

Resilience in Silence: Portrayal of Female Loneliness in Selected Contemporary Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the portrayal of female loneliness in contemporary short fiction, emphasizing the concept of resilience in silence. While traditional literary criticism often interprets silence as weakness or submission, this study conceptualizes silence as a nuanced and strategic form of emotional endurance and resilience in a digitally mediated world. Three short stories—“A Temporary Matter” by Jhumpa Lahiri (1999), “The Thing Around Your Neck” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), and “Cat Person” by Kristen Roupenian (2017)—serve as primary texts for analysis. Through qualitative textual analysis and feminist theoretical frameworks, the research investigates how silence, emotional withdrawal, and digital communication shape female experiences of isolation and resilience. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary short fiction reframes silence as a conscious, situational response through which women negotiate emotional vulnerability, relational uncertainty, and technological mediation. This study contributes to feminist literary scholarship by addressing the underexplored intersection of digital communication, female emotional labor, and contemporary short fiction.

Keywords: *Female loneliness, resilience, silence, contemporary short fiction, digital communication*

INTRODUCTION

The depiction of women in literature has undergone significant transformation over time. Historically, female characters were often portrayed as silent, submissive, or marginalized, reflecting broader patriarchal structures that constrained women’s autonomy (Showalter, 1991). Silence, in such narratives, was interpreted predominantly as passivity, complicity, or invisibility. However, feminist literary theory has challenged this limited perception, arguing that silence can operate as a complex mechanism of resistance, reflection, and resilience (Cixous, 1976; hooks, 2000). In contemporary literary discourse, particularly in short fiction, women’s silence is increasingly depicted as a conscious and

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strategic tool through which female characters navigate social constraints, personal trauma, and relational challenges.

In the twenty-first century, the rise of digital communication has introduced a new dimension to female experiences of silence and loneliness. While technological platforms promise constant connection, they frequently generate superficial interactions and emotional distance, particularly affecting women who often bear the weight of relational maintenance and emotional labor (Turkle, 2012; Ahmed, 2004). This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as “digital silence,” occurs when communication channels are active but fail to provide genuine emotional engagement, leaving women to contend with the paradox of being virtually visible yet emotionally isolated.

Within this study, key sub-concepts—*digital communication*, *digital silence*, and *silence as resilience*—are employed as interconnected analytical frameworks. Digital communication refers not merely to technological exchange but to mediated interaction that reshapes intimacy, emotional expression, and relational expectations (Turkle, 2012; Baym, 2021). Building on this, *digital silence* denotes moments of emotional absence within active communication channels, such as delayed responses, unreciprocated affect, or emotionally hollow exchanges, which generate isolation despite apparent connectivity (Lasén, 2018). Drawing from feminist theory, this study conceptualizes *silence as resilience* as a strategic, context-dependent practice through which women manage emotional labor, preserve psychological autonomy, and negotiate relational vulnerability rather than a passive marker of submission (Cixous, 1976; hooks, 2000; Ahmed, 2004). By integrating feminist literary criticism with digital communication theory, the research frames female silence as an adaptive emotional strategy shaped by both patriarchal structures and technologically mediated relational environments.

This research focuses on the portrayal of female loneliness and resilience in silence across three contemporary short stories: “A Temporary Matter” by Jhumpa Lahiri (1999), “The Thing Around Your Neck” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), and “Cat Person” by Kristen Roupenian (2017). These texts span diverse cultural and social contexts but share a common concern with the emotional experiences of women in situations of relational ambiguity and digital mediation. The study employs a feminist lens to examine how silence serves both as a coping mechanism and a site of subtle resistance, allowing women to preserve autonomy, negotiate identity, and endure emotional distress.

While feminist literary criticism has long examined silence as a response to patriarchal constraint, contemporary conditions necessitate an expanded theoretical lens. The digital age has transformed not only modes of communication but also the emotional economies in which women operate. As interpersonal relationships increasingly unfold through mediated platforms, silence acquires new meanings—ranging from unread messages to emotionally hollow exchanges. By situating traditional feminist interpretations of silence alongside modern theories of digital communication, this study bridges classical concerns with contemporary realities, demonstrating how female silence evolves from a

response to patriarchal oppression into a strategic adaptation within digitally mediated relationships.

