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A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF SILENCE AS TRAUMATIC DISCOURSE IN SHELAGH STEPHENSON'S FIVE KINDS OF SILENCE

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ABSTRACT

Silence is a potent but neglected force in contemporary abuse drama. In Shelagh Stephenson's Five Kinds of Silence (1996; staged 2000), speech, pause, and the unsaid become fields where power is exercised, trauma is stored, and the self is shaped. This study traces the interplay of coercive control, traumatic repression, and the recovery of voice. It asks how silence serves patriarchal authority and carries the weight of abuse. Using communication theory, Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and feminist dramatic criticism, the study offers a close reading of selected scenes of interrogation, memory, and therapy involving Billy, Mary, Susan, and Janet. Five forms of silence are identified: oppressive, repressive, defensive, reflective, and emotional. The analysis shows that character's live silence as imposed muteness, internalised denial, and self-protective withdrawal. Reflective silence remains ambiguous: it is both a mark of trauma and a fragile opening toward testimony. These patterns reorder household communication, entrench male authority, and persist in memory and affect long after Billy's death. The study treats silence as traumatic discourse in contemporary drama. It advances a Differentiated Model of Traumatic Silence to account for these dynamics and calls for closer critical attention to the unspoken channels through which abuse is communicated.

Keywords: Coercive Control; Domestic Abuse; Feminist Drama; Nonverbal Communication; Psychoanalytic Criticism; Shelagh Stephenson; Silence; Trauma

1. INTRODUCTION

Silence is often treated as the absence of speech. In abuse drama, it is better understood as a form of speech in its own right. What is not said, how long a pause lasts, and who is allowed to remain silent all carry meaning. In Shelagh Stephenson's *Five Kinds of Silence* (1996; staged 2000), silence operates as a central medium through which coercive control is exercised, trauma is encoded, and subjectivity is negotiated.

The play dramatises the aftermath of Billy's death as his wife Mary and daughters Susan and Janet reconstruct the past in therapy and in memory. Their testimonies are marked by gaps, hesitations, and refusals to speak. These are not mere failures of language. They are structured responses to a household in which speaking carried risk and silence became a strategy for survival. Silence in the play is therefore both a symptom of abuse and a social practice that sustains patriarchal authority.

Existing scholarship on Stephenson's work has foregrounded themes of domestic violence, memory, and gendered power. Less attention has been paid to silence as a differentiated communicative resource with distinct functions and effects. This study addresses that gap. It

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asks how silence works in Five Kinds of Silence as a mechanism of control, a carrier of trauma, and a potential site of resistance and recovery.

Drawing on communication theory, Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and feminist dramatic criticism, the analysis identifies five modalities of silence, which are oppressive, repressive, defensive, reflective, and emotional silence, and traces their operation across key scenes of interrogation, recollection, and therapeutic exchange. In doing so, the study advances a Differentiated Model of Traumatic Silence (DMTS) and argues for closer critical attention to the unspoken registers through which abuse is communicated in contemporary drama.

The central claim of this study is that, in Stephenson's drama, silence is a differentiated communicative system through which private violence is normalised, traumatic experience is encoded, and subjectivity is negotiated under patriarchal domination. Silence is not one thing but many. Foucault's observation that there is "not one but many silences," each functioning "alongside the things said ... within over-all strategies" of power,[1(p27)] provides the theoretical warrant for treating the play's silences as a plural and strategic field rather than a uniform absence. The title of Stephenson's play is, in this sense, programmatic. It announces silence itself as the object of dramatic analysis.

This study pursues three related questions. First, how is silence dramatised as a mode of coercion within the family? Second, how does silence register the psychic effects of abuse on Mary, Susan, and Janet? Third, how do different forms of silence contribute to the play's movement from domination toward partial articulation and tentative recovery? These questions extend the most productive insight available in existing readings, namely that silence in the play is multiple rather than singular, into a systematic analytic framework comprising oppressive, repressive, defensive, reflective, and emotional silence[2(pp12–16,56)].

The study draws on an interdisciplinary framework that combines communication theory, psychoanalytic criticism, trauma studies, and feminist analysis. Communication theory makes it possible to treat silence as communicative rather than empty[3–5]. Freudian and trauma-oriented concepts, including repression, the internalised superego, displacement, defence, and emotional numbing, help to explain why traumatic experience becomes difficult to narrate and why domination persists after the abuser is dead[6–8]. Feminist and critical approaches clarify that silence is not merely personal but structurally produced within relations of gendered power[9,10]. Read together, these lenses allow silence in the play to be analysed simultaneously as discursive, psychic, and political.

Methodologically, the study uses qualitative textual analysis through close reading of selected scenes, attending to speech patterns, pauses, interruptions, fragmented utterances, and explicit references to silence in the dialogue. This approach is appropriate because the significance of silence shifts across contexts. In one exchange it signals submission, in another self-protection, and in another the hesitant beginnings of testimony. The study argues that Five Kinds of Silence transforms silence into a primary dramaturgical language of trauma, one that both sustains domination and marks the difficult threshold of survival.

Silence has long been recognised as a meaningful element of human communication. In linguistic and pragmatic studies, silence is not merely the absence of speech but a structured resource that conveys attitude, power, and social relation[11,12]. In dramatic texts, silence operates through pause, ellipsis, and withheld speech to shape meaning and audience interpretation[13]. Feminist critics have extended this insight to show how silence in women's writing and performance often encodes resistance, constraint, or both.

Trauma studies emphasise the difficulty of representing extreme experience in language. Freud's early work on repression and the return of the repressed laid the foundation for understanding how traumatic memory resists straightforward narration. Contemporary trauma

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theorists argue that trauma disrupts linear narrative and produces gaps, repetitions, and silences in testimony[7]. In literary and dramatic contexts, these disruptions appear as fragmented speech, hesitant narration, and strategic withholding[14].

Feminist dramatic criticism has examined how domestic abuse is staged through both speech and silence. Scholars note that abusive power often operates by controlling who may speak, when, and under what conditions. In contemporary British drama, playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Debbie Tucker Green, and Shelagh Stephenson have used silence to represent the psychological effects of coercive control. Stephenson's Five Kinds of Silence, in particular, dramatises how silence functions within the family as both a tool of oppression and a means of survival.

