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The Colonial Conquest of Identity: Exploring Silence, Memory, and Narrative Agency as Resistance in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)

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ABSTRACT:

This dissertation explores the enduring impact of trauma, originating from colonial violence, on identity and memory within the postcolonial Caribbean context through a close reading of Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). It investigates how colonial violence, namely narrative erasure and silencing extends beyond political subjugation to inscribe itself onto personal identities and collective memory, leaving psychological scars that persist long after formal independence. Central to this study is how memory operates as a repository of trauma and as a means of narrative agency and resistance, and how silence could potentially enable the affirmation of identities which have been historically erased by colonial discourse.

By focusing on characters from the novel like Mala and Chandin Ramchandin, the analysis reveals how Chandin's internalised colonial mimicry forms part of a larger cycle of domestic violence and abuse which mirrors violent colonial hierarchies. Mala's silence and psychological fragmentation also serve as an allegory for the erasure of postcolonial identities as her trauma manifests both in the withdrawal of language and societal neglect. This dissertation employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing on postcolonial theory, trauma theory, memory studies and research on silence in literature, engaging with scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Maurice Halbwachs, Cathy Caruth and Charles Glicksberg.

The study examines how various narrative techniques including non-linear narration, narrative ambiguity and polyphonic narration mirror the fragmented nature of memory and facilitates a counter-discursive space where silenced voices emerge. By situating *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) in a much broader Caribbean literary canon, the project aims to demonstrate how Mootoo subverts traditional binaries surrounding victimhood and agency, public and private as well as natural versus unnatural identities.

Finally, the dissertation contends that memory and silence, despite their inscrutable and fractured nature, are capable of functioning as powerful tools for resistance and identity reclamation, urging postcolonial identities to renegotiate their personal narratives and collective histories that have for so long been silenced. At large, this project contributes to ongoing dialogue around how postcolonial literature grapples with memory, silence and trauma as key factors in the reconstitution of identity.

DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts, in the Graduate Programme in English Studies,
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Serusha Sanjeevy, declare that

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
4. This thesis does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
 - a. Their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced
 - b. Where their exact words have been used, then their writing has been placed in italics and inside quotation marks, and referenced.
5. This thesis does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the Internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the thesis and in the References sections.

Serusha Sanjeevy

7 July 2025



Signature

Supervisor: Dr Claire Scott



Signature

DEDICATION:

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." – James 1:17

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To my husband, whose constant encouragement to “carry the fire” sustained me, even when the journey felt impossibly long and the fire seemed determined to go out. To my family and my wonderful sons, who have taught me that whatever limits I imagine for myself, I am always capable of surpassing them. To Dr Claire Scott, for your invaluable guidance, steadfast support, and for ensuring that I made it across the finishing line, hand in hand. To the ADvTECH Group, whose financial support allowed this work to become a reality rather than a perpetual dream. Finally, to my friends, colleagues, and students, who generously supplied humour, encouragement, and much-needed distractions.

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Chapter One: Introduction

*“Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop”*

(Holiday 1939)

Introduction

Billie Holiday’s 1939 song “Strange Fruit” is widely recognised for its grotesque, yet effective portrayal of the horrific violence enacted upon Black individuals during a period of slavery in America through the poetic employment of the metaphor of “strange fruit”. Its use is certainly unconventional, since fruit is typically associated with nature in its abundant and organic state. Here, the image of fruit hanging from the tree in a seemingly natural, yet peculiar way is juxtaposed with the disturbing act of lynching, subverting its original life-sustaining and Edenic qualities. The reason why this song is perhaps so impactful and continues to be relevant is its emphasis on the characteristic nature of fruit to propagate after its kind, implying that there is, in fact, a legacy produced out of this racial violence and oppression. This legacy, or its vestiges may be traced in many postcolonial societies outside of America today for its enduring impact on the developing identity of younger generations.

This dissertation explores the impact of trauma originating from colonial violence on identity and memory for postcolonial identities portrayed in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and considers how silence and memory can be read as a form of resistance and narrative agency. Through an analysis of the novel’s primary characters, namely Mala and Chandin Ramchandin, I examine the role of silence and memory as acts of resistance and

agency that work to ultimately re-establish and acknowledge a repressed postcolonial identity. Specifically, my analysis will consider how the traumatic relationship between Chandin and Mala may be read as a metaphor for colonial violence, both in the form of systematic racism and sexism, as well as domestic abuse. Further to this, the study explores how the violent and intentional manipulation of identity, narrative and memory which takes place in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) may be extended to a discussion on identity erasure as a part of the colonial project. Finally, the dissertation will consider how silence and memory in the narrative may be used to redeem a lost and silenced postcolonial identity, not only through the characterisation of Mala, but also on a much broader level in postcolonial society today. The study, although specific to the Caribbean and its literary canon, may also be largely applied to previously colonised societies as its themes fall within the scope and interest of postcolonial literature and postcolonial theory.

I argue that the depiction and romanticism around the image of a spontaneous and rapid transition from ‘colonised to liberated’ is highly problematic and utterly implausible. Ironically, histories of fetishised colonies have subsequently transformed into romanticised narratives of a swift transformation from oppression to independence, neglecting the nuanced, distinct and often complex nature of transformation in the context of political independence. What I am referring to here is the enduring legacy of colonisation and the deeply seated psychological impact that colonial violence has on the identity of the oppressed long after independence is declared, or colonization has ended. Like Holiday’s (1939) “Strange Fruit”, the premise outlined below by Albert Memmi in his work *Dominated Man: Notes toward a Portrait* (1968) points to the same quick and hegemonic transformation of the postcolonial subject once independence takes place:

And when the day oppression ceases, the new man is supposed to emerge before our eyes immediately. Now, I do not like to say so, but I must, since decolonisation has demonstrated it; this is not the way it happens. The colonised lives for a long time before we see that really new man (Memmi 1968, p.88).

Memmi (1968) asserts that independence does not necessarily imply freedom for the postcolonial subject, or at least not immediately, and that this freedom does not take place as a passive process. In addition to this, narratives surrounding independence are still continuously framed with some measure of dependence on the coloniser. Of course, it would be difficult to speak of the one without the other, but even Leela Ghandi (1998) in

Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction notes how frequently postcolonial literature slips into the allure of a simplified telling of transformation where the oppressed disavows the oppressor and develops an identity outside of the definitions of the coloniser as the sum total of this exchange. When, in reality, this transition is not, by any means, linear or reciprocal. Ghandi (1998, p.4) introduces this interesting and noteworthy phenomenon as “postcolonial amnesia” or the willingness to forget the colonial past in the construction of an emancipated present:

This ‘will-to-forget’ takes a number of historical forms, and is impelled by a variety of cultural and political motivations. Principally, postcolonial amnesia is symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start—to erase painful memories of colonial subordination. As it happens, histories, much as families, cannot be freely chosen by a simple act of will, and newly emergent postcolonial nation-states are often deluded and unsuccessful in their attempts to disown the burdens of their colonial inheritance.

