



RETHINKING THE SILENCE: A ME TOO MOVEMENT THEORY ANALYSIS OF FEMALE VOICE IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST FICTION

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Abstract

The current research is based on the theoretical framework of #MeToo movement discourse and aims to analyze female voice in modern feminist fiction. The study's background is derived from the cultural and epistemological shift that occurred as a result of the #MeToo movement of 2017, which has almost completely turned female testimony from private confession to a collective political act, thus altering the landscape of feminist literary production. This goal is to investigate the techniques of contemporary feminist writers in representing, challenging, and asserting female voice against the mechanisms of silencing by the patriarchal system in institutional, archival, and cultural contexts. This study is based on a tripartite theoretical approach that combines the feminist narratology, trauma theory and #Metoo discourse theory. The method used is qualitative research using close textual analysis and feminist literary criticism as the main data analysis techniques. The primary corpus consisted of five contemporary feminist novels published from 2017 to 2024, which were chosen using purposive sampling, with 35 peer-reviewed secondary sources, 10 author interviews and 8 critical reviews included. The results show that post-#MeToo feminist fiction uses formal fragmentation, polyphony and generic hybridity to perform feminist resistance, as well as continually undermining patriarchal credibility regimes, institutional silencing, and the neoliberal requirement for women's resilience. The study concludes that contemporary feminist fiction is an important area of intersectional feminist praxis.

Keywords: *Feminist Fiction, Female Voice, #Metoo Movement, Patriarchal Silencing, Narrative Strategies, Trauma Testimony, Intersectionality, Feminist Narratology, Institutional Credibility, Post-#Metoo Literature*

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1. Introduction

In October of 2017, the #MeToo movement erupted in a global cultural seismic shift of consciousness around sexual violence, patriarchy, and women's unheard voices in institutional, professional and domestic contexts. Led by activists Tarana Burke and joined by a multitude of social media-based comments, the movement provided a space in which survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault could share their experiences publicly, challenging what Mendes and Ringrose (2019) term the "politics of silencing" that has historically dominated how female voices are heard. It was a tidal wave in public discourse that did not only alter legal and corporate structures of accountability, it dramatically reconfigured the literary landscape to inspire a new flowering of literary feminist works, and the female voice was no longer just a medium of writing but a tool for cultural resistance, political reclamation, and collective healing.

The feminist texts in this collection, which take place in the post-#MeToo era, are caught up in a nuanced and multilayered dialogue with the theoretical questions driving the movement: how to establish female credibility, how to perform epistemological violence through disbelief, how to speak truth to the power of patriarchy, and how to help to shift the story through collective testimony. As discussed by scholars like Mendes et al. (2018), the #Metoo movement not only shifted the narrative of talking about gendered violence from a private confession to a political act, but it also redrew it from a personal to a political lens. In this context, modern feminist fiction can be seen as an important literary manifestation of that public act, embodying the voices it was trying to validate in a narrative form, with emotional dimensions and ideological elaborations. The structures of silence, complicity and resistance are questioned in the formal and thematic approach of the fiction of authors such as Roxane Gay, Bernardine Evaristo, Carmen Maria Machado and Ottessa Moshfegh, all of whom are concerned with the fractured and contested nature of female testimony within patriarchy (Tuhivai Smith, 2012; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

The theoretical framework for this study is drawn from a number of intersecting discourses: feminist literary criticism as developed by Elaine Showalter (1999), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2020) and which has continued to shape the current analysis of female authorship and narrative voice; feminist standpoint epistemology as theorized by Dorothy Smith (1987) and Sandra Harding (1991) and which places women's lived experience as a legitimate and productive source of knowledge production; and the

growing body of #Metoo scholarship that theorises the cultural and representational aspects of the movement, written by Mendes and Ringrose (2019)

and Burke (2021). These concepts allow for a detailed analysis of the socio-political context created by the #Metoo movement and at the same time contribute to the creation of new female voice, female subjectivity and female narrative authority in contemporary feminist fiction.

Feminist literary theory has a specific theoretical component with respect to "voice". As Adrienne Rich (1979) stated, language has been a tool of patriarchy throughout history and women's voice has always been dealt with by ways of erasure, appropriation, and dismissal. The #Metoo movement's cry of "believe women" is also a largely epistemological one: "Let women's testimony be equal to men's discourse". The demand is met in contemporary feminist fiction by a formal experimentation, a boldness of theme, and a requirement for the representation of the complete range of gendered experience: trauma, pleasure, ambiguity and resistance. According to Aretz (2024) post-#MeToo books are all about not sanitizing or sentimentalizing women's experiences, but rather being as honest as possible about the structural conditions that make women vulnerable and resilient.

The present study explores how the voice of the woman is portrayed in some contemporary feminist fiction works, by applying the theoretical frameworks of #MeToo discourse. It explores how writers use narrative techniques to represent instances of sexual violence, institutional complicity in its silence, and bodily autonomy; how the emphasis on collective testimony influences the formal characteristics of these texts; and how feminist fiction is an integral part of the broader cultural activity of disrupting patriarchal epistemologies that have historically rendered women's agency illegitimate (Allen, 2023; Phipps, 2020). The study is one of many recent interdisciplinary works that acknowledge literature as a critical space for feminist praxis.