While existing work has addressed themes of violence, memory, and gender in Stephenson's play, few studies have analysed silence as a differentiated communicative phenomenon with distinct modalities and effects. This study builds on the above traditions to propose a more fine-grained account of how silence operates as traumatic discourse in contemporary drama.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study brings together four interlocking perspectives: communication theory, Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and feminist critical discourse analysis. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual tools needed to treat silence in Five Kinds of Silence as a differentiated communicative system rather than a uniform absence. Each perspective contributes a distinct layer of explanation, and together they support the central claim that silence in Stephenson's drama is a medium through which private violence is normalised, traumatic experience is encoded, and subjectivity is negotiated under patriarchal domination.

2.1. Communication Theory: Silence as Signifying Practice

Communication theory provides the foundation for treating silence as meaningful rather than empty. Classical process models describe communication as the movement of a message from source through channel to receiver, where meaning depends on interpretation rather than mere transmission[3,15]. In these models, the focus is on how messages are encoded, transmitted, and decoded, and on the potential for noise or distortion to interfere with meaning. Silence, in this early view, might be treated as a form of noise or as a breakdown in the channel.

Later accounts complicate this picture by emphasising feedback, context, and the active co-construction of meaning. These models insist that communication integrates verbal and nonverbal channels, and that meaning emerges through interaction rather than simple transmission[4,16]. Crucially, nonverbal signals frequently carry deeper emotional meaning than spoken words[5(p45)]. A glance, a posture, or a pause can communicate more than a sentence. This expanded model matters for dramatic analysis because it allows silence, including pauses, ellipses, gesture, and the inability to speak, to be read as meaningful discourse rather than communicative failure.

Within this framework, silence is a contextual and relational act. Once regarded as the simple negation of speech, silence is now theorised as an intentional communicative resource that may signify deference, dissent, respect, grief, repression, or trauma depending on the situation[11,17]. Ephratt's pragmatic account is especially useful here. She distinguishes "eloquent silence," a means deliberately chosen for verbal communication, from mere pausing, and maps silence onto the functions of language so that it can be expressive, regulative, and informative at once[2,18]. Pragmatic and semiotic approaches further stress that silence is context-dependent and capable of generating symbolic meaning within an exchange[12,19]. In Five Kinds of Silence, this

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variability is decisive, because the play presents silence not as a uniform absence but as a differentiated set of responses shaped by violence, hierarchy, and memory.

2.2. Psychoanalysis: Repression, Defence, and the Internalised Superego

Freudian psychoanalysis supplies the vocabulary for understanding why traumatic experience becomes difficult to narrate and why domination persists after the abuser is dead. Freud's structural model distinguishes the id, the reservoir of primitive drives; the ego, which mediates between drive and reality; and the superego, the internalised agency of authority and moral prohibition[6(pp19–29)]. The id operates according to the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification. The ego operates according to the reality principle, negotiating between desire and external constraint. The superego internalises social and parental authority, enforcing moral norms through guilt and shame.

Billy's tyranny can be read as the dominance of an unregulated id, aggression and the will to control unmediated by ego or restrained by superego. His violence is impulsive, excessive, and indifferent to consequence. At the same time, his cruelty toward Mary may involve displacement, the redirection of internal frustration onto a substitutable target. Unable or unwilling to confront the sources of his own rage, Billy turns his aggression outward onto those who are vulnerable and dependent.

For the women and children, the salient mechanism is repression, the unconscious exclusion from awareness of experiences too threatening to confront[20(p147)]. Repression is not a simple forgetting. It is an active psychic process that keeps traumatic material out of conscious awareness while allowing it to return in distorted forms, such as dreams, slips, or somatic symptoms. Repression is reinforced by an internalised superego shaped by an abusive figure, so that the victims police themselves even in Billy's absence. External prohibition becomes an interior law. The women monitor their own speech, movement, and desire, anticipating punishment even when no one is watching.

Defence mechanisms such as denial and rationalisation allow the ego to manage intolerable knowledge by distorting or minimising it, at the cost of distorting reality and foreclosing the processing of trauma[6(pp11–16)]. Denial refuses to acknowledge what has happened. Rationalisation offers plausible but false explanations for behaviour. Both mechanisms protect the psyche from overwhelm, but they also prevent the integration of traumatic experience into coherent memory. Silence, on this account, is the audible or inaudible sign of an interior economy in which drive, prohibition, and defence are continuously negotiated. The play's recurrent images of "rules," "lists," and forbidden noise dramatise precisely this conversion of coercive authority into psychic structure.

2.3. Trauma Theory: Fragmented Memory and the Labour of Testimony

Trauma theory explains why catastrophic experience resists straightforward narration and why silence often becomes the primary medium through which trauma is expressed. Cathy Caruth argues that the traumatic event is not fully assimilated as it occurs and therefore returns belatedly, in fragments, rather than as coherent narrative[7(p4)]. The survivor does not experience the event as a complete story at the time it happens. Instead, the event is registered as shock, and its meaning emerges only later, through repetition and return. This belatedness produces the characteristic textures of trauma narration: gaps, repetitions, and sudden intrusions of memory.

Herman's clinical account identifies constriction, including numbing, emotional flatness, and the narrowing of affect, as a core response through which survivors render unbearable experience survivable[8(pp33,47)]. Constriction is a protective strategy. By narrowing the range of feeling, the survivor reduces the intensity of pain. But this strategy also produces the emotional

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distance and detachment that characterise many trauma narratives. Both frameworks predict the textures that dominate Stephenson's dialogue, including ellipsis, fracture, belated recollection, and the flat delivery of shocking facts. Trauma, in other words, frequently speaks as silence, or as speech emptied of its expected affect.

At the same time, trauma theory locates in silence the precondition of recovery. For Felman and Laub, testimony is a process of bearing witness in which the survivor, with a listener, begins to reconstitute experience that had remained unspoken. The movement from muteness to speech is itself therapeutic and perilous[14(pp57–61)]. Testimony requires a listener who can hold the weight of what is being said without turning away. It also requires the survivor to risk re-experiencing pain in order to integrate it into memory. This double valence, silence as wound and as threshold, is essential to reading the play's interrogation and therapy scenes, in which pauses and hesitations are not empty but are the labour of approaching what could not previously be said.