In reflecting on this transformation, my analysis of Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) examines the changes that the postcolonial identity must undergo before the “new man” really emerges (Memmi 1968, p.88) and how memory and even silence, as in the absence of speech, becomes an effective tool to resist enduring colonial forces. My research questions which will help guide my discussion of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) all follow a similar thematic thread, in that all of them are intersectional and concerned with colonial violence, trauma, memory, silence, identity and representation:

- 1.1.1. How does Chandin’s abuse of Mala serve as an allegory for colonial violence in the Caribbean? Further to this, what does their relationship tell us about the oppressor-oppressed dynamic in postcolonial discourse?
- 1.1.2. How, through the character of Mala in the novel, is memory, narrative and identity manipulated and/or erased? Why is this significant in the context of postcolonial studies?
- 1.1.3. How is discourse around ‘Other’ characters like Chandin and Nurse Tyler also developed to systematically gain power over the oppressed? How might this be read as an act of colonial violence historically?

- 1.1.4. How is memory a form of narrative agency and resistance in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)? How can language and narrative, shape and redeem a lost identity of the postcolonial subject, specifically through the character of Mala?
- 1.1.5. How can silence, both as a result of suppression and a form of resistance work to challenge hegemonic discursive practices and invent alternative spaces for the rehabilitation and expression of Mala's identity?

As a method of investigation, my thesis involves a close reading and evaluation of my primary text, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) by Shani Mootoo. This close-text reading is guided by the process of textual analysis. As articulated by Catherine Belsey (2005, p.55), textual analysis takes into account the role of language and literary study as "an important influence on the ways people understand themselves and their relation to the real relations in which they live". I will be conducting a qualitative study through an interpretative approach to my primary text.

Synopsis of The Novel

Cereus Blooms at Night (1996) takes place in the town of Paradise on the fictionalized island of Lantancamara (acknowledged by Mootoo as the island of Trinidad located in the southern part of the Caribbean). The narrative itself oscillates between past and present as readers are made aware of the private and intimate histories of characters closely related to the protagonist, Mala Ramchandin. *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) recounts the life of Chandin Ramchandin (father of Mala and Asha Ramchandin) through the eyes of nurse Tyler. Tyler is a new member of staff and caretaker of the elderly Mala Ramchandin at the Paradise Alms house for the frail. Tyler's narration details Chandin's traumatic past since his adoption by European missionaries, the Thoroughlys. Chandin completely reconfigures his identity to transform into a more suitable husband for the Thoroughly's daughter, Lavinia, but is refused implicitly on the basis of his race. He earnestly desires a life with Lavinia, who, in turn, falls in love with his uneducated wife, who is Indian. The hypocrisy of the situation only fuels Chandin's anger further. When Mala and her younger sister Asha are abandoned in a hurried escape by their mother and Lavinia, the daughters are left to face public humiliation and the wrath of their father.

Fortunately, Asha manages to escape the Ramchandin household, but Mala is left behind. This shift in the narrative is painfully filled with Mala's longing for her sister. As Mala remains behind, the psychological delineation between her younger self (Pohpoh) and the

stronger, adult persona becomes clearer as Pohpoh retreats into silence. Other characters like Mala's childhood friend Boyie, later referred to as Ambrose, manages to capture the mischief and playfulness of Mala's childhood. When Ambrose returns to Paradise after travelling abroad, Mala eagerly awaits his visits, and they rekindle their friendship. Ambrose eventually discovers the secrets of the Ramchandin home and flees instead of protecting Mala and this, along with the earlier abandonment Mala faces, only devastates her further. As penance, Ambrose sends his son, Otoh, to Mala's home every month with groceries. It is Otoh (born Ambrosia) who discovers Chandin's corpse and whose frantic state alerts the authorities. In the present narrative, our narrator, Tyler is ostracised for being queer and he struggles to find his place among the judgmental and dismissive island residents. His unique position as a social pariah encourages a sort of camaraderie between himself and Mala. Mala is demonised and becomes the target of gossip over the years, left to be perceived as a "spectre" and "crazy lady" (Mootoo 1996, p.7). It is only through Tyler's display of empathy and his determination to ensure that Mala is not forgotten that she is humanised and her memory is acknowledged. Through Tyler's narration, Mala's memory is resurrected, and she experiences a sort of liberation.

Background and Context

In considering the depiction of this deeply personal internal trajectory in literature, the background and context of the author become extremely significant in shaping its meaning. Shani Mootoo was born in Ireland to Trinidadian parents who raised her in the West Indies before she relocated to Canada to become an artist, filmmaker and writer. Her success is largely credited to her ability to embed intriguing themes within her characteristically quiet and persuasive writing style, "inscribing new ways of thinking, of feeling and of being" (Narain et al.201, p.1). This unassuming approach to writing about sensitive topics like identity, sexuality, rape and trauma in her short stories and novels has made Mootoo's voice increasingly popular in diasporic, queer and postcolonial literature studies.

While Mootoo's debut novel garnered significant interest because of its nuanced portrayal of the Caribbean identity, her perspective on the dangers of the rigidity behind heteronormative gender constructs is evident in the stories in *Out on Main Street* (1993), *He Drown She in the Sea* (2006), and her most recent novel, *Valmiki's Daughter* (2008). Mootoo's counter-discursive style is not only thematic in its subversion of dominant meta-narratives but also stylistic in her breaking down of boundaries signifying time and space. This is done through

non-linear writing in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) where Mootoo blurs the divisions between past and present. In addition, the novel also transcends the clear demarcations between fiction and non-fiction as it contains diary entries, letters and portions of the narrative which are directly addressed to the reader. This departure from traditional storytelling is characteristic of Mootoo, and is a shared quality with many of her characters in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Lorna Burns (2011, p.65) argues that several symbolic features within the text serve as much more than just a means of resistance to binary oppositions. According to Burns (2011, p.65), instead of simply subverting spatiotemporal elements in the novel, locations such as Mala's garden or the Paradise Alms house become filled with ambiguity, leaving these spaces open to a multitude of interpretations rejecting the "idealised site of resistance or recovery, but must instead be enacted within the real and present circumstances of society".

