for school and work. There might be a vague, or more commonly not a single utterance about what everyone had witnessed and heard during the night. It is, then, true that silence can be as misleading as words.

This silence which women's narratives echo is one which attempts to compensate for the loss of innocence for children who lived in a violent everyday in which women had, and continue to have, little power to change. Rosh White (1998) has argued that silence can after all become a survival strategy in an uncaring world for those whose agency has been systematically undermined, such as the case of apartheid. And we are all aware of how women have used the power of silence to protect themselves (Maduna, 2002). In addition, Valentine (2000), in his ethnography of violence in Sri Lanka, reminds us that the capacity and ability to survive in zones of oppression give life to subjectivities rooted in the mastery to hide and not be seen, rather than optimal clarity. In other words, silence and invisibility become strategies that function to both deny and acknowledge the matter of living with everyday acts of violence. Silence viewed in this way need not mean a state of unawareness about one's circumstances, but simply another avenue to other facets about one's existence.

Ma Mabilo's testimony reflects on the use of silence in her home, as a way to perhaps create a mother–son relationship shaped by things other than the violence they both knew and shared. In telling the story of her activist son, whom state agents killed, she remembers:

> This child was not at home because they – they had been arrested before. I still remember it was 1985, and five of them were arrested and they were – they stayed in jail for 25 days. And I went to ask them why did they arrest the children. They said to me we will let them free on a certain date and I went back to work. When I came back from work that day, my child was at home and I didn't say anything.

Later, she relates when she is told about her son's death:

> I stayed like that and the police van was parked at my gate at night and my son was at the mortuary. I said to the children in the house: Let's go to sleep, we'll see what tomorrow brings.

The use of silence to create a sense of the normal amid chaos, particularly for children, also reveals to us women's struggles to protect their private

spaces from polluting state/outside claims. Ironically, this women's work of projecting protective silence recognizes the burdens of embodied suffering that shaped motherhood for those living in townships. In other words, it is part of a whole range of veiled speech that articulates women's demands for safer living for their families and communities in their lives. At the same time, we have to take into account that these silences carry simultaneously with them denial and a refusal to confront one's overwhelming material and political lived conditions.

Finally, this silence also served as a form of connectedness between mothers, families and neighbours within the communities they shared. Since these traumas constituted a collective experience for many in townships, this silence, which seeks to 'normalize', was then shared, relational and interactive forming invisible links and bonds in communities. In fact, Pandey (1995), researching Indian communities which have been traumatized by recent violence, suggests that we read 'narratives of violence' as 'narratives of community'. He argues that this is because 'community' and 'violence' constitute each other. Understood in this way, these silences not only uncover elements of individuals' lives, but also the collective social order. Tracing these silences in women's narratives ironically highlights what has been textually and politically repressed. These repressed utterances then produce a counter-memory vis-à-vis official ones.

However, as much as silence may have become a way to communicate a shared experience of constant violence, it was also used as a tool to mark and alienate those who were perceived as dangerous to one's sense of safety. Through the experiences of those who became isolated, we witness the extent that forces such as the state and vigilante groups were violating networks of care, trust and communal solidarity that continued to operate in urban townships. In these narratives we observe via individuals' lived experiences what they perceive as the imminent breakdown of a sense of community they once knew. This is part of what Das (2000) refers to as women's narratives speaking for the 'death of relationships' and ways of 'being-with-others'. These themes of isolation and community breakdown reverberate in Ma Masote's testimony when she relates the story of how, as the daughter of a well-known activist, life changed for her in her neighbourhood:

> I come to my family's breaking. The main thing was society. I would also say this communal living; I could go to the granny next door, I could go to Memama. And I knew I would find help. If there was no milk at home, it was easy for us to go and ask for it. Or to just visit and play next door. I knew I'd come back healthy and well and well fed. My mother would go to work and she knew her children are safe. Our keys, our door key, would stay at the third house from your house. Next time the next time. Nobody would come and steal. Everybody would look after it. But all that crumbled, because the special branch had to come and tell people; these are terrorists. You dare be seen associated. And then my family, that is my whole family . . . my extended family they

> started fearing us. My brother went into exile. There was loneliness. There was non-stop harassment of the special branch. There was a series of imprisonments.