Thesis Statement

In contemporary short fiction, silence is reconceptualized as a strategic tool of resilience, enabling female characters to navigate relational and societal pressures, preserve autonomy, and manage emotional challenges in both physical and digitally mediated contexts.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an eclectic theoretical framework that draws from feminist literary criticism, digital communication theory, and affect theory to conceptualize silence as a form of resilience. Elaine Showalter's (1991) feminist critique provides a foundational understanding of how women's voices have historically been marginalized within literary traditions, positioning silence as a symptom of patriarchal constraint. Building on this, Cixous (1976) reclaims silence as a potential site of resistance, emphasizing non-verbal expression and interiority as alternative modes of female agency. Bell hooks (2000) further complicates this notion by situating silence within emotional labor, arguing that women often regulate speech and affect to sustain relational harmony, even at personal cost.

Within contemporary contexts, Sherry Turkle's (2012) theory of mediated intimacy explains how digital communication reshapes emotional expression, producing what she terms "connected loneliness." This concept is particularly relevant to the present study, as it frames silence not as communicative absence but as emotional disconnection within active communication systems. Lasén's (2018) work on digital relationships extends this understanding by identifying delayed responses, emotional withholding, and selective disengagement as emerging communicative norms that generate affective ambiguity. Together, these theories enable this study to interpret female silence in contemporary short fiction as a psychologically and socially conditioned strategy of resilience rather than passivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly literature demonstrates that women's experiences of silence in literature are multifaceted, encompassing both oppression and resilience. Showalter (1991) argues that historically, literary representations of women were confined to the boundaries of patriarchal expectations, resulting in narratives that marginalized female voices. Contemporary feminist theorists, however, have proposed that silence can function as a deliberate and reflective strategy, allowing women to assert agency in restrictive environments (Cixous, 1976; hooks, 2000). Silence thus emerges not merely as the absence of speech but as a complex performance of identity, emotional regulation, and relational negotiation, particularly when women engage in affective labor within unequal or emotionally asymmetrical relationships (Ahmed, 2004; Duffy & Hund, 2019).

The digital era has introduced new dimensions to these phenomena. Turkle (2012) observes that while technology promises increased connectivity, it often produces a paradoxical effect of “connected loneliness,” whereby individuals are superficially engaged but emotionally unfulfilled. Women, in particular, experience these dynamics acutely due to societal expectations surrounding caregiving, empathy, and emotional labor, resulting in a heightened sensitivity to relational dissonance in digital spaces (Ahmed, 2004). The notion of *digital silence*—characterized by unacknowledged messages, delayed responses, or shallow online interactions—emerges as a significant factor in contemporary understandings of female emotional isolation.

Recent feminist and media scholarship further complicates the notion of silence in digitally mediated environments. Baym (2021) argues that online communication reshapes intimacy by privileging controlled self-presentation, often resulting in emotional withholding rather than expression. Similarly, Duffy and Hund (2019) demonstrate that women disproportionately engage in affective and emotional labor in digital spaces, intensifying experiences of isolation when communication lacks reciprocity. These perspectives reinforce the argument that female silence in contemporary fiction reflects not withdrawal but adaptive emotional management within technologically saturated relationships.

Short fiction offers a particularly effective medium for exploring these themes. Scholars emphasize that short stories’ condensed narrative structure allows for nuanced exploration of internalized emotional experiences and subtle relational dynamics (Lahiri, 1999; Adichie, 2009). Short fiction’s focus on intimate moments, internal thought processes, and fleeting interactions provides a fertile ground for analyzing the interplay between silence, emotional endurance, and digital communication. Despite these observations, scholarly analysis of digital silence in female characters remains limited, suggesting a substantial gap in the literature that this study aims to address.

Additional research indicates that silence can function as both resistance and coping in the face of relational and societal pressures. Lasén (2018) highlights that in contemporary narratives, characters frequently employ silence to navigate miscommunication, relational ambiguity, and emotional stress. In digital contexts, this strategic use of silence becomes particularly salient, as women balance the demands of virtual connectivity with the need for self-preservation. By integrating feminist theoretical perspectives with textual analysis, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which silence and emotional resilience intersect in modern short fiction.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs an eclectic qualitative approach, integrating principles from feminist literary criticism, discourse analysis, and digital communication theory. Rather than relying on a single theoretical model, this approach allows for a multidimensional reading of silence as a literary, emotional, and psychological phenomenon. Eclecticism is

particularly suited to contemporary short fiction, where emotional experience, mediated communication, and gendered subjectivity intersect fluidly.