Mootoo skilfully challenges the readers of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) to be open to "the dual perception of history, the re-imagining of the past, the poetic fabrication of a new memory" (Donatien-Yssa 2008, p.101). Donatien-Yssa(2008, p.16) also further highlights how *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) demonstrates the powerful role that social and political groups play in imprisoning marginalised figures in the novel, since it is the "coloniser's rhetoric and in a rigid frame which prevents him from giving way to his memory, imagination and true self". One generation later, it is Chandin's daughter who becomes a victim to the "wilful ignorance" of the community around her, which May (2006, p.109) refers to as a form of domination, where a cultural hegemony chooses to participate in "denigrating and "derogatory" discursive practices and harmful acts which fall short of the accurate representation of the oppressed (p.117).

Brief Overview of Theoretical Framework

I refer to the work of celebrated postcolonial authors such as George Lamming and Jean Rhys to help locate my study within the context of Caribbean literature, setting a larger backdrop for some of the key concerns and themes set in postcolonial Caribbean texts. In addition, I will make use of secondary readings, which include reference to postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said for his work on Orientalism (1978). Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) broadly describes the term as the way discourse has been used to isolate, stigmatise, and misrepresent the image of the East, whose identity is referred to as the Orient or Orientals.

This is relevant to my study as several characters may be read as Oriental figures who experience various forms of discrimination.

Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) explores the dynamics of culture, power and resistance in the context of postcolonial discourse. Bhabha (1994) has also significantly contributed to the field of postcolonial theory in his articulation of colonial ambivalence and liminality. Both postcolonial discourse and ambivalence are critical in my examination of the relationship between Mala and Chandin as a metaphor for the coloniser-colonised relationship.

The urgency for the oppressed to reclaim their agency that was lost through colonial imposition is highlighted in Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1998) which discusses the concept of Othering. In the colonial context, Othering describes the various ways in which colonial discourse represents its subjects. In Spivak's explanation, othering is a "dialectical process because the colonizing *Other* is established at the same time as its colonized *others* are produced as subjects." (Ashcroft et.al 2007, p.156). Othering and double-othering are highly relevant in the characterisation of Mala who experiences multiple forms of alienation and stigmatisation from her community.

I will also refer to proponents of trauma theory like Cathy Caruth who theorises the many ways in which trauma can exist long after the event itself. In *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and Histories* (1996), she argues that literature can articulate the silences and utterances of the past, which most other forms fail to do. Since my study is largely grounded in examining the impact of trauma, her insights are critical to evaluating the lasting impact of colonisation in the text.

My thesis places considerable emphasis on the relationship between trauma, silence, memory and identity. The role of collective memory and storytelling is examined by Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory* (1992) as he explores how memory contributes to the construction of identity. Finally, Charles Glicksberg, in his work titled *The Literature of Silence* (1975), evaluates the various interpretations of silence in a text. This is relevant since Mala's absence of speech and her use of grunts, body language and other visual cues suggest that she may be using her silence to communicate her resistance and refusal to conform to dominant social conventions.

Structure of Dissertation

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction to my topic and provides insight into Shani Mootoo and her debut novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), with a brief synopsis of the text and the relevance of its primary characters in my study. The first chapter also presents a brief discussion of the research questions emanating out of my reading of the novel and offers an outline and structure of the dissertation, discussing my approach to answering these research questions.

The second and third chapters present existing scholarship relevant to my dissertation. Chapter Two is a Literature Review beginning with an overview of the historical context of the Caribbean Literary tradition to situate the novel's significance. The chapter then moves to an analysis of academic scholarship surrounding *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Chapter Three presents my Theoretical Framework, starting with postcolonial theory, trauma theory and memory studies, and existing literature on the use of silence in the context of resistance.

After establishing this foundation, my critical analysis of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) begins in Chapter Four. Titled, "Haunted Heritage: Cycles of Violence and Trauma", this chapter analyses the transgenerational depiction of trauma in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) through a close reading of the relationship between Chandin Ramchandin and Mala. The chapter contextualises Chandin's transformation from oppressed to oppressor as he moves from a victim of colonial violence in his earlier years to the source of patriarchal violence in his family later on. This chapter notes the shift in power as Chandin internalises the abuse he experiences and dispenses his own perverse sense of justice on his children as his performance of masculinity. The chapter closes by examining the character of Mala whose body, in the context of postcolonial discourse, becomes the site of invasion, possession and exploitation.

The fifth chapter, "The Sound of Silence: Narrative Erasure and Oppressive Silence", examines the physical and psychological impact of the abuse Mala faces and how this manifests in the form of silence. This chapter outlines the gradual resignation of speech from the character of Mala who withdraws from society over the years. It depends heavily on key theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak to provide a theoretical context for a better understanding of how postcolonial identities are subject to power dynamics in discourse.

Drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs' theory on collective memory and well as Cathy Caruth's contribution towards trauma theory, the sixth chapter, "Modes of Resistance – Between Silence and Remembrance", considers the role of memory as a counter-discursive literary technique which I read as an act of narrative resistance and agency in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). While the story is told from the first-person point of view narration by Nurse Tyler, this chapter looks at the use of various sources of information in the construction of the narrative alongside other narrative techniques such as multiple levels of narration, a non-linear narrative and breaking the fourth wall to communicate the fluid nature of memory in the text. This chapter also examines the role of silence as a strategy for resistance against dominating hegemonic discursive practices. Using insights from theorists such as Derrida and Saussure, I evaluate how language is a problematic medium to communicate traumatic experiences like rape. Instead, I argue that silence presents a unique opportunity to retain agency and control over one's narrative. Hence, a discussion of Charles Glicksberg's *The Literature of Silence* (1975) is employed to discuss the various interpretations of silence in literature.

The conclusion to my dissertation, Chapter Seven, summarises my analysis of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and provides commentary on its potential readings and the significance of the text in contemporary postcolonial studies.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Re-visiting Caribbean Literature

One of the key aims of this dissertation is to establish the relationship between colonial violence and trauma and explore its impact on identity. For the purpose of this dissertation, my study is located in the Caribbean, a place haunted by the legacy of colonialism. The realities of colonisation and living in a postcolonial state shape various thematic concerns in Caribbean literature today, presenting itself as displacement, identity crisis and the ongoing contest between tradition and modernity. However, locating a specific literary tradition is somewhat problematic when, historically, not much evidence of an indigenous Caribbean literary expression has been chronicled.

Historical Context

Colonisation in the West Indies and the Caribbean for European expansion may be traced back to the 15th century, with European expansion primarily led by the Spanish and Portuguese. For this discussion, it is pivotal to refer to Edward Said's distinction between colonisation and imperialism, where imperialism may be defined as the practice, theory, and attitudes of a dominating centre ruling a distant territory (Said 1993). In contrast, colonialism is considered as the act of "the implanting of settlements on a distant territory" (Said 1993, p.8). The Spanish conquest of the Caribbean was both rapid and exploitative, structuring an economy largely dependent on slave labour. In 1797, the presence of the French had completely transformed locations such as Trinidad, yielding infrastructure large enough to maintain sugar and plantation developments at an increased rate. In the same year, the British expedition claimed Trinidad through military conquest.