2.4. Feminist and Critical Discourse Approaches: Silence as Gendered Power

Feminist and critical-discourse perspectives situate silence within structures of gendered power. Foucault's account of silence as an element functioning "alongside the things said ... within over-all strategies" reframes muteness as a tactic of power rather than its limit, determining whose voices are authorised and whose are suppressed[1(p27)]. Power does not only operate through speech. It also operates through the regulation of speech, through the silencing of certain voices and the amplification of others. Silence, in this view, is not the absence of power but one of its instruments.

Feminist theatre criticism extends this insight, showing that women's silence in drama frequently figures marginalisation, enforced powerlessness, and restricted agency, and that patriarchal systems naturalise such silence by framing domestic abuse as a private matter[9(pp45,77)]. When abuse is treated as a domestic issue rather than a public crime, it is removed from the realm of political scrutiny and legal intervention. The silence of the home becomes a shield for violence. Critical discourse studies similarly treat silence as structurally produced through social and institutional relations rather than as accidental[10(p211)]. Silence is not simply chosen. It is shaped by the constraints of context, role, and power.

Dramatic theory provides the final strand. Pinter's influential reflection on theatrical language holds that what is unspoken may communicate more powerfully than dialogue, since speech is often "a stratagem to cover nakedness" and silence carries the menace and tension beneath it[13(ppix–xiv)]. In Pinter's plays, silence is a source of threat and uncertainty. Esslin similarly argues that silence is a dramaturgical sign that heightens tension, reveals subtext, and compels the audience to interpret meaning beyond words[21(pp84–88)]. Silence in this tradition is not empty space. It is charged with meaning and expectation.

Stephenson inherits this tradition and turns it to feminist ends. She deploys silence not as Pinterian political menace but as the medium of domestic terror and survivable trauma. In Five Kinds of Silence, silence is not only a sign of threat. It is also a sign of survival, a way of enduring what cannot be spoken, and a fragile threshold toward testimony.

These four perspectives allow silence in *Five Kinds of Silence* to be analysed simultaneously as discursive, psychic, and political. Communication theory establishes silence as a signifying practice. Psychoanalysis explains why traumatic experience is repressed and why domination is internalised. Trauma theory accounts for the fragmented, belated, and constricted forms of narration that characterise the play's dialogue. Feminist and critical discourse approaches locate these dynamics within gendered structures of power and theatrical tradition.

This integrated framework underpins the five-part typology of silence used in the analysis: oppressive, repressive, defensive, reflective, and emotional silence[2(pp12–16,56)]. It also supports

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the central claim of this study, namely that silence in Stephenson's drama is a differentiated communicative system through which private violence is normalised, traumatic experience is encoded, and subjectivity is negotiated under patriarchal domination. The framework thus provides the conceptual foundation for the Differentiated Model of Traumatic Silence (DMTS) proposed in this study, a model that seeks to theorise the multiple functions of silence in abuse drama with greater precision than previous accounts have allowed.

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study uses qualitative textual analysis through close reading of selected scenes from Shelagh Stephenson's Five Kinds of Silence. The aim is to trace how different forms of silence operate as communicative, psychic, and political resources within the play. The analysis is guided by the five-part typology of silence introduced in the Introduction: oppressive, repressive, defensive, reflective, and emotional silence[2(pp12–16,56)]. This typology allows the study to move beyond generalised claims about "silence" and to specify how particular silences function in particular dramatic contexts.

Scenes were selected purposively to capture moments in which silence is dramaturgically salient. Three broad scene types were targeted: interrogation scenes in which Billy questions or disciplines family members, recollection scenes in which Mary, Susan, and Janet reconstruct past events, and therapeutic exchange scenes in which the women speak with Janet's therapist. These scene types were chosen because they foreground different functions of silence, from coercive enforcement to hesitant testimony.

Within each scene type, specific passages were identified on the basis of explicit textual markers of silence. These markers include stage directions indicating pause or silence, fragmented or interrupted utterances, repeated references to "rules," "lists," or forbidden noise, and moments in which characters refuse or fail to speak. For example, Billy's enforcement of household "rules" about noise and movement, Mary's hesitant responses when questioned about past violence, and Janet's halting narration in therapy all provide clear instances where silence is scripted as meaningful. This approach ensures that the analysis attends to silence as it is written and performed, rather than treating it as an abstract theme.

The final sample comprises approximately eight to ten key passages distributed across the three scene types. This number is sufficient to capture the range of silences in the play while allowing for detailed, line-by-line analysis. Passages were transcribed with their stage directions and contextual notes to preserve the dramatic texture of each exchange.

Each selected passage was subjected to close textual and psychoanalytic reading. The procedure involved three sequential steps.

First, verbal and nonverbal features were catalogued. This included pauses, ellipses, interruptions, changes in tone, repetitions, and explicit mentions of silence or speaking. Particular attention was paid to moments where speech breaks off, where characters talk around a subject without naming it, or where stage directions indicate a significant pause. These features were treated as data rather than as decorative elements of the text.

Second, these features were coded according to the five modalities of silence. A single passage could contain more than one modality, and shifts within a scene were noted. For instance, a moment of oppressive silence, where Billy enforces muteness through threat, might be followed by defensive silence, where Mary withholds information to protect herself or her daughters. Repressive silence was identified where characters seem unable or unwilling to recall specific events, even when prompted. Reflective silence was coded where pauses appear to signal memory work or processing, and emotional silence where affect is flattened or absent despite the gravity of what is being discussed.

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Third, coded instances were interpreted through the interdisciplinary framework outlined in the Introduction and elaborated in the Theoretical Framework. This involved drawing on communication theory to understand silence as signifying practice[3–5], Freudian psychoanalysis to explain repression and internalised authority[6,20], trauma theory to account for fragmented narration and emotional numbing[7,8,14], and feminist and critical discourse approaches to locate these dynamics within gendered structures of power[1,9,10].