While it is clear that violence fragments communities, the question remains of how people come to negotiate their 'sense of community' when their neighbourhoods are characterized by fear, secrets and mistrust, and the community streets become killing fields. This diminished sense of 'community as one knows it' may become evident in simple things like children being told by adults not play with 'others' in the township; when households can no longer talk to one another for fear of being associated and thus labelled (for instance, ANC, Inkatha, informer) and possibly attacked; when people become afraid to share general public spaces such as soccer fields, and the main function of a community hall becomes to hold funeral services. In many South African townships the everyday then became a site that was infused with a potential for random acts of violence, which simultaneously reconfigured community networks and interactions. This is made poignant in Ma Ndlovu's recollection, whose son was shot dead and her house burned down because her son was a friend of Ketisi, a neighbour's son who had been accused of being an Inkatha member:

> And I also heard that when Ketisi gets killed his friends also has to be killed. I never thought really, to tell the truth, that I will also be affected by this. Afterwards I heard that my children also had to be killed because I am a neighbour of Ketisi's. I heard that people had been shot and I heard also that – I was surprised because what I knew is that Ketisi was at the hospital. The case went on and on. I really don't know how far the evidence went. When they arrested they also came to kidnap my children and they were taken to the civic of Zone 12 to tell the truth because if they don't they will burn my children, all of them, because we were their neighbours and were eventually affected by that. I said I don't know anything, I really don't know anything but God knows everything. They said I am a liar, I know so much, yet I didn't know everything.

Later, she remembers:

> . . . when we got home people were so scared of us as if we were animals, as if we kill, as if we are killers that's how they were scared of us, avoiding us. I never went to Madala.

What kinds of moral communities are carved out by members when the taken-for-granted notions binding community coexistence as they once remembered are erased by moments of violence?

## Silence as a Site for Coping and the Reconstitution of Self

In a context where the everyday becomes an ongoing site of violence, where did women find the agency to go on? Explanations that posit that women

endured in the midst of daily family, community and state violence because they were resilient, 'strong' or were 'rocks' have always seemed inadequate to me. hooks (1993: 70) cautions us against these simplistic accounts of black women's lives and notes how they are built on the assumption that 'we are somehow earthy mother goddess who has built-in capacities to deal with all manner of hardships without breaking down, physically or mentally'. It is through the perpetuation of such myths that our insights of women's notion of pain, suffering, humiliation and joy remain limited within the social sciences.

However, before we discuss how moments of reflective silence became potential spaces to reconstitute oneself, there is another element we must briefly consider. This is the tool of terror utilized by both the state and vigilante groups to violate the homes of 'problematic' township residents. Importantly, violation into the sanctuary space of home left many women feeling inadequate, as they felt they had failed to protect loved ones (Das, 1990; Mehta and Chatterji, 2001; Ross, 1996; Motsemme, 2003). Feldman (1991) has argued that the entrance of violence into the home means that political action is everywhere and no one can ever relax, away from the intrusion of the state. He adds that this entrance of state abuse into private space also becomes a way and means that the state uses to disrupt the moral order of families and communities. It is vital to emphasize this intrusion into the home, as home constitutes one of the important social spaces in which women's identities are shaped and enacted. However, we should not take this to mean that women then 'naturally' belong to the domestic. Rather, it draws to our attention the ways women may use domesticity to map out the insertion of extreme violence into their daily lives (Ross, 1996). Feelings of inadequacy that surface when the boundaries of home have been forcibly transgressed reflect the loss of control in their lives. This is because domesticity, which usually marks a relatively ordered and predictable world, is shattered (Das, 1990; Ross, 1996), causing violent reconfigurations of duties and emotional work in the home for women.

Lacking the sanctuary and privacy of home, I argue that reflective silence and prayer[12] became an alternative sanctuary for these women both to retreat to and reclaim their sense of self. This retreat into one's inner world could, then, be viewed as opening up the possibilities for women to inhabit a different imaginary, where, as Palumbo-Liu (1996) suggests, the invention of the self can go beyond the limits of available oppressive representations. These moments of retreat into silence and prayer also then give us a glimpse into women's speeches of desire (Sitas, 2004) and betrayals of their full humanity under apartheid. This is because they tap primarily into factors beyond the present conditions of existence. Here we encounter an inner world governed by the imagination[13] and a language that refuses to be confined to narrow racist and sexist forms of validation. Within this

imaginative space different validation processes are at play, which allow women to reimagine, refashion and thus accrue the necessary psychic resources to act in an openly unjust social world. This invisible work by women constitutes an important element of coping within a context where it was/is 'terror as usual' (Taussig, 1987).