While slavery in Trinidad was eventually abolished in 1834, the first large-scale programme for Indian indentured labourers began in 1839 to recuperate from the potential losses that foreign planters had predicted. The period between 1845 and 1917 saw 147,000 Indian indentured labourers arrive in Trinidad. Indian labourers had suffered poor social conditions, unfair wages and racial discrimination back home in India due to their social class, and this drove many to accept offers of indentured labour in the Caribbean and other colonial centres. Lutz (2009, p.139) describes the labour conditions in the Caribbean as "hard, hot work" where the living conditions of the indentured labourer were "dependent upon the kindness or cruelty of the planter and his manager". While the British responsible for West Indies labour contracts were careful about "comparisons between indentured labour and slavery", having so

recently abolished the slave trade, the rhetoric used to describe indentured labour practices remained disturbingly similar to colonial discourse. As long as the indentured labourer was contracted to the planter, “he belonged to the plantation to which he had been assigned and could not venture off of it without permission.”(Lutz 2009, p.137).

After their contracts expired a large number of Indian labourers remained on the island, seeking low-wage labour or longer terms of employment. Many of these labourers converted to Christianity through affiliations with white missionaries on the island who offered academic scholarships and better living conditions for those who had remained. In fact, privileges such as time off were given in exchange for religious conversion even before slaves in the West Indies were emancipated. Furley (1965, p.4) writes about the distinction between plantation owners and missionaries from Europe who viewed the slaves as an opportunity to further their religious cause:

Slavery to him was not a matter for the missionaries to question, and slave-owning was no sin. If that many slaves belonged to the mission, then this provided a good opportunity for converting them, without interference from masters who might not be so sympathetic to the use of daylight hours for instruction. Martin, for instance, allowed his slaves time off for instruction in reading and writing. Zinzendorf actually bought back for the St. Thomas stations some of the slaves who had been sold away to other islands but whose conversion had made them valuable as Helpers to the mission.

European colonialism lasted over four centuries in Trinidad, making it a melting pot of influences from Asia, Africa and other European countries. Today, the descendants of Indian indentured labourers constitute more than 40% of the population in places like Trinidad. Lutz (2009, p.150), in speaking of the impact of Christianity in the Chinese indentured labour population in the West Indies and Hawaii, notes the cultural hybridisation that many communities faced as well as the benefits of religious conversion:

Sometimes Christianity facilitated the acculturation process, and quite a few Chinese, Hawaiian Chinese, and Creole Chinese adopted Christian names. Churches sponsored classes in English and instruction in hygiene, mathematics and typing. They established schools, and sometimes free education in parochial schools was a draw to Christianity. And sometimes the need for a community and its support was decisive. Whatever the initial reason for accepting Christianity, new and viable Christian

congregations were established in many parts of the world through emigration and the indentured labour system.

Recovery from colonialism and foreign imposition was difficult, since colonialism has not only produced a legacy of inequality and racial prejudice, but it has also caused previously colonised spaces to become the site of cultural diversity, pluralism and hybridity, making the Caribbean an ideal model for postcolonial ideals. The term postcolonialism as described by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies” (Ashcroft et al, 2007, p.168).

Identifying a Caribbean Literary Canon

Locating a specific literary tradition alongside the search for an identifiable Caribbean aesthetic has been particularly difficult. Adrienne Baytop (1967, p.32) proposes that the development of Caribbean English Literature could be read in three stages, “the early, the most traditional; the transitional, the period of adaptation, initial radicalism, and prefiguring of the existing literature, and the contemporary, the flowering.”

The Caribbean saw several periods of trauma, displacement and social transformation from its early experiences of colonisation up to the time of its independence. The Caribbean has played host to British Imperialists, Spanish colonisers and French settlers, African slaves, and Indian and Chinese labourers, all of whom were instrumental in the cultural amalgamation of the island. Identifying a literature today that is specific to its people, language and ethnicity has proven to be challenging since the Caribbean itself is synonymous with cultural integration and fluidity. As Alison Donnell and Sarah Walsh observe, no single notion of 'Caribbeanness' can exist, but rather a:

growing acceptance of a syncretic (centreless) model of cultural definition which is inclusive and accepts diversity and hybridity as the foundation for both Caribbean aesthetics and cultural identities (Donnell and Walsh 2006, p.6).

The inherent political dynamic present in literature, along with the discriminatory discourse used by some of the first-generation European writers on these islands contribute to the absence of many texts from popular anthologies initially produced to represent the Caribbean aesthetic, making it less than accurate.

Regarded as exclusively fixated on historical interests without any positive evaluations, writers such as Thomas MacDermot and Walter Mac A. Lawrence had been altogether

disinherited from such a tradition. However, to disavow the influence of imperialism and the colonial project is to rob literature of what had, for a long time, shaped the Caribbean experience. For several decades, the Caribbean literary canon was largely composed of authors who were predominantly European, limiting the authenticity and diverse experiences of writers from the colonies. These texts were concerned with the conquest of the Caribbean and romanticised colonialism rather than capturing the lived experiences of everyone in the region. However, removing these initial European texts from the Caribbean literary canon would be to alter the historical state of the Caribbean literary landscape which had strongly influenced the day-to-day lives of those living in colonies for years. Many of the earliest texts written before 1950 were of little interest to scholars and were often considered as contributions to a larger archive that constituted white culture in the Caribbean. In addition, James Seymour in *The Novel in the British Caribbean* further affirms that "the 1920s were a period when the British Caribbean was still literarily asleep" (Seymour 1996, p.180).

A brief examination of literature produced by Caribbean writers from the time of colonisation to independence reveals a critical transition from a narrow historical scope to becoming more inclusive of tropes such as hybridity and plurality, as well as trauma and displacement as characteristics of the Caribbean experience (Donnell and Walsh 2006). Writing between 1900 to 1929 often included the works of Creoles that placed significant emphasis on colonial culture in the Caribbean. The discourse used to describe the West Indies, Africa and some parts of Asia during the time of European Imperialism marks these lands as both fetishized and feminised. Anne McClintock argues that the "erotics of the imperial conquest" point to an important relation between imperialism and gender with a substantial emphasis on how European settlers would portray "virgin territory" as geographic locations which were unoccupied and weak but theirs to conquer (McClintock 1995, p.24). In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Colonial Contest*, McClintock suggests that the representation of the land as a woman is a strategy for control:

The feminizing of land represents a ritualistic moment in imperial discourse, as male intruders ward off fears of narcissistic disorder by reinscribing, as natural, an excess of gender hierarchy (McClintock 1995, p.24).

