

**Unvoiced Traumas: Silence and Oppression in Adriana Lisboa's  
*Symphony in White***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Literature is a reliable source in the social history of the contemporary world. Female voices in the current society take up a deep voice and a meaningful view, as they are recognized to be the public subject. Adriana Lisboa in her novel Symphony in White discusses the abuse of children and the violence meted out by them in the society. The novel also focuses on how the girl children suffer due to the harassment within their family circle, which results in failure. The present paper analyses how oppression leads to silence which ultimately destructs life.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Silence, Oppression, Sexual Violence, incest, Female.*

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Literature is one of the most widely used human expressional practices. In the contemporary literature, the public dilemma and the representation of women and women related issues are expressed deeply through many characters. Themes like, violence, identity crisis, and exploitation of women are the recurring subjects in the contemporary novels. One of the Brazilian writers, Adriana Lisboa eloquently brings out the delicate themes like child sexual violence and incest in her fiction, *Symphony in White*.

The plot of the fiction *Symphony in White* is woven with the memories of the characters, which links the past and the present of the characters. It is all about a family's saga which is filled with secrets and silences. The narration of the novel is multifaceted as well as stiff in a well-to-do allusion of art and music. Actually 'Symphony in White' is the title of a painting of an American painter James Whistler, which has a correlation with the concepts of music and visual arts. In the novel, the survival of the two main characters namely, Maria Ines and Clarice despite of their family secrets and chaos forms as the main core of novel, which is also associated with music and visual arts. Here Lisboa legitimates an operating space for her writing

imitating and deconstructing the ideas of the American painter, James Whistler and sets a new tone for her literary work.

The word 'Symphony' in the title of the novel also draws contraposition to the plot of the fiction. The story line accumulates trauma, like a tragic choir in the background scene, which includes, a frustrated mother, Otacilia, the rape and dead scene of Clarice's friend, Lina, Tomas's parent's exile, the lonely and submissive great-aunt Berenice of the girls shock the symphony of the novel. Clarice is sexually abused by her own father forms the main part of the novel which triggers trauma and disturbance the lives of all the characters in the novel.

The voice that narrates in *Symphony in White* is a discreet voice, which is almost secret. The allusion to symphony and music in the fiction demonstrate that there is sound in the silence and there is a silence in the sound. The centre of the plot is knitted with two distinguish sisters, Clarice and Maria Ines. Clarice is the oldest one, who is "docile, demure, submissive, well-mannered, polite, discreet [and] adorable" (*Symphony* 163) whereas, Maria Ines is the younger sister of Clarice who is inventive, bold who always "had her ways of overhearing the adult's conversations" (7). The characteristics of both the sisters are utterly different and it is evicted that Clarice is a girl who is bestowed with submissive personality. She seeks to fit and please others. As Clarice is very submissive always, her father rapes her while her mother always take liberty to illtreat her. The act of her parents makes Clarice to suffer from her childhood onwards.

With the voice of symphony in white, the narrator highlights the characters' melancholy and pain in detail with "the small mirror smile" (50). The entry of silence begins from the early childhood of the sisters, Maria Ines and Clarice, while they spend most of their childhood in the Ipes farm. Maria Ines instructs Joao Miguel "don't you go telling my father that we were here, It's forbidden" (5). Lisboa associates the thought process of Clarice with the plants that grows on the roof. As years go by, "plants grew on the roof. The paint on the windows peeled off little by little. Day to day everything aged and became more secretive [and] more painful" (6). Lucila Edelman et al are of the view that, "silence and secrecy could become even more important than the situation of loss, especially in situations where the substitute parental figures were adequate" (qtd. in Edelman 453). In the fiction Lisboa highlights the point that silence is the root cause of all problems to girl children.

The symbolism of white colour throughout the narrative indicates the innocence of the sisters. Maria Ines is the reason for the painting 'Symphony in White', as she is always seems to be "the girl in white" (*Symphony* 81) and she dramatically decorates her apartment in white: "Everything was white. White sofa. White walls. White ideas. A large quantity of white marble. Some brushed aluminium, as in the two chairs. Some satinwood, as in the shelves" (9). The color white "symbolizes innocence, purity, cleansing and forgiveness" (qtd. in Genie 299). Maria Ines on sighting these white objects every day, she gets trigger on her sister's innocence for the sexual abuse and gets arouse with "full of dust and vague thoughts" (*Symphony* 52) to evoke her sister, Clarice from the world of silence and innocence.