This method allows silence to be analysed simultaneously as discursive practice, psychic defence, and effect of gendered power. It also makes it possible to track how silence changes across the play, from a mechanism of domination to a fragile threshold of testimony. The result is a fine-grained account of how silence operates as traumatic discourse in contemporary drama.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Oppressive Silence

Oppressive silence is the foundational modality through which power is organised in *Five Kinds of Silence*. Billy's violence depends not only on physical assault but also on intimidation that regulates voice, movement and disclosure within the family. Silence is imposed externally, generated through fear, sustained through threat and normalised through repeated domination until speech becomes dangerous. In psychoanalytic terms, Billy's conduct reflects the dominance of an unregulated id, characterised by aggression and the desire for control unchecked by the moderating functions of the ego and superego. His violence can also be understood as displacement of internal insecurity onto Mary, who becomes the target of affects he cannot otherwise manage[6(pp19–25)].

Mary's recollection, "He broke my ribs. Jumped on them"[22(p17)], makes oppressive silence immediately legible. The compressed syntax intensifies the brutality of the memory. The short, abrupt verbal units reproduce the physical directness of the violence while suggesting the difficulty of sustained testimony. Mary does not offer an extended narrative; instead, she presents two stark statements that expose both bodily suffering and the linguistic difficulty of recounting it. Oppression therefore affects not only the body but also the capacity to narrate bodily experience.

This structure becomes more explicit when Mary recalls Billy's threat to "find us and kill us" if they speak[22(p17)]. Physical violence and the prohibition of speech become inseparable. Billy's authority extends from bodily assault to the control of disclosure, memory and witness. The threat transforms silence into a condition of survival: speaking risks further violence, while remaining silent offers protection from immediate punishment. Silence is consequently produced through an unequal distribution of power rather than freely chosen.

Billy's command to Susan makes this linguistic domination explicit: "Gather your thoughts, say nothing ... Don't say a word unless it's no"[22(p11)]. The imperatives "say nothing" and "Don't say a word" turn silence into discipline. Billy determines when language is permitted and what form it must take. Even Susan's possible response has already been restricted. Her communicative agency is reduced to compliance, while Billy occupies the dominant position within the household's communicative order. This corresponds to Ephratt's conception of oppressive silence as a condition in which speech is constrained through interpersonal power[2(p14)]. Billy does not merely demand quietness; he creates conditions in which speaking carries consequences.

Susan's recollection, "We weren't to make a noise ... That wasn't allowed"[22(p10)], reveals how this order becomes normalised. The modal expression *weren't to* suggests an established rule rather than an isolated instruction, while "That wasn't allowed" presents silence as household

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law. Significantly, the prohibition extends beyond meaningful speech to *noise* itself. The family must minimise its audible presence, as though ordinary expression were a potential provocation. Oppression consequently regulates both what the victims communicate and their capacity to occupy communicative space.

Billy's assertion, "What I say goes"[22(pp21–22)], crystallises this hierarchy of voice. The first-person pronoun *I* establishes him as the centre of authority, while the categorical construction excludes competing voices. His language functions as command rather than dialogue because dialogue requires reciprocity. The family is expected to listen, obey and remain silent.

Freud's account of the superego helps explain how this external authority becomes psychologically internalised. Repeated exposure to authoritarian commands can transform external prohibitions into mechanisms of self-surveillance and self-punishment[6(pp28–29)]. Billy's voice consequently becomes a psychological presence within the victims. They anticipate his anger and regulate their behaviour even when he is absent. Oppressive silence thus develops into anticipatory obedience: the victims silence themselves because they have learned to associate speech with danger.

This movement from imposed to internalised silence is central to Stephenson's representation of domestic abuse. Initially, Billy must actively command the family to remain silent. Through repetition, however, his commands become unnecessary because the victims begin to monitor themselves. Oppression becomes psychologically embedded, allowing patriarchal authority to persist without continuous physical enforcement.

Oppressive silence also has an ideological dimension. By preventing abuse from entering public discourse, Billy's control preserves household secrecy and isolates the victims from possible intervention. Diamond argues that silencing victims can preserve structures of violence by preventing testimony from challenging the perpetrator's authority[9(p45)]. Stephenson's household becomes a sealed communicative structure in which truth cannot circulate because speech has been made synonymous with danger.

Billy's death does not immediately liberate the women from these structures. His commands survive in their memories, fears and patterns of interaction. Oppressive silence is therefore more than the absence of speech; it is a mechanism through which patriarchal authority controls the body, voice and circulation of knowledge. Stephenson presents domestic domination as both physical coercion and communicative control, showing how the silencing imposed by an abuser can persist even after his physical presence has disappeared.

4.2. Repressive Silence

Repressive silence marks the point at which external domination becomes psychic management. While oppressive silence is imposed directly through Billy's commands, threats and violence, repressive silence operates within the consciousness of the victim. Susan's insistence to the detective that the family was "very close" and "didn't need that sort of thing"[22(p10)] conceals the reality of domestic abuse through denial rather than naming it. She speaks, yet her speech suppresses the truth her testimony ought to reveal. Silence, therefore, does not necessarily require the absence of speech; it may also operate through language that evades, disguises or contradicts traumatic knowledge.

Susan's description of the family as "very close" constructs an image of familial harmony that conflicts with the violence revealed elsewhere in the play. The phrase functions as a protective reconstruction of the past. Instead of acknowledging fear and abuse, Susan produces an idealised account that makes the violence difficult to recognise. In Freudian terms, repression involves excluding disturbing material from conscious awareness when its recognition threatens psychological equilibrium[20(p147)]. Susan's response can consequently be understood as a psychic defence against intolerable knowledge.

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The phrase "didn't need that sort of thing"[22(p10)] intensifies this process. The vague expression *"that sort of thing"* avoids naming the experience that has become psychologically threatening. Rather than identifying violence or abuse directly, Susan substitutes an imprecise phrase that creates distance between herself and the past. The euphemism therefore becomes a linguistic form of repression: what cannot be comfortably spoken is reduced to something unnamed and apparently manageable.

Repressive silence differs from simple unwillingness to speak. Susan has access to language, but trauma interferes with what that language can acknowledge. Her speech simultaneously communicates and conceals. Caruth's account of trauma is relevant because traumatic experience may resist straightforward narration and return indirectly through fragmented, displaced or belated forms of expression[7(p4)]. Susan's testimony illustrates this difficulty because the truth of the past remains present through its distortion.