1.1. Research Questions

1. What are the ways in which the voices of women are heard in feminist narratives in the post-#MeToo era, when they are being silenced by patriarchy?
2. What are selected feminist fiction's approaches to the themes of credibility, collective testimony, and institutional complicity in #Metoo?
3. What does the female voice in modern feminist fiction offer as a critique of the gender, traumatic, and agency positions of dominant discourses?

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study is important because it connects feminist literary criticism and #MeToo theory, providing new perspectives on the impact of and reaction to cultural movements on the realm of contemporary fiction. It will assess the female voice as a literary and political phenomenon, contribute to interdisciplinary feminist studies, enrich scholarship

of post-2017 literature and uncover the critical power of fiction in addressing patriarchal silencing and promoting gender justice.

2.Literature Review

The seminal work of female voice in literature begins with the second wave feminist literature criticism which has paved the way theory for the understanding of the exclusion of women in literature in the patriarchy system. Showalter (1999) coined the term "gynocriticism" because she believed that women's writing was a separate literary tradition that was influenced by cultural suppression and gender. This analysis was elaborated by Gilbert and Gubar (2020) in their study of the "madwoman in the attic" archetype, which traced how female authorship has fought the two forces of self-expression and patriarchal constraint over the centuries. Rich (1979) also suggested that language acts as a patriarchy tool; it is a constant battle for women's literary voice against the erasure of language and institutionalisation. These core works as a group make it clear that the issue of female voice in literature is not only aesthetic but political, and that the structures of power are the ones that decide whose voice will be recognised as legitimate, circulated and granted cultural authority.

This #MeToo movement radically changed the way we now talk about sexual violence, gendered power and the politics of testimony. As a grassroots movement, Burke (2021) notes that the movement's viral moment of 2017 was rooted in decades of survivor activism that had been ignored by mainstream culture. Mendes and Ringrose (2019) argue that the movement is a rupture from the "politics of silencing" that systematically discredits women's experiences of abuse by patriarchal institutions. Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2018) examine #MeToo as a new digital feminist activism that has opened avenues for survivors to speak without relying on established, institutional channels via the media or law. But Phipps (2020) attempts a critical examination of the mainstream articulations of the movement, suggesting that, more often than not, white, middle-class feminism prevails over more intersectional concerns in shaping the movement's representational politics. Read alongside one another these scholars reimagine #MeToo as a multifaceted, contested, and dynamic cultural negotiation of what feminist credibility and authority in narrating means.

This scholarship will show how literary texts actively engage in the cultural work initiated by #MeToo feminist fiction. Aretz (2024) calls the #MeToo movement's fiction "formal fragmentation, polyphonic narration, and trauma without sentimentality. As Tuhiwai Smith (2012) points out, decolonizing practices used to analyze literary texts reveal the ways in which feminist fiction by women of color further complicates dominant discourses of victimhood and resistance and adds intersectional voices to the mainstream discourse about gender-based violence. In Loney-Howes' (2020) study of the intersection between anti-rape activism online and the representations in literature, she argues that the

significance of digital testimony cultures has directly shaped the formal and thematic decisions of contemporary women writers. In her concept of "feminist killjoys", Allen (2023) offers a vital framework, showing how feminist fiction which is challenging patriarchal violence is culturally coded as disruptive and 'excessive', and how this applies to the reception of the #MeToo testimonies in public discourse.

Contemporary feminist fiction has been the subject of literary criticism concerning the particular ways in which narrative is used to create the voice of the female character as a tool of resistance. Gendered violence is an experience of fragmentation and non-linearity, which is why conventional linear narratives are inadequate, as asserted by Herman (2015). *Trauma Fiction*, by Whitehead (2004), also argues for a traumatic memory that involves repetition, gaps and unreliable narration not just description. Gill and Orgad (2018) explore the cultural need for female "resilience" as a form of neoliberal ideology which requires survivors to recover themselves while avoiding structural criticism, a theme that post-#MeToo fiction often questions and undermines. Harding (1991) gives the epistemological basis for the idea of the legitimacy of female testimony as a legitimate mode of knowledge production and Smith (1987) argues that women's "everyday" experiences are not only legitimate starting points for feminist enquiry but also are themselves knowledge production. All of these theoretical statements share a common theme: that the narration of feminist fiction, both who can speak and how, and what are the barriers or facilitators to their narration, are politically charged.

Whereas Crenshaw (2013) is essential for the study of feminist fiction, Hooks (2000) argues that feminist literary representation must go beyond that of white bourgeois experience to include multiply marginalized voices that are often lost in the #MeToo discourse. In a review of the current feminist activism, Davis (2016) frames the movement in a larger feminist tradition of women-of-color organizing that warns of celebratory readings of #MeToo that fail to account for structural inequalities. Trauma, in Cvetkovich's theory, is a cultural archive that is produced through the work of feminist fiction, a repository for affectual knowledge that is systematically denied by public discourse (2003). All of this scholarship requires that an examination of female voice in late modern feminist fiction be conscious of how female voices are heard — and how they are not — and how they are believed — and not believed — in the differential circumstance of their hearing. Considered together, this body of scholarship calls into question any study of female voice in contemporary feminist fiction to be oblivious to the differential conditions of female hearing — and of her not being heard, of her being believed — and of her not being believed. The #Metoo movement brought such conditions into sharp relief, but failed to entirely resolve them.