Castoriadis (1997) has argued that via the imagination social narratives can be reconfigured as new endings are imagined for old stories in response to emergent dilemmas, hopes as well as desires. Such imaginative reconfigurations, he continues, can in moments of historical upheaval have far-reaching political and social repercussions when they result in the reformulation of cultural narratives, the emergence of new normative ideals and the proposal of alternative ways of organizing social relations. Given these insights, I suggest that this invisible work of the imagination can thus be viewed as an act of women's agency which embodies a potentiality to transform social action. This of course challenges notions of agency as merely social and relational. It also questions the idea that the psychological context of action should not be included in the analyses of agentic processes (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

Ma Ngewu recalls how she sustained personhood amid constant violation, when she recalls how police, even after they had killed her son,

> . . . would come into our house, and even ask why I would light a candle. I said I cannot live without [lighting] my candle . . . because I'm always in prayer. This one policeman said, he also believed in prayer.

However, we should not forget that the language of grief is usually found in silence. Women like Ma Ngewu who are surrounded by grief and loss also learn the nuances of this language and over the years may come to embody it in their dark and rounded frames (Cheung, 1994). These are the women we have seen walking along South Africa's streets who are cloaked in a silence that is grief and loss. For some of these women, who have repeatedly experienced loss, 'grief' and 'suffering' become linked and associated with 'being woman'.

The night of her son's death Ma Ngewu remembers waking up and feeling strange, with a strong intuition that her son was in danger. She recalls being alone and in silence:

> I couldn't sleep. All lights were off and I asked myself I didn't know what was happening. I said whose child is being killed at this moment, I was alone outside asking myself this question. I was troubled and I started suspecting something. God was telling me – God was sending me a message that this thing is happening to you. I [indistinct] I [indistinct] down at my door and I prayed.

But what happens when these strategies of coping and reinvention fail? Do women fall into depression from which they cannot extract themselves? Who identifies these moments of pain reflected so well in the Zulu phrase

*kusabuhlungu* – it still hurts? What support networks exist for poor women during these moments? We have yet to provide the academic research that comprehensively delves into the topics of loss, suffering and depression in ordinary township women's lives.

## Conclusion

The article has been an exploration of women's experiences of constant violations under apartheid, and how they attempt to transcend these felt moments of violence. Through what I call 'languages of grief and pain', I propose that we use the silences embodied and narrated at the TRC as a means to further our understanding of township women's subjectivities and agency during apartheid. By demonstrating ways in which silence can also be viewed as 'present' and 'speaking', rather than 'absent' and 'voiceless', the article shows how silence can in fact become a site for creating new meanings and forms of enablement for those at the margins. By adjusting our conceptual lenses and exploring the range of silences women draw our attention to in their accounts of experiencing violence, we are also compelled to include the contradictory and imaginative aspects of agency. Rethinking ideas around resistance, pain, suffering and joy in women's lives can only lead us back to the texture of women's conditions of existence and how they endured during the horror that was apartheid. The recollections, which also detail self, family and community fragmentation, also invite us to think through how the effect of repressive states insinuates itself into people's daily lives. Finally, the article suggests at various points how through destabilizing the boundaries of silence and speech, we can expand our views (what we see) and senses (what we feel) of women's experiences of violence during regimes of terror.

> Why did the police shoot our children? With no – for no apparent reason. What did our children do that they *deserved death?* (Ma Mxinwa; emphasis in original)

## Notes

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1 This is the title of Mungoshi's Shona novel, which in English translates as 'Does Silence Not Speak?'.
2 There is now extensive literature detailing the 'transfer to power' in South Africa: see inter alia Friedman (1993), Friedman and Atkinson (1994) and Giliomee et al. (1994).
3 For a more extended discussion on the performance and ritual elements of the TRC, see Motsemme and Ratele (2002).
4 Bozzoli (1998) has noted how this religious discourse was complemented by what she calls proto-religious forms which were recreated in community halls and churches in which most hearings took place. In one of the hearings held in Alexandra township she describes the following setting:

> . . . large community halls [were transformed into a proto-religious setting] where an elevated platform at which the four commissioners sat in a row. The tables were covered in immaculate white cloth, flowers were displayed, and the TRC's own banner and symbols of peace and reconciliation were displayed. Each session opened with a prayer conducted by a figure from the community who would then light a candle symbolising the bringing of truth. (Bozzoli, 1998: 170)