The scene also shows how repression develops from earlier oppression. Billy's prohibition against disclosure gradually becomes an internal prohibition against recognition. Susan has learned that certain forms of knowledge are dangerous, and this lesson survives even when Billy can no longer enforce it physically. Freud's concept of the superego helps explain this process: repeated commands and punishments may become internalised as an authoritarian voice that regulates thought and behaviour[6(pp28–29)]. Billy's authority consequently persists as an internal censor, shaping which memories Susan can confront and which she avoids.

Repression also overlaps with denial and rationalisation. By presenting the family as close, Susan minimises the seriousness of the abuse and constructs a psychologically safer explanation of her past. This defence may temporarily protect her from helplessness, fear and guilt, but it also prevents fuller engagement with the traumatic experience. The silence created by Billy is consequently reproduced within Susan's own narrative.

The detective scene is significant because it shows that providing an opportunity to speak does not automatically restore truthful testimony. Susan can speak, but prolonged domination has already shaped what she can acknowledge. Stephenson therefore complicates the relationship between speech and truth: verbal expression may itself become a vehicle for concealment. The traumatic experience remains present beneath the surface of ordinary discourse.

This produces what may be described as damaged narratability. The experience exists but cannot initially be represented through a coherent and direct account. Instead, it emerges through minimisation, euphemism, contradiction and defensive narration. Repressive silence is consequently not an absence of knowledge but the presence of unacknowledged knowledge within speech. Stephenson presents repression as oppression turned inward, showing how the prohibition against speaking can become a prohibition against fully knowing. The truth does not disappear; it returns indirectly through distorted and defensive forms of narration.

4.3. Reflective Silence

Reflective silence constitutes a cognitive modality through which traumatic experience is attended to, evaluated and gradually reorganised into meaningful memory. Unlike oppressive silence, which restricts speech through external authority, repressive silence, which involves the exclusion or distortion of threatening knowledge, and defensive silence, which functions as self-protection, reflective silence creates a temporary suspension of verbal response that permits cognitive processing. It should not, however, be equated automatically with healing. In Stephenson's play, it is better understood as a cognitive interval in which the characters negotiate between remembered experience, present consciousness and the possibility of narration.

Janet's reference to "all the silence"[22(p27)] marks a shift from experiencing silence to thinking about it. She recognises silence as an accumulated condition that has shaped the family's

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history. The quantifier *"all"* gathers numerous unspoken experiences into a single conceptual frame, suggesting that Janet is no longer responding to an isolated event but evaluating a pattern that has developed over time. Cognitively, the statement involves retrospective organisation: experiences previously lived as separate episodes are being connected and interpreted as part of a larger pattern. Silence consequently becomes an object of metacognition as Janet recognises how the absence of speech has shaped the family's experience.

Mary's statement, "A flickering memory I have ..."[22(p19)], similarly presents the unstable relationship between trauma and memory. The metaphor *"flickering"* suggests intermittent rather than continuous recollection, while the ellipsis reinforces the incompleteness of the retrieval. Mary appears to be accessing an experience while simultaneously negotiating how to formulate it in language. Caruth's account of traumatic memory is relevant because traumatic experience may resist immediate integration into ordinary autobiographical narrative and return belatedly and fragmentarily[7(p4)]. Memory is present, but its organisation into coherent narrative remains difficult.

From a cognitive perspective, this distinction involves the difference between memory availability and narrative accessibility. An experience may remain represented in memory without being readily accessible as a coherent verbal account. The phrase *"flickering memory"* captures this unstable movement between retrieval and narration. Reflective silence occupies the interval in which the speaker attends to what is being retrieved, evaluates its significance and searches for an appropriate linguistic form.

Susan's dramatic "(Long pause)"[22(p20)] provides a further representation of this cognitive interval. The pause interrupts dialogue and creates temporal space for processes that cannot immediately be verbalised. It may involve retrieval, selection, monitoring and linguistic formulation as Susan negotiates what she remembers and how she can represent it. Similarly, her fragmentary expression, "Sometimes ... things"[22(p10)], suggests incomplete conceptualisation. The ellipsis records cognition in process, allowing the audience to encounter the difficulty of constructing meaning rather than receiving a completed account.

These moments distinguish reflective silence from defensive silence. Defensive silence reduces exposure to danger, whereas reflective silence creates processing time. Both may produce hesitation, but their functions differ. Defensive silence protects the self from anticipated threat; reflective silence directs attention towards experience and its possible meaning.

The play also suggests that traumatic memory is reconstructed within present circumstances. The women's recollections emerge through questioning and interaction, reflecting the reconstructive character of autobiographical memory. Freud's framework helps explain why traumatic material may remain difficult to access consciously, while a cognitive perspective draws attention to retrieval, attention, monitoring, sequencing and linguistic formulation. The movement from silence to speech is consequently not simply the release of repressed material but a process through which fragmented experience is reorganised into narrative.

This process is central to testimony. Laub argues that testimony involves bearing witness in the presence of another[14(pp57–61)]. In *Five Kinds of Silence*, the detective's presence provides a communicative context in which previously private experiences can begin to acquire narrative form. Janet's recognition of "all the silence" can therefore be read as retrospective integration, moving from isolated experiences towards patterned recognition.

Reflective silence is not inherently therapeutic. A pause may indicate reflection, uncertainty, confusion, dissociation or continuing distress. What distinguishes it is the direction of cognitive activity: attention turns towards experience rather than simply away from it. Stephenson stages this process through pauses, unfinished clauses, hesitation and fragmented recollection. Reflective silence thus represents a movement from experiencing trauma towards cognitively

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processing it, creating the temporal and cognitive space in which fragmented memory may gradually acquire coherence and become meaningful speech.

4.4. Defensive Silence

Defensive silence functions as a tactical form of self-preservation. Unlike oppressive silence, which is imposed through Billy's authority, and repressive silence, which operates through the psychological suppression of traumatic knowledge, defensive silence is adopted as a means of reducing danger. Ephratt identifies this dimension of silence as a strategic response in which withholding speech serves a practical communicative purpose[2(p16)]. In *Five Kinds of Silence*, the women learn that speaking can attract punishment, expose vulnerability or intensify violence. Silence consequently becomes a calculated means of survival.