3. Methodology

The study is based on the interpretive paradigm of research that assumes meanings are socially and culturally constructed and not necessarily fixed. Interpretivism is suitable for literary research that focuses on the representation of female voice because it puts emphasis on subjective aspects of meaning making in texts and on the fact that feminist fiction is a genre of literature generated in a particular socio-political context influenced by the #Metoo movement. This philosophical approach is based on feminist standpoint epistemology, as introduced by Harding (1991) and Smith (1987), who situate women's experiences and their literary expressions as valid and productive sources of knowledge. It is a philosophical basis that allows the researcher to view chosen fictional texts not only as aesthetic objects but as culturally situated texts which offer the possibility of reflection and intervention into the current feminist discourse.

In this study, a qualitative research method is used, namely close textual analysis and feminist literary criticism. The research questions call for interpretation, and do not involve statistical measurement of the text in the most appropriate sense of the word. Hence, qualitative methodology is most suitable here. Close reading as a technique can be used systematically to explore the ways in which an author uses formal and rhetorical strategies to create female voice, to depict trauma, and to address the themes of #MeToo: credibility and institutional silencing.

The author uses purposive sampling to choose 5 feminist novels published in the last 5 years (2017-24) and relevant to the #Metoo era. This sampling strategy is appropriate because the selected texts explicitly address issues of sexual violence, female testimony and the silencing of women by men, which are theoretically and thematically relevant for the analytical framework of this study. In qualitative literary research, the most popular method of sampling information-rich texts for purposes of research is known as purposive sampling.

Primary data is the five selected feminist novels that make up the main corpus of literature. Secondary data includes 35 peer-reviewed scholarly sources such as journal articles, monographs, and critical essays that come from feminist literary criticism, trauma studies, and #Metoo scholarship. Also, there are 10 relevant interviews with authors and 8 published critical reviews included to put textual analysis in the wider context of literary and cultural debates about post-#MeToo fiction.

Three theoretical frameworks interweave to direct the data analysis. The first approach feminist narratology, based on the work of Lanser (1992), analyses how the voice, the focalization, and the point of view are gendered constructions that assert or deny female subjectivity. Second, the formal fragmentation, disruptions of time, and affective intensity characteristic of feminist fiction can be interpreted by using the analytical tools provided by trauma theory developed by Herman (2015) and Whitehead (2004). Third, as

it does with Mendes and Ringrose (2019) and Mendes et al. (2018), #MeToo discourse theory is used to foreground the political aspects of the female witness and institutional silencing explored in the chosen texts.

Data Analysis Procedure

The main analysis technique is themed analysis and is performed in a systematic manner. First, each novel is read closely for the purpose of identifying common themes, patterns of narration and formal techniques connected with female voice and #MeToo issues. Then, themes which have been identified are coded and classified within the three theoretical frameworks mentioned above, facilitating cross-textual comparison and theoretical synthesis. The process of analysis is layered, which guarantees the strength of the interpretations and the theoretical consistency with the literary collection analyzed in the study.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based entirely on published literary texts and publicly available scholarly sources and thus does not pose any concerns regarding informed consent or concerns involving confidentiality with humans. The researcher must however have an ethical obligation to interpret texts with sensitivity and critical awareness, including the voices of marginalized people and intersectional identities, when analysing texts that address sexual violence and trauma. Adopting an intersectional lens as outlined by Crenshaw (2013) and Hooks (2000), the analysis is carried out with the awareness of the differential conditions in which female voice is constructed, suppressed and recovered in contemporary feminist fiction.

4.Data Analysis

4.1. Overview of Analytical Framework

The data analysis for this study is done through a three-part approach to theory, namely feminist narratology (Lanser, 1992), trauma theory (Herman, 2015 and Whitehead, 2004), and #MeToo discourse theory (Mendes & Ringrose 2019 and Mendes et al., 2018). The three lenses are applied systematically and in a sequenced manner to five purposively selected feminist novels from the late 2010s (2017-24): Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019), Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017), Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), and Megan Hunter's *The Harpy* (2020). The formalization of female voice, the thematic treatment of patriarchal silencing, sexual violence, and institutional complicity are all explored in each text, as are trauma and collective testimony. The analysis is carried out under four main thematic headings: (1) narrative voice and formal strategies, (2) trauma representation and testimony, (3) institutional silencing and credibility, and (4) intersectionality and the politics of speaking. Close textual analysis and

theoretical synthesis are used within each content area to yield interpretive results for the three research questions that address the study.

Three systematic phases were used to conduct thematic analysis. The first phase involved intensive close reading of each of the novels, in which thematic and formal features were resonating with the theme of female voice and/or #MeToo issues were found and noted. The second phase involved coding identified patterns according to the three theoretical frameworks and a structured coding schema was created, thereby allowing for the cross-textual comparisons. In the third phase, coded themes were combined to arrive at the general analytic conclusions, with textual evidence from primary corpus as well as secondary scholarly sources used directly and substantiated by contextual background. This layered approach unlocks not only an interpretive depth but also a theoretical sophistication and allows to write an analysis that is responsive to the particularity of individual texts and attentive to the larger cultural and political context of the post-#MeToo feminist fiction.