5 Archbishop Tutu was initially trained as a teacher and later took up studies in theology. He was the first black general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, and holds a number of honorary doctorates from leading universities. Some of his works include: *Hope and Suffering: Sermons and Speeches* (1983) and *The Rainbow People of God: The Making of a Peaceful Revolution* (1995). The irony of the TRC's appropriation of religious symbols was that the church itself lacked sufficient moral ground. It has been well documented how various religious institutions, particularly the Dutch Reformed Church, were implicitly and explicitly involved in the carrying out of racist policies and practices (Dubow, 1995). For example, a number of Afrikaans churches disassociated themselves from the South African Council of Churches as a result of their uncompromising stand against apartheid. Therefore, under apartheid, religion and politics became closely intertwined and almost impossible to separate.
6 *Ubuntu* refers to one's consciousness of being human and part of a wider human community. More specifically it is an African principle meaning humanness in community life (Nabudere, 2003).
7 The persistent framing of the TRC as an encounter between 'victims and perpetrators' (Promotion of the National and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995) has been criticized for obscuring several issues. First, in viewing apartheid via such a narrow lens it allowed the 'truth' to be turned into the experiences of a tiny minority of political activists on the one hand, and state agents on the other. This oversimplification masks the totality of South Africa's experience within apartheid. But as participants at the University of Cape Town Public Discussions in 1997 and 1998 noted, there existed an irony in the way 'victims' were defined. The definition meant that the vast majority of South Africans were excluded, turning them into spectators of the TRC. Second, the victim–perpetrator dichotomy encourages a focus on black–white relations, neglecting the acute conflicts within the deeply fragmented Black communities (Pakendorf, 1999). In other words the Commission focused on 'vertical violence' (between civilians and

security forces) rather than 'horizontal violence' (between neighbours, particularly within black communities where the 'informer' discourse was deeply divisive). In a US conference in 1998, Hamber stressed that there was a need to have dealt with both forms of violence (Hamber and Kimble, 1999). This black–white focus also masks the hierarchical privileging between whites, Indians, 'coloureds' and blacks, which was an important shaping element of apartheid. Third, Hamber and Kimble (1999) further critique the narrow interpretation of 'victim', as it failed to identify women as victims, even though they bore the brunt of the oppression through forced removals, pass arrests and other acts of systematic apartheid violence. Mamdani (University of Cape Town Public Discussion, 1998: 12) asks: 'In marginalizing the victimhood of the majority has the TRC not obscured the truth as the majority experienced it?'. Also see Mamdani (2000).

8 In the TRC this was comprised of the voices of the victims, what Krog (1998) labels the first narrative, and the 'perpetrators'' utterances, the second narrative. As the hearings continued, the former evolved as a feminized language of pain, humiliation and bitterness, while the latter remained the language of violence. The 'perpetrators' narrative' evoked powerful visual imagery where white 'perpetrators' related stories of disembodying black bodies, organizing death squads, corruption and organized illegal activities (Pauw, 1997).

9 There are several books written on South Africa's townships; see, for example, Carr (1990), Lewis (1969) and Smith (2001).

10 See for example the works of bell hooks; Audre Lorde; Yvette Abrahams; Patricia Collins-Hill; Toni Morrison; Desiree Lewis; Amina Mama; Yvonne Vera; Pumla Gqola; Nnaemeka Obioma; Oyerunke Oyewumi; Boyce Davies; Ntozake Shange; Gail Smith, as well as many others.

11 A Zulu phrase which in English translates as 'Spear of the Nation'.

12 Yvette Abrahams (2000) noted the contradictory role of the church in women's lives, where it is born out of domination but provides an affirming space in their lives. In addition, I have argued in a chapter in *Social Psychology: Identities and Relationships* (Motsemme, 2003) that religious experience also provided a powerful alternative imaginary space of spiritual time that women could draw on. This, I maintain, becomes an important psychic space for oppressed women to negotiate, attempt to rehabilitate and make sense of their traumatizing present lives. It is also important to highlight the redemptive aspects of the Bible embodied in the message 'we will overcome', which was especially appealing to marginalized women (Nabudere, pers. comm., UNISA, Tshwane, 2 April 2004).

13 Ricoeur (1991) describes imagination as the free play of possibilities in a state of non-involvement with respect to the world of perception or of action.

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