Mary's statements, "I can't say it. I can't write it" and "I can't tell you"[22(p24)], provide a particularly revealing instance of defensive silence. The repetition of the first-person pronoun and the modal verb *can't* conveys more than an inability to communicate. It suggests a boundary that Mary has developed around traumatic knowledge. She recognises the existence of what needs to be communicated, but she also recognises that bringing it into language is psychologically and emotionally threatening. Her refusal to speak therefore becomes a protective response to an experience that remains too dangerous to expose.

The progression from "say" to "write" and finally to "tell" is significant. The difficulty is not confined to one mode of communication. Whether through speech, writing or direct disclosure, the traumatic experience remains resistant to articulation. Silence therefore becomes a protective enclosure around the self. Mary does not simply lack words; she withholds words because articulation would require her to confront and expose an experience that has remained associated with fear. Herman's account of trauma is relevant here because survivors may restrict disclosure as a means of maintaining psychological and physical safety, particularly where speaking has previously been associated with danger or disbelief[8(p33)].

The family's dependence upon "rules" and "lists"[22(p19)] further illustrates how defensive silence becomes incorporated into everyday survival. These structures suggest a household organised around anticipation and precaution. The family members must know what can be done, what must not be done and how they should conduct themselves in order to minimise Billy's anger. Silence becomes part of this practical system of regulation. Remaining quiet is not simply obedience; it is a method of avoiding attention and thereby reducing the likelihood of punishment.

Janet articulates this survival calculation with particular clarity: "Because what could I say? ... I knew he'd kill me"[22(p14)]. The rhetorical question, *"what could I say?"*, indicates that silence is produced by an awareness of the consequences of speech. Janet does not suggest that she has nothing to communicate. Rather, she recognises that communication is rendered impossible by the threat of death. The subsequent statement, "I knew he'd kill me," provides the logic underlying her silence. Speech is weighed against survival, and survival takes precedence. Silence consequently becomes an adaptive response to an environment in which verbal resistance carries potentially fatal consequences.

This scene also demonstrates the difference between defensive and oppressive silence. Billy creates the oppressive conditions, but Janet's silence is a response to those conditions. The distinction is important because it preserves the agency of the victim. Although Janet is constrained by violence, she nevertheless makes a tactical decision about what she can safely disclose. Her silence is therefore not evidence of passivity. It represents a limited form of agency exercised within an extremely restricted field of choice.

Jaworski's account of silence as communicative behaviour helps illuminate this point. Silence can communicate caution, resistance, uncertainty and emotional intensity even when no

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explicit verbal message is produced[11(p102)]. Janet's silence communicates her recognition of danger. Her refusal or inability to speak is itself meaningful because the audience understands what produces it. Stephenson therefore makes silence function as an alternative form of testimony: what Janet cannot safely articulate is communicated through the conditions surrounding her silence.

Susan's broken phrasing, "I just ... I wasn't ... I didn't know what it was"[22(p22)], extends this defensive mechanism to the level of syntax. The ellipses interrupt the movement of the sentence and prevent the speaker from producing a complete, coherent account. These pauses can be read as signs of hesitation, uncertainty and emotional resistance. The syntax itself becomes expressive. What the speaker cannot formulate continuously is registered through interruption. Silence therefore enters the grammar of testimony, making the structure of the utterance reproduce the difficulty of disclosure.

The defensive function of silence is also evident in the relationship between knowledge and disclosure. The women frequently know more than they are prepared to say. Silence creates a distinction between knowing, remembering and telling. A traumatic event may remain accessible to memory while remaining unavailable for direct narration. This distinction is crucial to Stephenson's treatment of domestic violence because the women's silence cannot simply be interpreted as ignorance. Their silence frequently signals the presence of knowledge that has been rendered unsafe to communicate.

Defensive silence, however, is not presented as an entirely successful protective mechanism. What initially functions as a shield can become a source of prolonged psychological confinement. By preventing disclosure, silence may protect the victim from immediate danger while simultaneously preventing the social recognition and processing of trauma. The strategy that once preserved survival may therefore continue after the original danger has passed. The women remain governed by the communicative habits that violence taught them.

This paradox gives defensive silence its particular significance in the play. Silence protects, but it also isolates. It reduces the possibility of immediate punishment, yet it restricts access to external support. It conceals vulnerability, yet it leaves traumatic experience unshared. It allows the women to survive the violent environment, but it also contributes to the persistence of the psychological effects of that environment.

Stephenson consequently avoids romanticising silence as either weakness or resistance. Defensive silence occupies an ambiguous position between the two. It is an adaptive response to circumstances in which speech is dangerous, but its continued operation carries psychological costs. The silence of Mary, Janet and Susan therefore demonstrates how victims may exercise agency within conditions that severely restrict their choices.

Defensive silence represents survival through strategic withholding. The women remain silent because they understand the danger attached to speech. Their silence is therefore meaningful precisely because it emerges from calculation, fear and self-protection. Stephenson shows that when violence makes speech dangerous, silence can become the only available form of agency. Yet the play also reveals the cost of that agency: what protects the individual from immediate harm may simultaneously deepen isolation and postpone the possibility of confronting and narrating traumatic experience.

4.5. Emotional Silence

Emotional silence refers to a condition in which speech remains available but the affect normally expected to accompany traumatic experience is markedly reduced, restrained, or difficult to access. It is therefore different from oppressive silence, in which speech is externally prohibited, and defensive silence, in which speech is withheld as a strategy of self-protection. In emotional silence, the characters may speak, but the emotional significance of

what they recount is muted. The silence resides not in the absence of words but in the apparent separation between what is said and what is felt.

Susan's statements, "We killed him. He is dead" and "We feel better now"[22(p16)], provide a striking example. The statements are grammatically complete and semantically explicit, yet their emotional economy is remarkably restrained. The blunt declarative structure leaves little room for elaboration, reflection or affective qualification. The contrast between the enormity of the event and the brevity of its verbal expression suggests a narrowed emotional register. The characters can identify what has happened, but their language does not necessarily reveal a corresponding depth of emotional engagement with it. Stephenson therefore creates a significant gap between cognitive recognition and affective expression: the event can be named even when its emotional implications remain muted.