Unlike novels which began to emerge in the nineteenth century in African-American and neo-slave societies which focused on the experiences of colonialism and oppression in previously colonised societies, Indo-Caribbean literature had not developed until much later:

No original first-hand, full-fledged accounts were written between the 1830s and 1917 at the time of indentureship. There were letters written to journals and local newspapers, but they did not have the same scope as the original eighteenth century Atlantic slave narratives. Oral testimonies given by the indentured servants themselves or by their descendants were, only much later, transcribed and archived. Indo-Caribbean writers in the latter part of the twentieth century took up fiction to try and give their voices back to the voiceless descendants of indentured labourers, sometimes getting their inspiration directly from the memories of the people who had been indentured servants one or two generations before. (Misrahi-Barak 2021, p.4)

Language plays a pivotal role in the conceiving of the Caribbean identity. Literature produced by the Caribbean is so heavily influenced by Creole and several other languages that to identify a single dialect and categorise it as the authentic Caribbean voice is to also refute the influence of European languages, and in the process, diminish the resistive power that language is characterised by. Baytop (1967, p.33) observes the role of English in the work produced by Caribbean writers in the late 1920s:

The irony of it all was that the then colonized writer, as imaginatively passionate as his climate and physical surroundings, began to use the English language, which he was forced to learn, more compellingly (and in some cases more profoundly) than the colonial. These formidable new authors during the second period of development are the precursors of contemporary Caribbean literature. Their collective themes show their intense awareness of their own physical environment and society; their tones are sometimes tinged with an egregious disgruntlement against colonialism and subtle angst.

According to David Decamp, Caribbean writers often appropriate speech varieties accepted by a single community that uses a specific form of Creole when addressing certain social contexts (Decamp 1971). Therefore, the ability to switch between different speech variants according to cultural demands highlights the fluid nature of the Caribbean. Further, Carol Boyce-Davies argues that referring to the Caribbean as solely a geographical location would be to ignore that it is a "site of dissemination of a variety of sociocultural processes", all of which represent a series of "mixtures, languages, communities of people" (Boyce-Davies 1994, p.13). In "manipulating language to their own ends", Caribbean writers began using

creative and strategic means to not only rebel against traditional British modes of writing but also to conjure up a new Caribbean literary aesthetic:

But no amount of indoctrination in favor of the conventional modes of writing and suppression of the doctrine of the freedom of expression could still these rebel voices, the eloquent advocates of Caribbean English literature. The growth of an independent literary vision had begun. There could be no stemming of the verbal tide, almost defacing the models created by the old masters of British literature and the patterns of British society, encompassing Caribbean dialect and lifestyle. (Baytop 1967, p.34-35)

One such writer who employed the use of Jamaican dialect and remained committed to inscribing the neo-slave culture in his work as a counternarrative to traditional British writing was Roger Mais. His novels *The Hills Were Joyful Together* (1953), *Brother Man* (1954), and *Black Lightning* (1955) serve as a key marker for the creative potential and rebellious nature of second-generation Caribbean writing.

However, even after the violent imposition of European powers, the 1900-1929 period saw the recognition of alternative narratives to those of colonial voices through the awareness of the working class in the Caribbean. This transition was evident in the growing interest in folklore and storytelling in literature in the West Indies which is still included in many contemporary novels today such as the work of Andrew Salkey as well as Edwidge Danticat. For instance, Louis Bennet's dialect poems such as "Laugh with Louis" (1961) work to reflect traditional storytelling familiar to everyday men and women in the Caribbean because her "original subjects are drawn from West Indian politics and society." (Baytop 1967, p.31). According to Albert James Arnold, Julio Rodríguez-Luis and J. Michael Dash, this signalled a critical transition from slave or indentured labour to "barrack-yard" literature (Arnold et al 1997, p.53). From the 1930's onwards, literature began to reflect the political state of the Caribbean. For instance, the first elections with adult suffrage took place in Trinidad in 1946, where the unrest produced tension among Creole writers who were conflicted about writing about their beloved homelands while also addressing the harrowing political events that took place in their immediate location. The 1950s, more commonly known as the 'boom' in Caribbean literature, displayed the growing struggle to write about the West Indies after the mass migration of writers. Themes of alienation, displacement and the struggle to locate an identity outside of the Caribbean became an identifiable concern in literature. However, the decade that followed witnessed a considerable effort to establish a canon that offered

alternative narratives to that of the European literature present in the West Indies. The texts that emerged from 1948 to 1958, which outlined the consequences of a migratory culture and placed significant emphasis on nationalism, were also responsible for what George Lamming considered to be the "emergence of the novel as an imaginative interpretation of West Indian society by West-Indians" (Lamming 1960, p.41).

The contemporary narratives of the West-Indian population today aim to do more than represent the end of colonialism and acquisition of black power but also to re-establish and reimagine a black identity, distinct to the Caribbean. One way of imagining a new black consciousness can be seen in Caribbean literature produced by authors who have often migrated away from their homeland. Such a literary tradition aims to depict both the brutality of colonialism as well as a sense of optimism for the recovery and grounding of the new postcolonial identity. Misrahi-Barak (2021, p.4) notes that Indo-Caribbean texts, towards the latter part of the twentieth century, began to focus on the recovery of lost narratives, "giving voices back to the voiceless descendants of indentured labourers, sometimes getting their inspiration directly from the memories of the people who had been indentured servants one or two generations before." Writers' attempts to articulate an accurate representation of this postcolonial identity which strives for a definition outside of the context of limiting historical structures is also necessary and considered by Eli Park Sorensen (2014, p.240) as:

embodying a desire to speak for, of and about the postcolonial per se; a discourse defined as one that struggles against all (other) representations (and, of course, often self-critically its own theoretical assumptions).

Today, contemporary Caribbean literature examines the aftermath of colonisation by reflecting on narratives of genealogy and inherited violence caused by colonisation while expressing the struggle for restitution and development alongside the growth of the legacies of the empire. In other words, recent works in the Caribbean have come to clearly signpost two objectives. First to highlight the impact of colonial violence, representing the realities of those who faced imperial rule, and second, they express the identity conflict of a postcolonial generation that must overcome the intergenerational violence inflicted on their ancestors and develop a new and liberated identity. In doing so, contemporary Caribbean literature pays considerable attention to childhood as well as the role of memory, prompting a shift in the perception of the 'postcolonial' text to begin including a multi-disciplined approach such as that of psychological trauma, social accountability and cross-cultural studies (Baytop 1976).