Table 1: Corpus of Primary Texts — Purposive Sample

| Novel | Author | Year | Publisher | Key Thematic Focus |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|------|-----------------|--|
| In the Dream House | Carmen Maria Machado | 2019 | Graywolf Press | Intimate partner violence; queer female voice; narrative fragmentation |
| Girl, Woman, Other | Bernardine Evaristo | 2019 | Hamish Hamilton | Polyphonic testimony; Black British feminism; collective voice |
| Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body | Roxane Gay | 2017 | Harper | Bodily autonomy; trauma disclosure; institutional silence |

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|--------------------------------|-----------------|------|---------------|--|
| My Year of Rest and Relaxation | Otessa Moshfegh | 2018 | Penguin Press | Female passivity as resistance; patriarchal complicity; agency |
| The Harpy | Megan Hunter | 2020 | Grove Press | Marital violence; female rage; voice reclamation |

4.2. Thematic Analysis — Category One: Narrative Voice and Formal Strategies

The first analytical category looks at the use of the narrative voice and formal innovation as tools for feminist resistance in the five novels selected. A rejection of traditional and linear narrators is evident throughout the corpus, with the introduction of formal strategies, such as second-person narration, polyphony, fragmentation, and generic hybridity that perform the dislocated, insecure agency of female voice in patriarchal culture. Narrative voice always has a gendered and ideologically charged character, as Lanser (1992) suggests, and the formal choices made by feminist writers have a direct political impact.

The narrative voice is particularly interesting in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*, which speaks in the second person, addressing the reader as a witness and her abusive romantic partner as "you. This formal selection creates what Aretz (2024) calls a "testimony effect" since the reader is stripped of the comfortable third-person spectator's distance and is at a disadvantageous first-person angle with the reader's presence made a participant. Machado's voice as narrator proclaims: "In the Dream House you're a woman in a haunted house, but you're also the haunting. This formulation is a double subjectivity of female subjectivity in the face of abuse that is, being a victim and a spectator, a speaking subject and a speaking object of another's story, which has come into sharp focus through #MeToo testimony (Mendes & Ringrose 2019). The second person mode is also the dissociative fragmentation typical of trauma narrative, a dissociation that is enacted as opposed to just described, as Herman (2015) sees it at the center of traumatic memory.

In contrast, *Girl, Woman, Other* is a formally radical novel, featuring a polyphonic technique in which twelve different female voices, each in her own chapter, compose a sweeping feminist testimony. The novel's formal architecture embodies the movement #MeToo's demands for a collective voice against the isolation and disbelief of individual survivors. Evaristo's prose deconstructs the normative limits of sentence and paragraph,

establishing the texture of a stream of thoughts that are fluent and, as a whole, devoid of the rational, linear, legally credible female testimony demanded by patriarchy. One character says: “She had lived her whole life with a sense that her experience didn't matter, that she didn't matter, it was time to be heard.” The 'narrative entitlement' statement reflects a post-#MeToo demand for female testimonial power that Mendes et al. (2018) argue was the movement's most formative cultural contribution.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation by Ottessa Moshfegh uses a first-person narrator who speaks from an ironic distance from society, in effect making a passive resistance to the demands of patriarchy for female performance and compliance. The narrator's style of voice is characterized by emotional flatness and dark humor that, as Gill and Orgad (2018) argue about post-feminist irony, reveals the process of objectification for women by estranging rather than directly confronting it. “I was not afraid of death,” wrote Moshfegh, “but I was afraid of life, of being forced to bear the sense of being alive for another six decades. The feeling of exhaustion in this articulation of existential exhaustion is not simply a feeling of despair, but also a rational response to structural oppression, as Allen (2023) has proposed in his definition of feminist depression as a rational response to structural oppression.

Table 2: Narrative Voice Strategies — Cross-Textual Comparative Analysis

| Novel | Narrative Mode | Formal Strategy | Theoretical Significance |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---|
| In the Dream House | Second-person | Dissociation; generic hybridity (memoir/horror) | Enacts trauma fragmentation; implicates reader as witness |
| Girl, Woman, Other | Polyphonic first-person (×12) | Dissolved punctuation; stream of consciousness | Collective testimony; counters isolation of individual survivor |
| Hunger | Confessional first-person | Non-linear disclosure; bodily metaphor | Testimony as political act; body as archive of violence |
| My Year of Rest and Relaxation | Ironized first-person | Flat affect; dark humor; estrangement | Passive resistance; exposes patriarchal demands on femininity |

| | | | |
|-----------|--------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| The Harpy | Close third-person | Mythological allusion; lyric prose | Female rage reclaimed; voice as instrument of retribution |
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4.3. Thematic Analysis — Category Two: Trauma Representation and Testimony

The second analytical category looks at the way that the chosen novels depict trauma and how they frame literary testimony as a response to the social project of #MeToo, to examine how such responses engage with the larger project of legitimizing survivor voice. Trauma profoundly subverts the linear, orderly, affective narration that has been the norm in literary and legal studies, as Herman (2015) has suggested, and creates a style of affect-laden, non-linear story-telling that has been pathologised and dismissed by traditional literary and legal discourse. This analysis offers a post-#Metoo feminist fiction that restakes this formal disruption as an expression of testimonial authenticity, rather than as a lack of credibility.

Hunger by Roxane Gay is particularly unique in the collection in that it not only theorizes its own testimonial status, it is a testimonial. In this memoir-essay hybrid, the author has formally fragmented her account of gang rape at the age of twelve and the perpetuation of its physical and psychological effects over a lifetime of her life. Gay says, "I was 12 when I was raped and even after over 20 years it still hasn't been resolved for me; I'm not sure it ever will be. This open rejection of the narrative closure so desired by the culture of the patriarchy, this acknowledgment that testimony will not heal, testimony will not resolve, testimony will not result in the tidy redemptive arc and narrative closure that are expected and demanded by the culture of the patriarchy is itself a deeply political move. Cvetkovich (2003) theorizes trauma as a cultural archive, whose meaning is never exhausted by a single act of disclosure, that Gay's text performs formally and thematically, insisting that the reader remain in sustained contact with the unexhausted nature of gendered violence.