From a cognitive perspective, this distinction is important. Emotional processing involves more than the recognition of an event; it also involves appraisal, affective response and the integration of experience into autobiographical memory. Trauma can disturb the relationship between these processes, so that an individual may possess explicit knowledge of an event without being able to access or communicate its associated emotional intensity in an ordinary way. Herman's discussion of traumatic responses is relevant here, particularly her observation that survivors may experience emotional numbing as a consequence of prolonged trauma[8(p47)]. Emotional silence, therefore, should not be interpreted simply as a lack of feeling. It may indicate a reduced or disrupted capacity to connect remembered experience with its expected emotional expression.

Janet's admission, "I felt nothing"[22(p14)], makes this separation particularly clear. The simplicity of the statement is significant. "Nothing" functions not merely as a description of an emotional state but as an assertion of affective absence at a moment when strong feeling might conventionally be expected. The cognitive significance lies in the distinction between knowing that an event has occurred and experiencing its emotional meaning. Janet knows that Billy is dead, yet her reported emotional response is characterised by emptiness. The statement consequently exposes the psychological cost of prolonged exposure to violence: when fear, anticipation and emotional regulation have been organised around survival for an extended period, the cessation of danger does not necessarily produce immediate emotional release.

The sisters' use of the collective pronoun "we" in "We killed him" and "We feel better now" is equally significant. The pronoun constructs their experience as shared rather than exclusively individual. Yet the collective voice does not produce emotional fullness. Instead, it compresses several individual histories of fear, complicity, survival and relief into a common statement. The grammatical simplicity of "we" can therefore be read cognitively as a form of collective compression, through which complex autobiographical experiences are condensed into a manageable verbal formulation. What remains outside the formulation is precisely the emotional complexity that the statement cannot fully articulate.

This emotional restraint also complicates the assumption that speech automatically constitutes recovery. The women have moved beyond complete muteness, but verbalisation does not mean that traumatic experience has been fully processed. Their ability to name events coexists with difficulty in expressing their affective significance. The play consequently distinguishes between narrative availability and emotional integration. A memory may be accessible enough to be spoken while its emotional content remains attenuated, fragmented or difficult to formulate. Emotional silence thus occupies an important intermediate position between silence as absence of speech and speech as complete testimony.

Pinter's observation that what remains unspoken may communicate more than what is explicitly said is particularly relevant here[13(ppix–xiv)]. In Stephenson's play, the unspoken does not simply

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represent information withheld from the audience. It is also embodied in the affective gap surrounding the women's words. Their controlled delivery, brief statements and restricted emotional vocabulary communicate the residue of prolonged violence. Silence therefore survives within speech itself.

Emotional silence should consequently be understood as trauma communicated through affective attenuation. The women speak, remember and identify what has happened, but the emotional force of those experiences does not always accompany their words. Stephenson uses this disjunction to show that surviving violence involves more than recovering the capacity to speak. It also involves reconnecting memory, emotion and meaning. Until that integration occurs, speech may remain formally present while emotional silence continues to speak through what the characters cannot, or do not yet, fully feel and articulate.

5. DISCUSSION

Silence in *Five Kinds of Silence* is neither marginal nor uniform. Stephenson gives it different forms according to the conditions under which it occurs and the work it performs. Oppressive, repressive, defensive, reflective and emotional silence emerge from different relations between power, memory, cognition, affect and survival. These forms are not entirely separate. They overlap and sometimes develop into one another as the women respond to prolonged violence and its aftermath. Silence can be imposed from outside, reproduced within consciousness, adopted as protection, used as a space for reflection, or experienced as an emotional distance between an event and the feelings attached to it. Such variation supports Foucault's contention that silence exists in multiple forms within relations of power rather than as a simple absence of speech[1(p27)].

Power provides the first condition of silence in the play. Billy's authority rests not only on physical violence but also on his control of speech, noise, disclosure and witness. His commands determine when the women may speak and what they may say, while his threats attach danger to acts of disclosure. Oppressive silence consequently turns the home into a restricted communicative space in which speaking becomes hazardous. What begins as an external prohibition gradually acquires an internal life. The women learn to anticipate Billy's reactions and regulate themselves before he needs to intervene. Domestic violence consequently reaches beyond the body into language, memory and self-monitoring. This recalls the wider structure of coercive control, in which domination operates through the regulation of everyday behaviour and communication[9(pp45,77)].

Repressive silence marks a further stage in this process. Once the conditions of domination have been established, the victim does not always need an external command to remain silent. Susan's description of the family as "very close" and her reference to "that sort of thing"[22(p10)] reveal how traumatic knowledge can be displaced through euphemism, denial and idealisation. The problem here is not simply that Susan refuses to tell the truth. Her language suggests difficulty in bringing the full significance of that truth into conscious narration. Psychoanalysis provides one explanation through the concept of repression, where threatening material is kept outside ordinary conscious awareness[20(p147)]. A cognitive approach adds another layer by drawing attention to attention, memory retrieval, appraisal and the organisation of autobiographical experience. Susan can refer to the circumstances of her life without fully integrating what those circumstances mean. Trauma consequently appears not as simple forgetting but as disrupted access to coherent narration.

Defensive silence has a different logic. Janet's question, "Because what could I say? ... I knew he'd kill me"[22(p14)], places silence within a clear calculation of danger. She does not remain silent because she has nothing to communicate; she remains silent because speech carries a

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foreseeable cost. Silence here becomes a practical response to an unsafe environment. This distinction matters because it gives the women a degree of agency that would be lost if every instance of silence were treated simply as evidence of victimhood. The silence is constrained by violence, but it is also used strategically within those constraints. Ephratt's conception of silence as communicatively purposeful is useful here[2(p16)], as is Herman's account of withholding and withdrawal as responses to traumatic circumstances[8(p33)]. Stephenson, however, refuses to present this strategy as uncomplicated empowerment. The same silence that protects Janet from immediate danger also separates her from others and delays the possibility of confronting what has happened.