This is to highlight the enduring impact of colonialism, even for those who were born after independence was declared. These legacies of colonialism have worked themselves into the fabric of the colonised and post-colonised society.

Contemporary Caribbean literature also attempts to redeem the lost narratives of slaves and indentured labourers which were initially misrepresented or altogether erased in earlier texts. This narrative erasure is frequently resisted through narrative techniques that focus on the act of remembering. Memory within the context of postcolonial literature may be read as a form of “remembering back” or an attempt at “navigating a grievous past imbricated in a grieving present” (Adebayo 2023). Leela Gandhi in *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, reveals that a study of the aftermath of colonialism has been recognised as a project specifically committed to “revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (Gandhi 1998, p.4). At present, Caribbean literature is associated with rewriting histories for a nation alongside personal struggles with identity, childhood and nostalgia after migration.

For over four centuries, the abstruse Caribbean canon was traditionally influenced by seminal European voices that only included the voices of natives as a mere secondary narrative and deprived literature of these lived experiences. *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) stands as a key departure from the original thematic concerns of the Caribbean literary tradition in its commitment to depicting the legacy of colonialism through personal and collective trauma, its bold critique of postcolonial diasporic communities and its unique approach to challenging heteronormative perspectives on identity, gender, ethnicity and culture.

Caribbean Literature in the Postcolonial Era

According to Ashcroft et al. (2007, p.168), the term “postcolonialism” was originally used in a chronological context to refer to a time after colonial rule but later became popular among writers and critics to describe the “cultural effects of colonisation.” This transformation in meaning is highly significant when arguing that colonisation ushered with it long-term and enduring consequences which transcend the obvious tangible effects. Postcolonial literature may then be defined as far more than texts deriving from a time after colonisation in previously colonised states but also literature that reflects the cultural, social, political and psychological concerns relevant to the postcolonial individual and nation (Döring 2008).

Postcolonial literature is able to embody these themes through various linguistic and narrative choices including the use of subversion, atypical writing conventions, multilingualism and a

multiplicity of narrators or a fragmented narration (to name a few). While this list is not exhaustive and each narrative technique has its own respective impact, they share one critical feature: that is, they resist the inherent structures within language, and by doing so, challenge the structural power of their previous oppressors. Contemporary writers have managed to strike a balance between inscribing in a text the beauty of the natural West-Indian landscape while maintaining the stark and difficult social and economic realities of a postcolonial state. Baytop (1967, p.36) describes this as their ability to write about the “Caribbean sunrise and to the sea and land and their products as vigorously as they chant the realities of the abysmal condition of the poor and the side effects of a post-colonial era.” Some of the texts referred to chronologically in the discussion hereafter reflect the evolution of the thematic and stylistic techniques used in postcolonial Caribbean literature that can be read in parallel to the political and social climate of each novelist’s respective period.

Barbadian writer George Lamming’s 1953 *In the Castle of My Skin* is widely considered as a foundational text in the Caribbean which not only narrates the experiences of a young boy growing up during the turn of independence in the Caribbean but also chronicles the deep psychological impact of colonialism on the developing self. The novel reflects the political climate of the time, specifically the post-World War Two period, in which political upheaval and social unrest were at its height. Against the backdrop of a shifting political and social climate, the protagonist (referred to as G) reflects on the connection between the personal trauma from colonialism as well as the impact colonial rule had on a larger social consciousness. The text does well in emphasising the importance of community and cultural and historical memory, concepts which at the time were radically removed in the Caribbean because of colonial power structures. Acknowledging Lamming’s strategic use of the theme of displacement in his novels, Gikandi (1992, p.72) highlights that Lamming’s work displays the “explicit tension” between “coherence to the Caribbean social body” and “the mechanisms of psychological blockage generated by colonialism”. The ‘castle’ referred to in the title highlights these internal and external struggles which postcolonial nations as well as individuals faced in understanding their identity which is often described as constrained and uncertain (Brown 1983). This novel is highly significant as it foreshadows the radical change in the development of the postcolonial identity in places like Trinidad, Barbados and other parts of the Caribbean because of its creative, honest and bold approach to introducing the psychological impact of colonialism on the postcolonial generation.

From exploring the impact of colonialism in the local Caribbean, Sam Selvon's (1956) *The Lonely Londoners* also carries with it notable postcolonial themes such as racial prejudice, psychological trauma and cultural identity through the experiences of the Caribbean immigrant. This departure from the native experience of Caribbean villages and the shift to the identity crisis experienced by the Caribbean diaspora is skilfully demonstrated through Selvon's linguistic choices. While critics have claimed that writing a text which resists colonialism means disavowing the language which was initially used to suppress, Selvon challenges these structures by combining local dialect with English (Decamp 1971). The novel portrays the experiences of immigrants finding their way in London after leaving the West Indies. After World War two, large-scale Caribbean migration took place because of the serious labour shortages that Britain experienced (Dawson 2007). While the focus of *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) is on the new life that the characters are trying to acquire, Selvon combines Caribbean English with British English to provide an accurate and realistic narration of the internal conflict these cultures are engaged in. The theme of displacement and strong social critique on postwar Britain is seen through the crafting of a 'new' language which not only resists categorisation but also speaks to the postcolonial theme of ambivalence and hybridity. The despondency shared as the characters realise that immigration itself has challenges to overcome helps shape the landscape of Caribbean postcolonial literature. Selvon captures the anxiety of the diaspora, opening up Caribbean literature and making it relatable and familiar to those who have left their homeland across the globe.

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys (1966) displays another mode in which postcolonial literature subverts colonial discursive writing. Picking up from the growing interest in the diasporic experience in places away from the Caribbean homeland, Rhys's use of intertextuality addresses the racial and sexist prejudices present in the much-loved *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (1847), offering a counternarrative for traditional British storytelling (Clark 1994). The novel offers a nuanced and critical perspective on Brontë's madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason, providing her with a different name and background. Brontë's summation of Bertha being a ghostly and bestial figure is a key example of colonial discourse in Europe's treatment of the unknown and dangerous Other. In Rhy's text, Bertha is formally Antoinette, a young girl who faces displacement, social shaming and romantic betrayal, and who is ultimately driven to self-liberation (and not lunacy, as Bronte would earlier write) (Lanser 1992). Nakase (2021, p.200) argues that the shift in the characterisation of Antoinette

needed serious address, suggesting that the original character inscribed the “Black female body with historic and pejorative stereotypes of racial difference”. By offering Antoinette an alternate narrative, and by using narrative fragmentation and a shared narration with Brontë’s Rochester, Rhys manages to address the bias present in a celebrated British novel, creating a platform for a more accurate and alternate reading of a stereotyped Jamaican woman. It is through intertextuality and subversion that Rhys depicts a woman doubly oppressed but one who ultimately attains agency. Rhys’ text signals a key development in Caribbean postcolonial writing, in that, the voice of the woman who is doubly oppressed is finally brought to the surface. By sharing the troubles of a postcolonial, second-generation descendant of slave owners who is stuck between her ambivalent Creole heritage and the pressure of conforming to Victorian standards, Rhys explores the challenges that women and diasporic communities come to face as they navigate a new and difficult terrain.

