Negotiating Power through Silence: A Discourse-Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness and Evasive Strategies in Peacebuilding Dialogues in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

This study examines silence as a discourse-pragmatic strategy for negotiating power, politeness, and evasive communication in selected dialogues in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. While existing scholarship on the novel has largely focused on themes such as war, identity, memory, and gender, less attention has been given to the micro-level interactional processes through which meaning is constructed in dialogue. This study addresses that gap by analyzing silence not as absence of speech but as a meaningful communicative act embedded in context. The study is anchored in discourse pragmatics, particularly Gricean implicature, Speech Act Theory, and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, complemented by African communicative perspectives that emphasize indirectness, restraint, and social harmony. Using a qualitative textual analysis approach, selected conversational exchanges in the novel are examined to show how silence functions as a pragmatic resource for expressing resistance, managing conflict, avoiding confrontation, and negotiating interpersonal power relations. Findings reveal that silence in the novel operates in multiple ways: as a politeness strategy that preserves face, as an evasive mechanism that deflects confrontation, and as a subtle tool for asserting emotional and social power. The study further demonstrates that silence contributes to

everyday peacebuilding within interpersonal relationships, even in contexts shaped by war and instability. It concludes that silence is not communicative absence but a structured discourse strategy that plays a central role in meaning-making and relational negotiation in African literary texts.

Keywords: Silence; discourse pragmatics; politeness strategies; power negotiation; evasive communication; African literature

Introduction

Communication in literature extends beyond articulated speech to include silence, pauses, and other forms of non-verbal signification that shape meaning within interaction. In African literary discourse, silence is not merely an absence of words but a culturally and contextually embedded mode of communication through which individuals negotiate relationships, power, and social expectations. As Karin Barber observes, meaning in African expressive forms is often produced through performance, implication, and shared contextual knowledge rather than explicit articulation (Barber 72). This understanding foregrounds silence as an integral component of discourse, particularly in narratives that engage with conflict, trauma, and social instability.

This study examines silence as a discourse-pragmatic strategy in *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a novel situated within the historical realities of the Nigerian Civil War. The text offers a profound exploration of human relationships under conditions of war, where communication is shaped by fear, uncertainty, and shifting power dynamics. While existing literary scholarship has extensively examined themes of war, identity, and memory in the novel, there remains limited attention to the micro-level of dialogue through which these themes are enacted. In particular, the role of silence as a communicative and strategic resource in interpersonal exchanges has not been sufficiently interrogated. This gap underscores the need for a discourse-pragmatic analysis that moves beyond thematic interpretation to examine how meaning is constructed through both speech and silence in the text.

African literary scholars have long emphasized the importance of contextual and culturally grounded approaches to textual analysis. Isidore Okpewho notes that African narratives often rely on indirection, symbolism, and audience inference, thereby privileging what is implied over what is explicitly stated (Okpewho 98). Similarly, Chinua Achebe argues that African storytelling traditions are deeply rooted in communal values where language is used not only to convey information but to maintain social harmony and respect (Achebe 24). Within such communicative frameworks, silence can function as a marker of politeness, respect, or restraint, especially in situations where direct speech may threaten social equilibrium. These insights are particularly relevant in analyzing *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where characters frequently engage in indirect and evasive communication as a means of navigating complex interpersonal and sociopolitical tensions.

The present study is therefore motivated by the need to interrogate how silence operates as a functional element of discourse in the novel, particularly in relation to politeness and evasive strategies. In contexts of conflict such as war, where direct expression may escalate tension or expose vulnerability, individuals often resort to indirectness, ambiguity, and silence as protective mechanisms. As Tanure Ojaide observes, African literature often reflects the strategies through which individuals cope with socio-political crises, including the use of subtle and non-confrontational modes of expression (Ojaide 56). However, while such observations point to the presence of indirect communication, they do not sufficiently account for the specific discourse-pragmatic functions that silence performs within interaction. This creates a critical gap that this study seeks to address.

Within this framework, the study is guided by the overarching aim of examining how silence functions as a discourse-pragmatic resource for negotiating power, politeness, and evasion in selected dialogues from *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This involves identifying instances where silence occurs in interaction and analyzing the communicative purposes it serves within specific conversational contexts. In particular, the study seeks to explore how silence operates as a politeness strategy that enables characters to preserve face and maintain social harmony; how it functions as an evasive strategy that allows speakers to avoid sensitive or

potentially conflictual topics; and how it contributes to the negotiation of power relations by enabling characters to assert agency, resist domination, or navigate hierarchical structures.