Reflective silence introduces a different relationship with traumatic experience. In this form, silence provides a temporary interval in which memory can be attended to, reconsidered and organised. Janet's phrase "all the silence"[22(p27)] is particularly revealing because silence itself becomes an object of reflection. She is no longer merely living within silence; she is thinking about the accumulation of what has remained unspoken. Mary's "A flickering memory I have ..."[22(p19)] similarly presents remembering as an uneven process. The adjective "flickering" suggests a memory that comes into awareness intermittently rather than as a complete and settled account. Susan's staged "(Long pause)"[22(p20)] gives dramatic form to this process. The pause can be read as a moment of retrieval, selection and linguistic monitoring, as the speaker searches for a form in which difficult experience can be expressed. Reflective silence is consequently different from defensive silence. The latter limits exposure to danger; the former allows attention to turn towards experience and its possible meaning.

The cognitive dimension is particularly useful at this point because it prevents reflective silence from being treated automatically as healing. A pause may indicate memory retrieval, uncertainty, confusion, hesitation or difficulty in sequencing experience. What matters is the direction of the mental activity. In reflective silence, attention turns towards the remembered experience rather than simply away from it. Stephenson's fragmented utterances and pauses give the audience access to this uncertain movement between memory and narration. Laub's account of testimony is relevant because traumatic experience becomes narratable through the difficult process of addressing another person and reconstructing what has remained inaccessible or unspeakable[14(pp57–61)]. Speech does not simply replace silence; it emerges gradually from a space in which memory is being reconsidered.

Emotional silence complicates the movement from silence to speech even further. Susan's statements, "We killed him. He is dead" and "We feel better now"[22(p16)], contain explicit information, yet their brevity and emotional restraint create a striking distance between the magnitude of the event and the manner in which it is reported. Janet's "I felt nothing"[22(p14)] makes this distance more direct. She can identify the event and describe her response, but the response itself is characterised by emptiness. Trauma here affects not only what can be said but also the relationship between memory and affect. Herman's discussion of emotional numbing provides a useful framework for this condition[8(p47)]. The women may possess explicit knowledge of what happened while remaining unable to access or communicate the full emotional force attached to it.

The distinction between remembering, speaking and emotionally processing experience is important to the play. The ability to narrate an event does not necessarily mean that the event has been integrated into the self. Emotional silence occupies the space between verbal recognition and affective engagement. The recurrent "we" in Susan's statements also gives this silence a collective dimension. The sisters share a history of violence, but shared experience does not produce a complete emotional resolution. Their collective voice compresses complicated experiences of fear, survival, relief and possible guilt into brief statements. What

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remains outside those statements is part of the emotional history that the language cannot fully contain.

The five forms of silence consequently trace different relationships between violence and subjectivity. Oppressive silence originates in Billy's control; repressive silence shows the continuation of that control within consciousness; defensive silence reflects the practical need to avoid further harm; reflective silence creates a cognitive interval for attention and memory; and emotional silence reveals the distance that may remain between speech and feeling. These forms should not be treated as a fixed sequence. A character may experience several at once, and the same silence may perform different functions at different moments. Silence that protects against immediate danger may later contribute to repression, while a pause that begins in uncertainty may eventually create an opportunity for reflection.

Stephenson's treatment of trauma is consequently located as much in the form of language as in the events being narrated. Fragmented sentences, ellipses, euphemisms, repetitions, pauses and emotionally restrained statements carry aspects of traumatic experience that extended description might not capture. Caruth's account of trauma is useful here because it draws attention to the difficulty of assimilating overwhelming experience into ordinary narrative[7(p4)]. Herman's work similarly helps explain the effects of prolonged violence on memory, affect and the capacity to speak[8(p47)]. The cognitive perspective extends this discussion by considering how attention, retrieval, appraisal and narrative organisation shape the movement from experience to expression.

The play also unsettles any simple opposition between silence and speech. Silence does not disappear when the women begin to speak. It remains within their speech through pauses, omissions, euphemisms, fragments and emotional restraint. Pinter's observation that what remains unspoken may communicate more than what is explicitly stated[13(ppix–xiv)] is particularly pertinent. Stephenson makes the unspoken part of the dramatic language itself. What the characters cannot say, cannot yet organise, or cannot emotionally express becomes part of what the audience must interpret.

The deeper concern of *Five Kinds of Silence*, then, is not simply whether abused women speak. It is the set of conditions that makes speech possible, difficult or dangerous, and what remains after speech has begun. Billy's death removes the immediate source of physical control, but the structures produced by years of violence do not disappear with him. His authority survives in learned self-censorship, disrupted memory, emotional restraint and the expectation that certain forms of knowledge are unsafe. Psychoanalysis accounts for part of this persistence through the internalised superego, while cognitive and trauma perspectives draw attention to the continuing effects on memory, attention, affect and narrative organisation.

Silence in the play is consequently both a consequence of violence and a means of living through it. It can injure the subject by restricting expression, protect the subject when speech is dangerous, provide a temporary space for reflection, and communicate emotional states that words cannot adequately name. Stephenson's achievement lies in refusing to give silence a single moral or psychological meaning. Its value and danger depend upon its circumstances. The play ultimately suggests that the end of physical violence does not end its effects on language, memory or feeling. The oppressor may disappear, yet his prohibition can remain within the survivor's ways of remembering, speaking and responding to the past.

6. CONCLUSION

Silence in Shelagh Stephenson's *Five Kinds of Silence* is a central medium through which trauma, power and damaged subjectivity are dramatised. Rather than functioning as passive absence, silence operates as discourse, symptom and survival strategy. Through qualitative

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textual analysis informed by communication theory, psychoanalysis, trauma studies and feminist criticism, this study has shown that oppressive, repressive, defensive, reflective and emotional silence together structure the play's representation of domestic abuse and its aftermath.

The findings indicate that Stephenson uses silence not only to represent victimisation but to expose the mechanics of patriarchal control. Speech is restricted, memory is fractured, feeling is blunted and testimony becomes difficult because violence has entered both the household and the psyche. Yet silence remains unstable: what begins as externally imposed muteness may become protective withholding, hesitant remembrance or the threshold of articulation. The play's arc moves from domination toward a limited and hard-won speech, without offering the consolation of full recovery.

Understanding silence in this differentiated way has broader implications for the study of contemporary drama and of trauma dramaturgy. Analyses of abuse narratives must attend not only to what characters say but also to the patterned absences, ruptures, pauses and tonal flattenings through which trauma is communicated. In *Five Kinds of Silence*, Stephenson makes those absences audible, demonstrating that the most devastating effects of violence often appear where language falters, contracts or arrives too late.

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