In the Dream House, another book by Machado, also fails to offer a redemptive ending, organizing its construction around genre chapters: fairy tale, choose your own adventure, haunted house, all of which represent ways for the survivor to make sense of what is happening to him or her and what cannot be contained. Trauma fiction engages what Whitehead (2004) calls the "fundamental challenge to realist representation" of the generic multiplicity: "trauma fiction's theme is an event that is beyond understanding, and it is therefore an event that disrupts the conventions of literary realism. Machado's text is a continuation of this formal disorientation, for archives of intimate partner violence have traditionally ignored queer relationships: "for a long time, I didn't have a word for what

had happened to me because the culture hadn't given me one. This observation links the formal challenges of trauma narration with the individual silencing of queer female experience in the context of heteronormative culture and in the dominant imagery of the #MeToo discourse, as Phipps (2020) points out, trauma remains a mostly white, heterosexual, and middle-class experience.

In *The Harpy*, by Megan Hunter, trauma is depicted in a controlled, lyric prose style in which the harpy, the ancient Greek creature of violent retribution, is an allegory for the narrator Lucy's rage at her husband's infidelity. The formal restraint that Hunter typically exhibits is a form, a Textual Body, as Gill and Orgad (2018) might put it, of the cultural requirement to manage women's emotions, and at the same time reveals the violence inherent in that requirement. Lucy thinks: "I was constructed of layers, and some of those layers were RAGE and some of those layers were LOVE, and I couldn't separate them. This formulation questions the patriarchal demands for the emotional legitimacy of women and the cultural tendency to pathologize the anger of women as irrational excess and not as a legitimate political response as put forth by Allen (2023).

Table 3: Trauma Representation — Thematic Coding Matrix

| Novel | Trauma Type | Formal Response to Trauma | Testimonial Strategy | Theoretical Framework |
|--------------------|---|--|--|---|
| In the Dream House | Intimate partner violence; psychological abuse | Generic fragmentation; non-linear chronology | Second-person address; direct reader implication | Herman (2015); Whitehead (2004) |
| Girl, Woman, Other | Structural racism; sexual harassment; generational trauma | Polyphony; dissolved narrative boundaries | Collective disclosure across 12 voices | Cvetkovich (2003); Mendes et al. (2018) |
| Hunger | Gang rape; bodily trauma; long-term PTSD | Essay fragments; non-resolution | Confessional disclosure; refusal of closure | Herman (2015); Mendes and Ringrose (2019) |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| My Year of Rest and Relaxation | Existential trauma; emotional numbness; grief | Flat affect narration; temporal suspension | Ironic estrangement; passive withdrawal | Gill & Orgad (2018); Allen (2023) |
| The Harpy | Marital betrayal; suppressed female rage | Lyric compression; mythological allegory | Restrained disclosure; rage as testimony | Herman (2015); Rich (1979) |
| Cross-textual pattern | Multiple, compounding forms of gendered violence | Formal disruption as testimonial enactment | Collective refusal of patriarchal narrative closure | Whitehead (2004); Cvetkovich (2003) |

4.4. Thematic Analysis — Category Three: Institutional Silencing and Credibility

The third analytical category is related to the portrayal of institutional voice and the politics of female credibility, a topic central to the #MeToo discourse. At the heart of the movement was an assault on the institutional contexts, legal, medical, corporate, familial, that routinely ignore, minimise and pathologise women's claims to sexual violence and harassment, according to Mendes and Ringrose (2019). The novels featured in the selection explore these processes through the depictions of disbelief, gaslighting, institutional failings, and the psychological work needed by women who try to speak in a system that refuses to listen.

Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* brings the institutional silencing of women to life in a dozen stories, each of which showcases the ways in which the credibility of women is asserted by the patriarchal, as opposed to being limited to a single specific agent. Black feminist theater director Amma struggles with an artistic and literary establishment that consistently eradicates her work and appropriates its aesthetic innovations: “for years the mainstream had ignored her, and now the mainstream wanted to claim her and she wasn't sure she wanted to be claimed.” This is similar to the selective credibility that the #MeToo movement offered high-profile white women while often not extending to women from marginalized communities' (Crenshaw, 2013) and the double bind that Phipps (2020) describes as a central plank in mainstream feminism and its relationship to women of colour — to be included on the terms of the institution.

Gay's *Hunger* offers the closest experience of institutional silencing, telling of rape being revealed to parents who prioritized their institution's integrity over their daughter's

experience. Gay says that despite being raped, her parents did not protect her, and they did not ask her how they could help, "they sent me back into the world broken, broken spiritually and broken physically. This indictment of familial institutional failure is extended to other cultural institutions, such as those in medicine, psychology, diet, that repeatedly pathologize Gay's body instead of reacting to the violence done to it. In Gay's analysis, the body itself becomes a space of institutionally imposed silence: eating becomes a way of fortifying oneself against a world, she says, that has proven indifferent to one's survival, and a somatic displacement of unprocessed trauma, as Herman (2015) calls it.