This study utilizes qualitative textual analysis to examine the portrayal of female loneliness and resilience in silence within three contemporary short stories. Texts were selected based on three criteria:

- i. Presence of female protagonists experiencing emotional or relational isolation.
- ii. Inclusion of digital or mediated communication as a narrative element.
- iii. Emphasis on internalized strategies of resilience rather than overt resistance.

Patterns of silence were identified through a structured thematic coding process. During close readings of the texts, instances of silence were categorized into three primary thematic codes: (1) emotional silence (absence of verbal emotional expression despite internal distress), (2) communicative silence (breakdowns, delays, or absences within mediated or interpersonal communication), and (3) strategic silence (deliberate withdrawal or restraint employed to preserve autonomy or emotional stability). Each instance was analyzed in relation to narrative context, character psychology, and relational dynamics. This systematic categorization enables analytical consistency and enhances the replicability of the study, allowing future researchers to apply similar thematic frameworks to other contemporary texts.

In interpreting delayed responses, minimal engagement, and non-responses as forms of communicative silence, the study draws on principles from pragmatic theory, particularly Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle. Within conversational exchanges, delays or violations of expected responsiveness disrupt communicative cooperation and thus acquire interpretive significance. In digitally mediated interactions, such disruptions function as meaningful silence, signaling emotional withdrawal, uncertainty, or disengagement rather than mere absence of communication.

In analyzing delayed responses and communicative gaps as silence, the study draws implicitly on pragmatic and discourse-based principles, particularly Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle. Delays, non-responses, and minimal engagement violate expectations of conversational cooperation, thereby functioning as meaningful silence rather than neutral absence. In digitally mediated contexts, such violations acquire emotional significance, signaling disengagement, uncertainty, or affective withdrawal.

This methodology allows for a nuanced comparison across stories, emphasizing cultural, social, and technological dimensions of female loneliness and resilience. By integrating textual evidence with theoretical insights, the study seeks to illuminate underexplored aspects of contemporary short fiction and its engagement with digital-era emotional dynamics.

Textual Analysis

“A Temporary Matter” – Jhumpa Lahiri (1999)

In *A Temporary Matter*, Shoba and Shukumar navigate profound grief following the stillbirth of their child. Their interactions are marked by emotional restraint and minimal verbal exchange, resembling the fragmented and transactional communication often observed in digital interactions. Shoba’s silence, particularly in moments of relational tension, operates as both protective and reflective, allowing her to manage grief while preserving a sense of personal autonomy (Lahiri, 1999).

Lahiri’s narrative employs structural techniques that emphasize silence: alternating perspectives, short conversational exchanges, and internal monologues convey the unspoken emotional realities of the characters. The story’s temporally bound structure—a series of scheduled blackouts—serves as a metaphorical framework for moments of enforced communication and silence. Shoba’s selective engagement highlights how female silence can function as an adaptive strategy, enabling resilience and emotional self-preservation in the aftermath of trauma.

“The Thing Around Your Neck” – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009).

Adichie’s story centers on a Nigerian immigrant woman confronting the cultural and emotional dislocation of living in the United States. While the protagonist receives correspondence from family members, these interactions fail to address her emotional needs, creating a sense of alienation amplified by physical and psychological distance (Adichie, 2009). Although Adichie’s narrative does not foreground digital technology as explicitly as *Cat Person*, it nonetheless engages with mediated communication through letters, imagined conversations, and emotionally constrained exchanges. These forms of communication function as precursors to contemporary digital silence, characterized by partial connection without emotional fulfillment. The protagonist’s inability to articulate her loneliness to those back home mirrors modern experiences of unread messages or emotionally superficial digital contact. Her silence, therefore, anticipates digital-era emotional detachment, illustrating that mediated communication—whether epistolary or digital—can intensify female loneliness while simultaneously compelling silent endurance as a form of resilience.

“Cat Person” – Kristen Roupenian (2017)

Roupenian’s *Cat Person* provides an incisive exploration of relational ambiguity in the context of digital communication. Margot engages in text-based interactions with Robert, yet these exchanges are marked by inconsistency, ambiguity, and miscommunication. Digital silence—manifested in delayed responses, unread messages, and unexpressed emotions—amplifies her feelings of loneliness and relational insecurity (Roupenian, 2017).