Finally, Edwidge Danticat’s (1994) *Breath, Eyes and Memory* critiques the Haitian identity under conflict in a more recent and contemporary setting. While all tangible effects of colonialism may have passed on, contemporary writers like Danticat present trauma and the psyche in crisis as the new forms of oppression experienced by the postcolonial generation. Through the protagonist Sophie, transgenerational trauma inflicted upon the women in her family can be read as commentary on the enduring impacts of colonialism carried across generations. Danticat manages to depict the conflict between the homeland and diasporic identity as Sophie is forced to leave her home in Haiti, her mother enforces virginity testing on her and ultimately learns that she is a product of a violent and brutal rape. Her character bears this generational shame and is haunted by the actions of those before her, yet she must learn to negotiate and form a new identity, liberating herself from the past while still balancing the importance of family and culture in Haiti. These relationships are an accurate portrayal of many diasporic communities who have left the Caribbean. While writers before Danticat, like Rhys, introduced the concept of personal trauma and sexual violence in their novels, Danticat connects the personal to the collective by highlighting the intergenerational impact of domestic abuse and sexual violence, illustrating the enduring legacy of colonialism, long after independence was declared. Navas (2020, p.182) acknowledges that the novel portrays the crisis of the female diasporic identity which is foregrounded in this text and situates both “the opportunities and strategies through which women can reach for self-definition and self-preservation in a diasporic context”. Danticat also skilfully emphasises the

connection between memory and trauma as critical factors in grappling with the postcolonial condition.

Commenting on the development of Caribbean English Literature over time, Baytop (1967, p.38) states that literature from the Caribbean today manages to adeptly capture its people and landscapes' quintessential vibrancy while still maintaining its confrontational and deeply personal need for accountability:

Contemporary Caribbean literature, which generates a most assertive and vibrant tone and style, essentially has an innate, arresting individuality and organism. It is primarily reflective of the view of social accountability to the West Indies. In its florescence it is as affirmative and ritualistic as it is sociologically dialectical, for the English-speaking Caribbean had to declare its political independence as well as its literary individuality.

Existing Literature on *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)

The existing literature surrounding *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) focuses on various themes relating to identity and sexuality, the connection between nature and the self, trauma and silence in the postcolonial context.

Heavily invested in discourses around sexuality and identity, Mootoo skilfully employs characterisation to communicate resistance to heteronormative practices which have relied on patriarchal and colonial power structures to sustain them in places like Trinidad for years. Mootoo offers an alternative reading of characters whose identities do not neatly comply with gender, class or caste dynamics. Authors like Eddie Whyte (2011), Chung-Hao Ku (2023), Shreya Bhattacharji and Neha Kumari (2015), Belinda Wallace (2018) and John Corr (2005) all explore the representation of identity and its intersection with race and sexuality in the novel. Whyte (2011) in “(Un)Manacled sexuality! Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* as a queer Bildungsroman?” argues that the novel may be read as a *Bildungsroman* which depicts “alternative notions of growth and development, alternative sexualities and alternative family structures made up of outsiders”(p.87). Whyte (2011) proposes that through the lens of a bildungsroman, Mootoo has presented an alternative perspective of what character development looks like in a nonbinary context through identities like Tyler, Otoh, Lavinia and Sarah. Similarly, Ku (2023) focuses on the various manifestations of trans embodiment in

Cereus Blooms at Night (1996). According to Ku (2023) in “Trans Bodies and Embodiments in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*”, Mootoo challenges the colonial pathological conceptualisation of the trans identity through characters who experience sexuality and identity as fluid. Bhattacharji and Kumari (2015) highlight how Mootoo's use of heterogeneous spaces to blur oppressive boundaries challenges the politics of identity and what is considered deviant sexuality. Wallace (2018) also illustrates how Mootoo's depiction of non-binary identities disrupts the Eurocentric notion of home and how non-conformance to traditional representations of identity creates room to explore concepts such as belonging and nationalism. On a broad level, Corr (2005) argues that the novel reveals how anxieties around the representation of sex and gender identity do not exist in the private space but are established in national and cultural discourse.

As discussed earlier, the garden, among other spatial features in the text, serves as one of the primary symbols of resistance against the homogenising of identity. This ecological reading has been explored further by authors such as Lorna Burns (2011), Isabel Hoving (2005) and Kyle Bladlow (2014). Lorna Burns' “Politicising Paradise: Sites of Resistance in *Cereus Blooms at Night*” (2011) considers how the use of the garden of Eden metaphor, typically associated with the Caribbean, demonstrates the inequalities present in the supposed paradise that these communities are rooted in. Burns (2011) highlights the connection between the psyche of Mala and the landscape described in the novel. Specifically, she analyses how Mala's garden and home act as a reflection of deep pathological detachment from her younger self while also emphasising the restorative qualities of nature. Bladlow (2014) in “Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination” focuses on how the novel uses nature to imagine and interpret the queer identity. Bladlow (2014) suggests that Mala caring for the unknown species in her natural environment intersects with discourse around empathy for queer identities and is deeply rooted in the field of queer ecology. Hoving (2005) calls into question the ambiguous nature of Mala's garden, arguing that the space stands in contrast to the well-manicured garden of the Thoroughly's. By analysing the environment within the novel, Hoving (2005) proposes that the unruly and chaotic garden serves to represent hybridity as the real ‘centre’, portraying the ambiguity vested in the garden motif as painful and difficult to make meaning of because of the damaging effect of colonisation.