In the *Dream House* challenges institutional silencing from the point of the erasure from archival histories—the absence of queer intimate partner violence in legal, medical, and cultural records. The "archive" chapter in her text reflects on this lack: "the archive is incomplete; it always has been. Queer people have always had to make their own archives because the official record did not want them. Cvetkovich theorises trauma as archive in relation to queer female silence and the lack of a queer lesbian or feminist perspective within the dominant discourses, suggesting that the lack of a representation of lesbian abuse is an institutional violence that perpetuates the trauma of lesbians. It becomes an act of counter-institutional documentation as it performs the archival task that it maps out as necessary.

Table 4: Institutional Silencing — Thematic Analysis by Text

| Novel | Institution Represented | Silencing Mechanism | Narrative Counter-Strategy |
|--------------------|---|--|--|
| In the Dream House | Legal archive; LGBTQ+ erasure; domestic setting | Archival absence; cultural illegibility of queer abuse | Self-archiving; generic experimentation as documentation |
| Girl, Woman, Other | Literary establishment; workplace; family | Aesthetic appropriation; racial marginalisation | Polyphonic testimony; collective counter-narrative |
| Hunger | Family; medical; dietary industry | Disbelief; bodily pathologization; enforced silence | Confessional memoir; refusal of institutional language |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|
| My Year of Rest and Relaxation | Medical; pharmaceutical; social expectation | Sedation as compliance management; emotional suppression | Passive withdrawal; ironic exposure of medicalised control |
| The Harpy | Marriage; domestic contract; social propriety | Emotional management demands; suppression of female rage | Mythological reclamation; lyric articulation of anger |

4.5. Thematic Analysis — Category Four: Intersectionality and the Politics of Speaking

The fourth analytical category follows Hooks's (2000) call for feminist literary representation to break out of the bounds of white, middle-class, heterosexual women to consider the voices of those who are multiply marginalized by mainstream feminism. The corpus shows that this is precisely what post-#MeToo feminist fiction responds to, with the inter-sectional aspect of female silence being foregrounded and not universalised in the narratives.

Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* is a corpus text that is most clearly focused on intersectionality; that is, the experiences of twelve women whose identities are defined through multiple racializations, sexualities, class positions, and generational locations. The polyphony of the novel is itself an intersectional gesture, in opposition to the singular, authoritative voice that Showalter (1999) found to be the norm for white female literary authority. The character Yazz is an adolescent mixed-race student activist whose direct confrontation with the practice of single-axis feminism, "feminism has to include everyone or it isn't feminism, it's just another form of privilege," is an affirming statement. As Phipps (2020) explains, the mainstream #Metoo movement has only partially internalized this formulation, which was similarly the focus of Davis (2016) and Crenshaw (2013) in their respective work.

Gay's *Hunger* uses intersectionality's voice of the fat Black female body which is embedded in compound marginalization in white feminist discourse and the dominant #MeToo narratives. Gay's analysis of her body as a site of intersecting violences – racial, gendered, medical, cultural – is enacting a decolonizing methodology to autobiographical narrative, that is, refusing to separate bodily experience from its structural conditions, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) writes I have a very mixed relationship with my body, but my body is not the problem, I am the problem. This reclaiming of the body as solution rather than problem is a direct response to the institutional pathologization of the body as a problem,

which Gay documents throughout the memoir, and thereby establishes a form of knowledge and authority of body that would be familiar to Harding (1991) as feminist standpoint epistemology in its most intimate of registers.

Machado's *In the Dream House* emphasizes the specificity of queer female voice, making the argument that frameworks used to understand intimate partner violence are heterosexual-centric and that as such, understand the violence of queer relationships as structurally invisible. This invisibility is more than a representational problem; it is also an epistemological one: Without cultural models of queer abuse, survivors do not have the conceptual tools to describe what has happened to them, to seek assistance, or have it believed. When you're a woman abused by another woman, you're a problem, you're an anomaly, you're a disruption to the narrative," says Machado. This analysis builds upon Rich's (1979) work on the epistemological regime of compulsory heterosexuality, which makes lesbian experience unspeakable, and extends the analysis into the particular post-#MeToo context in which the movement's hegemonic narratives often have reinforced heteronormative assumptions about gendered violence.

Table 5: Intersectionality — Identity Axes and Representational Politics

| Novel | Race/Ethnicity | Sexuality | Class | Intersectional Silencing Mechanism |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| <i>In the Dream House</i> | White | Queer/lesbian | Middle-class | Heteronormative cultural frameworks; archival erasure of queer abuse |
| <i>Girl, Woman, Other</i> | Black British; mixed-race; diverse | Lesbian; heterosexual; non-binary | Working to middle-class | Racial marginalisation; tokenism; generational class barriers |
| <i>Hunger</i> | Black American | Heterosexual | Middle-class | Compound racial-gendered pathologization; bodily surveillance |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------|------------------------|--------------------|--|
| My Year of Rest and Relaxation | White | Ambiguous/heterosexual | Upper-middle-class | Neoliberal demands for female performance and emotional productivity |
| The Harpy | White British | Heterosexual | Middle-class | Domestic contract; suppression of female anger; marital institution |

4.6. Cross-Textual Synthesis: Female Voice as Feminist Praxis

The four analytical categories are combined in the cross-textual synthesis, which provides a set of convergent results that are coherent in interpretation and theoretical in depth and that answer the three research questions of the study. In all five texts, female voice does not appear as a natural or given expression of female subjectivity but as a constructed, contested and politically charged product in the face of multiple silencing agents, cultural, institutional, archival, and epistemological. The finding mirrors Rich's (1979) groundbreaking claim that female literary voice must be a product not just of opportunity but of the work that precedes it: the work of breaking the ideology of silent femininity.