These concerns are closely tied to the broader concept of peacebuilding, understood in this study as the everyday processes through which individuals manage conflict and sustain relationships in contexts of instability. Rather than viewing peacebuilding solely in institutional or diplomatic terms, this research conceptualizes it at the level of interpersonal interaction, where language plays a crucial role in mitigating tension and fostering coexistence. As Kwame Gyekye argues, African social thought emphasizes communal harmony and the maintenance of social balance as fundamental values (Gyekye 35). Within such a framework, silence and indirectness can be seen as pragmatic tools for conflict management, enabling individuals to avoid confrontation and preserve relational stability. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, characters frequently deploy these strategies in their interactions, thereby engaging in subtle forms of peacebuilding even amidst the chaos of war.

At the same time, the study recognizes the ambivalent nature of silence as a communicative practice. While silence can facilitate harmony and conflict avoidance, it can also reflect and reinforce power inequalities. In certain instances, silence may signal marginalization, repression, or the inability to speak within dominant discourses. As Tejumola Olaniyan notes, power in African texts is often negotiated through both speech and its suppression, revealing the complex dynamics of voice and agency (Olaniyan 112). This duality underscores the need for a nuanced analysis that considers both the empowering and constraining dimensions of silence within the novel.

By focusing on selected dialogues from *Half of a Yellow Sun*, this study adopts a discourse-pragmatic approach that foregrounds the interactional dynamics of communication. It moves beyond broad thematic readings to examine how meaning is constructed through the interplay of speech, silence, and context. In doing so, it contributes to African literary scholarship by highlighting the importance of linguistic and pragmatic analysis in understanding character interaction and narrative development. Furthermore, it advances the study of

silence as a critical tool for negotiating power and managing conflict, thereby offering new insights into the communicative complexities of literature set in contexts of crisis.

Ultimately, this research argues that silence in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is not a passive or incidental feature of dialogue but a deliberate and strategic resource through which characters navigate the challenges of war, negotiate interpersonal relationships, and engage in processes of conflict management and peacebuilding. By bringing together insights from African literary criticism and discourse pragmatics, the study underscores the significance of the unsaid in shaping meaning and reveals the intricate ways in which language and its absence functions within the text.

Review of Related Literature

Recent African scholarship has increasingly moved beyond purely thematic interpretations of literature to view texts as sites of discourse and communicative practice, where meaning is produced through interaction, cultural codes, and contextual negotiation. Within this shift, attention to silence, indirectness, and pragmatic meaning-making has become increasingly important, particularly in African fiction. However, despite growing interest in discourse approaches, there remains limited systematic analysis of silence as a communicative strategy in contemporary African novels such as *Half of a Yellow Sun*, especially in relation to politeness and power negotiation in dialogue.

African literary criticism has long emphasized the importance of socio-political and historical context in interpreting African texts. Biodun Jeyifo argues that African literature must be read within its ideological and historical conditions, where language becomes a medium for negotiating power, conflict, and social meaning. This perspective is particularly relevant to war narratives, where communication is shaped by trauma, instability, and shifting social relations. However, while such scholarship foregrounds the political dimensions of language, it pays less attention to the micro-level pragmatic processes such as silence and evasive responses through which these negotiations occur in everyday interaction.

Similarly, Ato Quayson highlights that postcolonial African narratives often employ fragmentation, gaps, and narrative silences that require interpretive reconstruction. These absences are especially significant in texts dealing with trauma and violence, where meaning is often indirect and layered. While Quayson's work draws attention to silence as a narrative feature, it does not fully extend to a discourse-pragmatic analysis of silence as an interactional strategy within dialogue.

Feminist African scholarship also provides valuable insights into silence and power. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argues that silence in African women's writing can function both as a form of oppression and as a strategy of resistance, depending on context. This duality is evident in Adichie's representation of female characters, who often navigate patriarchal constraints through both speech and silence. However, much feminist literary criticism remains focused on thematic interpretation rather than detailed analysis of conversational interaction.

African philosophical thought further deepens the understanding of communicative practices in African contexts. Kwasi Wiredu emphasizes consensus-oriented communication in African societies, where restraint, indirectness, and non-confrontational dialogue are valued as tools for maintaining social harmony. This perspective helps explain why silence and evasive responses are culturally meaningful strategies for managing conflict and preserving relationships. However, philosophical accounts tend to remain abstract and do not examine how these principles operate at the level of literary dialogue.

In African discourse pragmatics, Kofi Agyekum provides one of the most important empirical contributions to understanding silence as communication. His study of Akan discourse demonstrates that silence is not absence of meaning but a context-dependent communicative act that can signal respect, disagreement, emotional restraint, or acceptance. This reinforces the view that silence is a culturally regulated and semantically rich strategy in African communication systems.