After the migration to Rio de Janeiro Clarice makes attempts to forget her trauma but it accompanies throughout her life. Otacilia, Clarice's mother after the

occurrence of rape a forbidden disaster, in Clarice's life, she "decided to send Clarice to Rio de Janeiro to study" (42), in order to save Clarice from the repeated attack of her incestuous father. Clarice migrates to Rio de Janeiro and realizes that "Life is a vast seam of precise moments" (*Symphony* 38). Therefore with the day-to-day occurrences in Rio de Janeiro, the silence within Clarice slowly seems to fade. She says that, "her stomach ached, her head ached. She mentioned it to great-aunt and her own voice startled her, as if it had been silent for many years" (58). Also in trying to set herself free from the past memories, Clarice plans to be busy with too many enterprises in Rio de Janeiro, so that she could "forget who Clarice was" (59) but, "nothing took shape. Not that she was lacking in ideas, but it was as if they had no face or shape" (59). The critic Peter is of the view that, "sensory imprints of trauma can have powerful effects on our subsequent reactions, behaviour and emotional feeling states. After having become accustomed to constantly be on guard against letting these demons from the past enter our consciousness" (4) the voice within Clarice reveals that, emotions are exhausted and irreversible that, it can never get switched or forgotten from the memory of the person so easily. That makes herself once again arrested with the past thoughts.

The forbidden words and taboo secrets of the past in the novel brings forth the sense of loss to the characters' present life. In the house, Clarice makes arrangements for her shift while her friend, Lina comes up to help Clarice with packaging. Lina has a good time with Clarice. Later, she finishes her supper and leaves Clarice's home. On the way "she smelled sweaty and felt an odd sadness gnawing at her heart" (*Symphony* 53) with silence. Meanwhile a man "came out of the bushes, from behind a grove of cypress trees" (*Symphony* 53) and rapes her. On the next day morning only few people whisper about the crime. The role of misfortune and trauma in Lina's life with a tragic trauma add an extra disgrace in the fiction which is labeled as a subject of forbidden and silence. Otacilia and Afonso Olimpio remain silent on Lina's murder, because it is forbidden. Here, it can be observed that trauma occurs in a person's life shatters his life as well as it makes an end to his life.

The bond between the mother, Otacilia and her daughters, Clarice and Maria Inês is built with silence. The sexual violence of the father towards his daughter creates a void and the result is silence and disturbance in the family which reflects trauma. The happy childhood of the sisters, Clarice and Maria Ines was also devastated by the silence of the family, who least spend time for each other. Otacilia, leads an unhappy life with her husband Alfonso Olimpio, because she always feels that "her marriage was never all that that [she] had imagined" (24). The trauma is silenced throughout the family, while "Otacilia knew what was happening in her own house, in her own family, long before she finally took a stand. And no one said a single word" (164). Most of the time Otacilia ponders about the trauma and annihilates her relationship with her husband, as "there was nothing left for her but a bitter stab of hopelessness" (25). The women in the family are affected by consequences of the abuse whereas their father, Afonso Olímpio remains obscure like a shadow and hides himself in the corners. It shows that women are all silenced mainly for the convenience of the family in the name of family privacy. The critic Cathy Caruth records that "the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). The narrator is of the view that, keeping quiet is not always a choice for women, but it adds meaning according to the circumstances. Lisboa, here focuses on female silencing, as well as reminds her readers about the

history of women emancipation, where women have been silenced throughout their life and are dominated and oppressed by the male members of the society.

Otacilia emancipates her daughter from silencing. She is the first one to break the “rule” (48) of the family and decides to send Clarice to Rio de Janeiro to give her education. However Clarice “was surprised by her mother’s resolve to send her away. Because if it was all so underground, if it was all of secret” (48). As a result, this behaviour of Otacilia reflects on Maria Ines’ behaviour, as she retreats from her silence. Maria Ines looks for a good chance to rebel her father, for his crime. Alfonso Olimpio since then, “never near to Maria Ines, he pretended to ignore her” (166), because he is already “afraid of that younger daughter as if she was a devil” (166). Maria Ines creates an opportunity during a ‘June festival’ and pushes Alfonso from the top of the quarry. Though the “murder” (*Symphony* 55) being a forbidden word, the apparent ‘silence’ is a painful sound that nudges Maria Ines to push Alfonso Olimpio from the top of the hill with “a minimal sound almost inaudible, echoed in Clarice’s mind” (*Symphony* 176). The silence is broken through the gesture of Maria Ines, while, Clarice turns up her face up “to the sky and saw the image of the multicoloured butterfly” (*Symphony* 176-7). In symbolic terms, the butterfly is equated to a “human soul which is purified by earthly sufferings and its presence heralds a visit or the death of a close person” (Chevalier 834), which is a symbol of transformation and rebirth. Just like the butterfly which flies with happiness, after the death of their father, the ‘silence’ is broken and there is a considerable transformation in the lives of the family members.

In her fiction, *Symphony in White*, Lisboa stresses the point that ‘silence’ entraps a human being and leads to an undesired harsh life. She also elucidates the idea that, silence leads to emptiness and creates a void in life. Both the characters Clarice and Maria Ines undergo silence in their life due to their father’s immortal life. After their father’s abrupt death they feel free from their enslavement and try to lead a happy life. Lisboa as a writer through the novel expresses the causes and effects of silence. She radically focuses the idea that psychic entrapment is the root cause of ‘silence’ which should be detected in the beginning so that women can enjoy throughout their life.

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