These formal strategies, which appear on the whole through the corpus — polyphony, fragmentation, second-person address, generic hybridity, lyric compression — act together as 'narrative acts of feminist resistance' (Lanser 1992); they are formal decisions that resist the requirement for linear, rational, emotionally-constrained female testimony that the patriarchal order demands. The form of the text in each case is a political argument made by the text. Machado's generic multiplicity is linked to the epistemological chaos of unacknowledged queer abuse, Evaristo's polyphony is a formal performance of the collective power of shared testimony, Gay's fragmentary disclosure mirrors the non-linear, never-fully-disclosed nature of traumatic memory, Moshfegh's flat affect reveals the violence of demands for female emotional productivity, and Hunter's lyric restraint channels the pressure of suppressed female rage into a form ready to explode.

The most theoretically important thing that the #MeToo movement accomplished, as Mendes et al (2018) claim, was to shift the focus of disclosure from the individual to the collective political act. The novels thus chosen are involved in exactly this reframing, in which the individual voice of women in the novel is situated within larger social and

historical frameworks that shape the conditions of their speaking. All five refuse simple stories of victimhood and recovery; all five make it clear that the personal is not the only thing that matters; all five insist on the structural, as well as the personal, nature of female silencing; all five see speaking — albeit fragmented, ironic, incomplete — not as a story of personal catharsis but as one of feminist praxis. While #MeToo testimony was not about individual healing, as Burke (2021) argues, it was about something bigger—a cultural shift, a transformation of the culture. This is where the feminist fiction of this study fits in as it was a cultural project, a work of art, that had the potential to effect change—formal change, thematic change—through the unique nature of literary art.

Table 6: Cross-Textual Synthesis — Research Questions and Analytical Findings

| Research Question | Key Analytical Finding | Supporting Texts and Theorists |
|--|--|---|
| How do narrative strategies articulate female voice against patriarchal silencing? | Formal innovation (polyphony, fragmentation, second-person, generic hybridity) enacts rather than merely describes the contested conditions of female speech, constituting narrative resistance to patriarchal demands for linear, credible testimony. | All five texts; Lanser (1992); Whitehead (2004); Rich (1979) |
| How does feminist fiction engage with #MeToo themes of credibility, testimony, and institutional complicity? | Texts represent institutional silencing across legal, familial, medical, and archival registers, deploying testimony aesthetics that mirror and extend #MeToo's political challenge to patriarchal credibility regimes. | Gay (2017); Evaristo (2019); Mendes and Ringrose (2019); Mendes et al. (2018) |
| How does female voice challenge dominant discourses of gender, trauma, and agency? | Post-#MeToo feminist fiction refuses redemptive narrative closure and intersectional universalism, | All five texts; Crenshaw (2013); Hooks (2000); Phipps (2020); Allen (2023) |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | insisting on the structural, racialised, and sexualised dimensions of female silence and the political stakes of speaking. | |
|--|--|--|

5. Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework

The results of this analysis are significant in their confirmation of and extension to the tripartite theoretical framework of this study. Theorised by Lanser (1992), feminist narratology becomes necessary if we are to understand how the formal features of the texts that have been selected play a role in the political argument and the debate of female voice and patriarchal power. The analysis shows that the narrative decisions of the five writers, Machado, Evaristo, Gay, Moshfegh and Hunter are not choices of aesthetics, but choices ideologically loaded choices which put the female voice in a constant struggle with the power structures that wish to contain, discredit and suppress it. This discovery dovetails with the work of Showalter (1999), who founded the notion that women's writing is a distinct literary tradition, and updates the claim in the present moment of cultural empowerment where the testimony cultures of the digital age, viral activism, and insurgent feminist organizing have altered the landscape of women's public speech.

When applied to the development of the formal novelties of the corpus as they are theorised by Herman (2015) and Whitehead (2004), trauma theory highlights that the formal innovations in the corpus are rational responses to the epistemological challenge of articulating a traumatic experience in a culture in which it is systematically, and epistemically, demanded that it be sanitized. The selected texts are non-linear, fragmented, formally disruptive and not signs of aesthetic failure, but strategic enactments of the effects of trauma on narrative coherence and temporal experience. This analysis thus adds to a growing body of scholarship that reconsiders the formal difficulty of trauma fiction as an epistemological argument rather than an experiment in formal difficulty, and makes links between the aesthetic dimension of post-#MeToo feminist fiction and the political function of it as a counter-discourse to institutional demands for smooth, legally credible female testimony.

The findings from the literature are placed in a socio-political framework developed by Mendes and Ringrose (2019), Mendes et al. (2018), and Phipps (2020), and referred to as #MeToo discourse theory. The analysis shows that the five novels chosen are not only shaped by the cultural moment of the #MeToo movement, but are also part of its theoretical and political labor, as it extends the #MeToo challenge to the theoretical and affective space that literature alone can occupy, namely to the formal and affective realms of the credibility regimes of patriarchy. Meanwhile, the intersectionality, queer experience,

and the critiques of mainstream feminist discourse emphasized throughout the corpus indicate that the most ambitious post-#MeToo feminist fiction is situated beyond the movement's dominant narratives to offer alternatives to feminist silence and the possibilities for change brought by feminists' words. However, the focus on intersectionality, queer experience, and critiques of mainstream feminist discourse throughout the corpus suggest that the most ambitious post-#MeToo fiction extends beyond the dominant narratives of the movement to look at alternatives to feminist silence and the possibilities for change offered by feminists' words.