Despite these important contributions, there remains a clear gap in scholarship. While African scholars have examined themes of identity, conflict, gender, and

cultural communication in Half of a Yellow Sun, and while discourse and pragmatic studies have highlighted the importance of indirectness and silence in African communication, there is still limited integration of these insights within a discourse-pragmatic framework applied directly to literary dialogue. Specifically, the functional role of silence as a strategy of politeness, evasion, and power negotiation in interaction has not been sufficiently explored.

The present study addresses this gap by integrating African literary criticism with discourse pragmatics to examine how silence operates in *Half of a Yellow Sun.* It moves beyond thematic interpretation to focus on interactional meaning-making, showing how characters use silence to negotiate power, manage conflict, and regulate emotional relationships. In doing so, the study contributes to African literary pragmatics by demonstrating that silence is not absence but a structured communicative strategy embedded in cultural, social, and relational contexts.

Empirical Studies

A growing body of African discourse-pragmatic scholarship has demonstrated that communication in many African sociocultural contexts is deeply shaped by indirectness, politeness, and strategic silence. Although relatively few empirical studies have focused specifically on silence in literary discourse, research on everyday interaction, pragmatics, and conflict communication in African settings provides a strong analytical foundation for examining how silence functions as a meaningful communicative resource in texts such as *Half of a Yellow Sun.*

One of the most influential contributions to African pragmatics is the work of Akin Odebunmi, whose studies on discourse in Nigerian institutional and interpersonal settings highlight the role of indirectness, mitigation strategies, and face management in communication. Odebunmi demonstrates that speakers often rely on implicit meaning, avoidance strategies, and minimal verbal response to navigate sensitive interactions, particularly where social hierarchy and emotional tension are involved. His findings support the view that silence is not communicative absence but a structured pragmatic choice used to regulate interaction and manage relational risks.

Similarly, research in African sociolinguistics has consistently shown that politeness and social harmony strongly influence communicative behavior. Efurosibina Adegbija, in his foundational work on pragmatics in Nigerian English, emphasizes that conversational interaction in Nigerian contexts often prioritizes respect, restraint, and contextual appropriateness over directness. Within such communicative environments, silence and indirect responses function as face-saving strategies that help maintain interpersonal balance and avoid overt confrontation. This perspective provides a useful lens for interpreting silence in literary dialogue, where characters frequently negotiate power and emotion through what is left unsaid.

Further support comes from African pragmatic studies that focus on meaning construction in context. Kofi Agyekum, in his analysis of communicative silence in Akan discourse, argues that silence is a culturally embedded semiotic resource that must be interpreted within situational and relational contexts. He shows that silence can indicate agreement, disagreement, respect, emotional restraint, or disapproval depending on the communicative setting. This reinforces the idea that silence is polysemous and context-dependent, making it particularly relevant for discourse-pragmatic analysis of literary texts where meaning is often indirect and layered.

In addition, politeness theory as developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson has been widely applied in African discourse studies to explain how speakers manage face-threatening acts through linguistic and non-linguistic strategies. Their framework shows that silence can function as a negative politeness strategy, allowing speakers to avoid imposition, disagreement, or confrontation. In African communicative contexts, this aligns with broader cultural norms that value restraint and relational harmony.

Taken together, these empirical and theoretical insights establish that silence is a meaningful communicative strategy widely used in African discourse systems. It functions as a tool for managing power relations, negotiating social hierarchy, and maintaining emotional and interpersonal balance. However, most existing empirical studies focus on spoken interaction in everyday or institutional settings, with limited attention to how these strategies operate within African literary

narratives. This study addresses that gap by extending empirically grounded discourse-pragmatic insights to the analysis of silence in *Half of a Yellow Sun.* It demonstrates how silence in the novel operates as a structured communicative strategy through which characters negotiate power, manage conflict, and express emotional states in contexts of tension and uncertainty. In doing so, the study bridges African empirical pragmatics and literary discourse analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Pragmatics, Politeness Theory, and African Communicative Thought to explain how silence functions as a meaningful communicative strategy in literary discourse. The framework provides conceptual tools for analyzing how characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* construct and negotiate meaning through both speech and the deliberate absence of speech.

At the foundation of this study is Pragmatics, particularly the work of H. P. Grice. Grice's theory of meaning emphasizes that communication extends beyond what is explicitly stated to include what is implied. His concept of conversational implicature demonstrates how interlocutors derive meaning based on shared assumptions, contextual knowledge, and the cooperative principles guiding interaction. Within this framework, silence can be understood as a form of implicature: when a speaker withholds a response, that silence itself becomes meaningful and open to interpretation within a given context. In literary discourse, silence invites readers to infer underlying emotions, tensions, and unspoken intentions, making it a powerful meaning-making resource.