Margot's internal reflection and decision-making highlight how silence functions as a protective mechanism, allowing her to maintain agency within a confusing and potentially coercive relational context. Roupenian's narrative structure, with interspersed internal monologues and descriptive passages, underscores the psychological impact of digital communication gaps. This story demonstrates how modern short fiction foregrounds the intersection of emotional resilience, relational navigation, and technologically mediated silence.

DISCUSSION

This discussion examines the selected short stories through three interrelated analytical concepts—emotional silence, communicative (digital or mediated) silence, and silence as resilience—in order to demonstrate how contemporary short fiction reconceptualizes female silence as an adaptive emotional strategy rather than passive withdrawal.

Emotional Silence and Internal Regulation

Across the three texts, emotional silence functions as an internalized form of emotional regulation through which female characters manage distress without overt verbal expression. In *A Temporary Matter*, Shoba's emotional silence is most evident during the nightly power outages that structure the narrative. Although these moments temporarily reopen communication between Shoba and Shukumar, Shoba withholds her deeper emotional intentions, particularly regarding the impending separation, until the story's conclusion. This deliberate restraint reflects an effort to regulate grief and maintain psychological control in the aftermath of loss (Lahiri, 1999). Her silence is not an absence of feeling but a controlled management of vulnerability.

Similarly, emotional silence characterizes the unnamed protagonist in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Despite maintaining correspondence with her family in Nigeria, she refrains from articulating her loneliness and alienation in the United States. Her silence is internal and sustained, operating as a psychological buffer against cultural dislocation and emotional misunderstanding (Adichie, 2009). By suppressing emotional disclosure, she preserves a sense of dignity and self-containment.

In *Cat Person*, Margot's emotional silence emerges through internal monologue rather than dialogue. While she actively engages in textual communication, her reluctance to voice discomfort or dissatisfaction during her in-person encounter with Robert reflects an internal regulation of anxiety and fear. Margot's silence allows her to process unease privately, illustrating how emotional silence functions as a protective response to relational ambiguity (Roupenian, 2017).

Communicative and Mediated (Digital) Silence

Communicative silence—manifested through minimal, delayed, or emotionally hollow interaction—plays a central role in all three narratives, though it takes different forms depending on context. In *A Temporary Matter*, silence surfaces through restrained face-to-face communication, where conversations remain functional rather than emotionally restorative. Despite physical proximity, Shoba and Shukumar’s exchanges fail to bridge emotional distance, highlighting how silence can exist within active interaction (Lahiri, 1999).

In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, mediated communication occurs through letters and imagined conversations that fail to convey emotional truth. Although communication channels remain open, the protagonist’s experiences are filtered and censored, creating a form of mediated silence that parallels contemporary digital disengagement. The emotional gaps within these exchanges intensify her loneliness, revealing how mediated contact can obscure rather than alleviate isolation (Adichie, 2009).

Cat Person explicitly foregrounds digital silence through text-based communication. Margot’s anxiety is shaped by delayed responses, ambiguous messages, and shifts in tone, all of which transform technological delay into emotionally charged silence. The absence of timely or reassuring replies becomes a source of psychological distress, illustrating how digital communication amplifies emotional uncertainty rather than resolving it (Roupenian, 2017).

Silence as Resilience and Boundary-Making

When examined collectively, these forms of silence reveal a broader pattern: silence operates as a mechanism of resilience and boundary-making. In *A Temporary Matter*, Shoba’s final revelation delivered after sustained emotional restraint—demonstrates how silence enables her to maintain agency over her emotional narrative. Her controlled disclosure marks a decisive boundary rather than submission (Lahiri, 1999).

In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the protagonist’s refusal to vocalize loneliness to her family reflects a resilient negotiation of identity. By withholding emotional disclosure, she avoids external judgment and emotional misinterpretation, preserving psychological stability within a dislocating environment (Adichie, 2009).

Margot’s silence in *Cat Person* similarly functions as a form of self-preservation. Her selective disengagement both emotional and communicative—allows her to navigate an uncomfortable relational dynamic without direct confrontation. Silence, in this context, becomes a strategy for maintaining autonomy in a digitally mediated relationship marked by imbalance and uncertainty (Roupenian, 2017).

Synthesis

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that silence in contemporary short fiction is neither passive nor uniform. Instead, it operates as a **situational, gendered, and psychologically adaptive response** shaped by emotional labor, mediated communication, and relational vulnerability. By grounding silence in specific textual moments, this study illustrates how female characters employ restraint, withdrawal, and selective disengagement as resilient strategies that enable survival within emotionally complex environments.

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