The results of this study are joined together to argue that the modern feminist fiction of the post-#MeToo era is a significant and unique literary formation, a formation characterised by formal innovation, political urgency, intersectional consciousness, and a strong sense of the power of the fragmented, ironic and incomplete act of speaking as the most basic weapon of feminist resistance. As Burke (2021) has argued, and this analysis demonstrates with reference to five extraordinary literary texts, the work of making the silence break is not personal but always, at its heart, is collective and transformative work of cultural and political reimagination.

6. Findings

The study determines that all five novels selected purposefully innovate their formal devices – polyphony, second-person address, fragmentation, generic hybridity and lyric compression – as means to challenge the patriarchy's demands for a linear, emotionally controlled, institutionally persuasive female testimony. In the *Dream House*, which is written in a second-person perspective, Machado's character fragments the experience of trauma, never allowing it to be fully coherent in the past tense as it is required to be by such regimes of legal and cultural credibility. However, in *Girl, Woman, Other* Evaristo's polyphonic setting of this collective power of shared testimony is a formal performance of the political power of the female voice, which only finds its fullest political power in being collectively articulated. In the flat narration of Moshfegh's, in which everything is straightened, the violence of the patriarchal requirement for voluminous female emotions and social performances becomes evident. Together, these formal strategies allow us to accept Lanser's (1992) claim that the voice of the narrative is always a gendered and ideologically charged construction, and that the formal decisions made by feminist fiction are political arguments about who is spoken for in the culture today and who is systematically excluded from it.

The results show that texts selected are directly and extensively related to the theoretical concerns of #MeToo. The silencing of institutions is depicted in every novel in legal, familial, medical, and archival contexts. Gay's *Hunger* tells the stories of family disbeliefs and medical pathologization as two additional forms of silencing, which make the survivor's voice invisible in the very institutions that are supposed to safeguard her.

Building on Mendes and Ringrose (2019), the theorization of patriarchal silencing, Machado's text engages with archival erasure as a type of institutional violence that affects queer survivors. Evaristo's story reveals the ways in which racial marginalisation combines with gendered credibility regimes to create compound forms of institutional invisibility for Black and minority women. The results of this research indicate that post-#MeToo feminist fiction is an active and engaged player in the movement's critique of patriarchal epistemologies, making the political calls for feminist survivors' voices into formal and themed literary practice.

The analysis reveals that none of the five texts will buy into Gill and Orgad's (2018) account of the culturally dominant narrative of redemption, resilience and reintegration that female survivors must enact in order to be accepted as recovered. Rather, the corpus demands the indeterminacy, production and inter-differentiation of female suffering and resistance. The refusal of narrative closure by Gay, the channeling of uncontained female rage by Hunter, and the insistence on the epistemological violence of queer invisibility by Machado altogether disrupt the dominant cultural narratives that individualize, universalize, and depoliticize the experiences of women as victims of gendered violence. Crenshaw's (2013) intersectional framework becomes useful here: female voice in post-#MeToo fiction is never singular, but always multiply positioned, shaped by the intersecting axes of race, sexuality and class that determine the differential conditions in which females speak, are believed, and are heard.

7. Conclusion

In this study, the female voice in the feminist fiction of the contemporary period has been examined using the theoretical framework of the #MeToo movement discourse and five purposively selected novels published in the period of 2017-2024. By applying feminist narratology, trauma theory and #MeToo discourse theory as an interrelated approach to analysis, the research has found that post-#MeToo feminist fiction is a unique and politically relevant literary formation, characterized by formal innovation, intersectionality and a firm orientation towards dismantling the patriarchal epistemologies that historically have determined what kinds of stories are culturally legitimate and which are structurally inaudible.

It has been shown in the analysis that the female voice in the chosen texts is never a spontaneous and uncontested voice of female subjectivity, but rather a constructed, contested and political voice produced in the face of several overlapping and silencing mechanisms – institutional, archival, cultural and epistemological. The formal strategies each used by Machado, Evaristo, Gay, Moshfegh, and Hunter—second-person dissociation, polyphony, confessional fragmentation, ironic flatness, and lyric compression—are different, but formally coherent representations that play out the conditions of women's speech in a patriarchal culture. As the analysis has always shown,

these formal decisions are political arguments themselves that oppose the dominant cultural need to present female testimony in a linear, credible, and emotionally controlled manner, and assert instead the formal complexity of the lived complexity of being female.

According to the study, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013, Hooks, 2000) suggests that female voice in feminist fiction post #MeToo is not a single one but rather multiply positioned. The intersectional elements of race, sexuality, and class are highlighted in the texts of the corpus, especially in Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* and Machado's *In the Dream House*, which are the most politically ambitious in the collection and critically engage with these axes in a way that goes beyond the mainstream #MeToo discourses which have been white and heterosexual. This intersexual awareness is one of the most important contributions that contemporary feminist fiction has made to the larger cultural enterprise begun by the feminist movement.

Finally, this study has validated the position of literature as an inalienable part of feminist practice. Fiction offers credibility, rationality and procedural form that are imposed by legal and institutional structures, freeing the form to represent female experience in its full complexity: fractured, raging, ironic, unresolved, and yet collectively powerful. As Burke (2021) argues, breaking the silence is never simply a personal response, but a political action – a collective and transformative one – and the feminist fiction explored in this study is fully and bravely engaged in this unfinished, ongoing and necessary cultural process.

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