Closely related to this is Speech Act Theory, developed by J. L. Austin and later expanded by John Searle. Speech Act Theory conceptualizes language as a form of action in which utterances perform functions such as asserting, questioning, or commanding. Extending this perspective, silence may also be interpreted as a communicative act a form of "non-verbal speech act." In this sense, silence can perform functions such as refusal, resistance, evasion, or emotional withdrawal. This theoretical lens is particularly useful for examining how characters deploy silence deliberately within interaction, rather than treating it as a passive absence of communication.

The study further draws on Politeness Theory as articulated by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. Their model is based on the concept of face, defined as an individual's public self-image. They distinguish between positive face the desire to be approved of and negative face the desire to act without imposition. Within this framework, silence can function as a politeness strategy, particularly as a form of negative politeness, where speakers avoid direct confrontation, criticism, or imposition by withholding speech. In the novel, characters frequently employ silence to maintain social harmony, demonstrate respect, and manage interpersonal tensions, especially in contexts shaped by hierarchy, gender relations, and emotional sensitivity.

However, these frameworks are largely rooted in Western linguistic traditions. To account for the cultural specificity of communication in African contexts, this study incorporates African Communicative Thought, particularly the works of Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye. These scholars emphasize that African communicative practices are embedded in communal values where the primary goal of interaction is the preservation of social harmony and consensus rather than individual expression. Within such contexts, indirectness, restraint, and silence are culturally valued strategies for managing relationships and preventing conflict. Silence, therefore, is not merely the absence of speech but a socially meaningful act shaped by norms of respect, hierarchy, and collective well-being.

In addition, the study engages African literary-critical perspectives on power and expression, particularly the works of Tejumola Olaniyan and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie. These scholars highlight the complex relationship between silence and power in African texts. Silence may function as a form of agency and resistance, enabling characters to withhold consent, negotiate dominance, or subtly challenge authority. At the same time, silence may also signal marginalization or repression, especially in contexts where voices are constrained by gender, class, or sociopolitical structures. This dual perspective is essential for interpreting the ambivalent nature of silence in the novel, where it operates both as empowerment and constraint depending on the interactional context.

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, the study conceptualizes silence as a pragmatic resource that generates meaning through inference, a communicative

act that performs interactional functions, a politeness strategy for managing face and social relations, and a culturally embedded practice shaped by African values of communal harmony and respect. This integrated framework provides a robust analytical foundation for examining how silence operates as a nuanced and multifunctional strategy in literary discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based research design grounded in literary analysis and discourse pragmatics. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meaning-making processes, communicative strategies, and interactional dynamics as they are constructed through language use particularly silence within a literary text. The aim is not quantification but a close interpretive reading of how meaning emerges within specific narrative contexts. The primary data for this study are drawn from *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which serves as the sole source of analysis. The study relies on careful close reading of the novel to identify relevant passages in which silence, pauses, withheld responses, or non-verbal communicative cues play a significant role in character interaction and meaning construction. The selection of textual evidence is guided by analytical relevance. Only those passages that reflect interpersonal tension, emotional intensity, power relations, or pragmatic ambiguity are included in the analysis. This ensures that attention is focused on moments where silence is functionally meaningful within the narrative structure.

The study employs a discourse-pragmatic analytical approach to examine the selected extracts. This involves interpreting how meaning is produced through both spoken language and silence within specific interactional contexts. The analysis is informed by pragmatic concepts such as implicature, speech acts, and politeness strategies, which help explain how silence operates as a communicative resource beyond verbal expression.

Each extract is examined in relation to its immediate conversational context, the relationship between characters, and the underlying power dynamics. Silence is interpreted functionally, with attention to whether it signals resistance, avoidance, emotional withdrawal, deference, or conflict management.

To this end, methodology is interpretive, context-sensitive, and firmly rooted in qualitative literary analysis. It seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of silence as a discourse-pragmatic strategy in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, particularly in relation to power, emotion, and interpersonal communication.

Analysis

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, silence functions as a dynamic discourse-pragmatic resource through which characters negotiate power, politeness, and emotional tension within both interpersonal and collective contexts. Olanna's silence following Odenigbo's infidelity "Say something," Odenigbo said. Olanna said nothing (Adichie 252) constitutes one of the most compelling instances of silence as resistance and power negotiation. Odenigbo's directive attempts to reclaim conversational authority from Olanna keeps the silence on the move. Olanna's refusal to respond produces a pragmatic reversal of power. Her silence generates strong implicature, communicating anger, betrayal, and emotional withdrawal without explicit articulation. Within politeness theory, this silence avoids direct face-threatening acts such as accusation, while simultaneously threatening Odenigbo's positive face by denying him engagement or validation. As such, silence becomes a strategic withholding that preserves Olanna's dignity while destabilizing Odenigbo's dominance. This aligns with African communicative norms where restraint often signifies emotional control and moral authority (Ezeifeka 45; Nwoye 98). Similarly, Ugwu's silence in response to Odenigbo "Did you hear me? Ugwu nodded, saying nothing (Adichie 34) demonstrates silence as a politeness strategy shaped by hierarchical relations. His non-verbal response substitutes for speech, conveying respect, attentiveness, and compliance without overstepping social boundaries. From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, this reflects negative politeness, as Ugwu avoids imposing himself through unnecessary verbalization. Within African socio-cultural frameworks, such silence reinforces structures of deference and respect, functioning conservatively to maintain social order (Adegbija 210; Igboanusi 67). In contrast, Kainene's silence during emotional confrontation "You could have told me," Olanna said. Kainene did not reply (Adichie 289), illustrates evasion as a discourse strategy. Her silence deflects direct engagement, creating ambiguity that compels interpretive effort. Pragmatically, this silence is dense with meaning, potentially signaling indifference, guilt, or defiance. While it operates as a conflict-avoidance strategy

within politeness theory, it simultaneously withholds relational repair, thereby intensifying interpersonal distance. In this sense, silence becomes a mechanism of interactional control, allowing Kainene to regulate the trajectory of discourse (Odebunmi 154). Beyond interpersonal exchanges, silence also emerges collectively in wartime contexts: "They listened to the distant shelling. Nobody spoke" (Adichie 317). Here, silence functions as a shared communicative experience shaped by trauma and uncertainty. The absence of speech signals what exceeds verbal expression such as fear, anticipation, and vulnerability highlighting the limits of language in extreme conditions. Within this context, silence operates as a protective and regulatory mechanism, sustaining emotional stability and fostering implicit solidarity. From a peacebuilding perspective, such silence performs micro-level conflict management by preventing panic and reinforcing communal endurance (Ekanjume-Ilongo 73). Finally, Kainene's silence in response to Richard "Are you angry with me?" Richard asked. Kainene said nothing (Adichie 305), further underscores silence as emotional control and power assertion. By withholding verbal response, Kainene compels interpretive engagement while denying reassurance, thereby positioning herself as the interactional gatekeeper. This silence avoids overt confrontation yet withholds positive face support, creating an imbalance that underscores her dominance within the interaction. Collectively, these instances demonstrate that silence in the novel is not merely absence but a culturally and pragmatically meaningful strategy through which characters negotiate power, manage relationships, and regulate conflict in both personal and communal spheres

Conclusion

This study has examined silence as a discourse-pragmatic strategy for negotiating power, politeness, and evasive communication in selected dialogues in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It demonstrates that silence in the novel is not a passive absence of speech but a structured communicative resource embedded in context, relationships, and cultural meaning systems. Through the integration of discourse pragmatics, politeness theory, and African communicative thought, the study reveals that silence performs multiple interactional functions. It serves as a politeness strategy that helps characters preserve face and avoid direct confrontation; it operates as an evasive strategy through which sensitive issues are strategically avoided; and it functions as a

subtle mechanism for negotiating power in interpersonal relationships. In addition, silence contributes to everyday forms of peacebuilding by regulating emotional tension and sustaining relational balance even within the broader context of conflict and war.

However, the findings also show that silence is inherently ambivalent. While it may promote harmony and prevent escalation of conflict, it can equally reinforce emotional distance, inequality, or unresolved tension depending on context. This duality underscores the complexity of silence as a communicative strategy in African literary discourse.

The study contributes to knowledge in several significant ways. Theoretically, it extends discourse-pragmatic understanding by establishing silence as an active meaning-making resource rather than communicative absence. Literarily, it shifts critical attention in *Half of a Yellow Sun* from thematic interpretation to micro-level interactional analysis, revealing how meaning is constructed through dialogue structure as well as content. Culturally, it situates silence within African communicative norms of restraint, respect, and indirectness, demonstrating its role in maintaining social harmony. Finally, the study introduces a peacebuilding dimension to literary pragmatics by showing how everyday interactional silence functions as a tool for conflict regulation and relational stability.

By foregrounding the communicative power of silence, this study opens up new possibilities for African literary discourse analysis, particularly in examining how what is left unsaid is often as meaningful as what is spoken.

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