Mala's relationship with nature and her own vegetative state when she arrives at the Paradise Alms house is associated with the trauma she endured in her own home. Notably, authors like

Sarah Lincoln (2020), Jennifer Marchisotto (2021) and Maite Escudero (2011) have analysed the complex relation between nature and trauma in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Lincoln (2020) in “Uncanny Communion: Trauma, Touch, and Vegetal Being in *Cereus Blooms at Night*” examines the Eurocentric interpretations of the transformative healing power of gardening which are usually synonymous with recovery from trauma. However, this can be problematic for its oversimplified depiction of what healing and trauma looks like in the postcolonial context where healing is often unpredictable, complex and unconventional as depicted in Mootoo’s novel. In “Cracks Filled with Images: Mental Disability, Trauma, and Crip Rhetoric in *Cereus Blooms at Night*”, Marchisotto (2021) borrows from the concept of crip time which is “the way trauma necessarily relies on mediation and the manipulation of temporality” in order to theorise what she calls “crip rhetoric” (p.58). According to Marchisotto (2021), Mootoo employs narrative embodiment and animacy as techniques to produce affective connections in time across the narrative. For instance, Mala is told by Lavinia that if she protects the dead shells of snails, they will take care of her and her loved ones (Mootoo 1996). Then, throughout the text, snails are mentioned several times, with each instance signalling some intimate connection which carries deep and personal meaning for Mala. While the scholars above highlight the how trauma is embodied in spatial and animated elements of the text, Escudero (2011) notes that in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), trauma is strongly associated memory. Escudero (2011, p.135) reads Mootoo’s novel as narrative leaning towards the transformation of existing personal and national memory, burdened by “sexual, gendered and racial violence”.

Mootoo (1996) manipulates time to create space for what Caruth calls “the witness of the crying voice” (Caruth 1996, p.3). Conversely, the narrative also highlights the impact of not bearing witness or what happens when a community is ignorant of the cry. Vivian May (2006), Tirzah Zachariah (2012), and Cherie Meacham (2010) all examine the concept of testimony and witness, analysing the various manifestations of silence in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). May’s (2006) “Trauma in Paradise: Wilful and Strategic Ignorance in *Cereus Blooms at Night*”, identifies the strategic dismantling of traditional binaries such as private and public by exploring how ignorance and the lack of advocacy on the part of the community actually dehumanises Mala instead of liberating her. May (2006, p.124) contends that the community displays a “learned inability” to witness and speak against sexual and racial violence, arguing that they are “arrogantly committed to forgetting, to avoiding memory”. In contrast to May (2006), Meacham (2010) suggests that the novel invokes

accountability from the community and the reader. Framing silence as “the collective failure of the community to intercede”, Meacham (2010, p.306) explores how characters like Otoh and Tyler signal the need for active involvement and humanity to defy colonial hierarchies that seek to silence traumatic histories of sexual and racial violence. However, the reticence embodied by the community is only one representation of silence in the novel. Zachariah (2012) argues that although Mala’s testimony is foregrounded in the novel through Tyler’s narration, it still lacks direct representation of the victim of trauma. While this may not be an intentional form of epistemic violence, what readers are exposed to is a variety of sources, hearsay and a filtered account of Mala’s life through the eyes of another. Zachariah (2012) invokes Spivak’s question of whether the subaltern can ever speak, even when the account of marginalisation is hers to tell.

My investigation of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) not only aligns with the existing literature but also attempts to expand upon memory as a tool for narrative agency and silence as a form of resistance. While the present scholarship does briefly outline the function of memory in the text, it does so by highlighting the impact of forgetting, especially from a societal standpoint. The role of memory has not been extensively explored in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), especially not in the context of how memory works as resistance against colonial discourse and identity erasure. While the literature, in part, examines collective memory, it also fails to demonstrate how the power of personal memory or testimony, in the process of identity recovery, can act as active resistance to both colonial and patriarchal violence. Previous discussions on memory are often overly simplified, reducing it to a thematic device rather than the antithesis of the various embodiments of silence and suppression in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Silence operates in a similar way. In postcolonial literature, critical scholarship frequently associates silence with suppression, yet it often overlooks its ability to challenge harmful colonial narratives and the hierarchical power structures they reinforce.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this study, this chapter will focus on the critical theoretical frameworks that underpin my analysis of colonial violence and trauma, and their collective impact on memory and identity, and the role that silence plays both as an oppressive and transformative force. Moving from postcolonial theory, which I use as a foundation to articulate key concepts relevant to the novel, the chapter also highlights significant conceptual contributions made to trauma and memory studies. Finally, the chapter theorises silence in literature and the discussion focuses on how silence may be read as more than just a signpost of oppression but also a tool for resistance.

Postcolonial Theory: Foundational concepts relevant to *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)

Postcolonial theory is an expansive topic and the risk of emphasising certain key concepts at the cost of omitting others is highly probable. Bearing this in mind, this chapter attempts to concisely present three theorists, namely, Edward Said and his seminal work titled *Orientalism* (1978), Homi Bhabha and his theory of colonial mimicry and ambivalence in *Location of Home and Culture* (1992), and Gayatri Spivak's groundbreaking discussion on *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1985) in the context of Othering.

Postcolonial theory fundamentally serves as a literary approach to the cultural, social and political implications of colonisation. Colonialism may be defined as the “cultural exploitation” necessary for the expansion of Europe in the context of dominating large geographic locations through political rule (Ashcroft et al 2007, p.40). Postcolonial theory is largely concerned with perceiving colonisation as a physical and psychological construct responsible for cultural subjugation. Within this discussion, recovery from colonial violence infers issues like forced migration, land dispossession, indentured labour and slavery, all stemming from colonialism and often told through the lens of various diasporic communities. These diasporic communities can be traced back to specific colonial systems which were responsible for the movement of people globally. Such systems include the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade resulting in what is known today as the African diaspora, Settler colonisation (seen in Australia and parts of Canada), Partition (evident in the divide between Pakistan and India, and in Kenya and Uganda) and Indentured labour practices (trafficking and movement of individuals across South-East Asia, Africa and China).

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is responsible for one of the largest diasporas in the world, seeing the movement of roughly 12 million Africans forcibly taken from their homes in

Central and West Africa through slave routes located in parts of America and Europe for over nearly three centuries. Forced to work in agriculture, industry and in the homes of foreigners, these slaves became the backbone of the colonial economy and contributed in great part to the modernisation and profitability of Europe (Gilroy 1993). Today, the African diaspora has expanded to parts of America, South America and the Caribbean. Settler colonisation in places like Australia differed from how the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade functioned, in that its sole aim was to replace the existing indigenous population of that region (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). From the erection of penal colonies to mass land dispossession, native groups were removed from their homes and in turn, migrants from other parts of the world were brought in, either through the colonial project or seeking work. The work of colonisation to partition established regions is also considered a key factor in diaspora studies today. Partitioning as part of colonial restructuring allowed for a shift in political dynamics, economy and power. In the case of India, the divide was the result of anti-colonial nationalism but was essentially fuelled by colonisation for the 200 years Britain occupied India. As a result, the India/Pakistan divide saw one of the largest migrations in history with over 15 million people displaced; the Muslims moved to Pakistan and the Hindus and Sikhs moved to India (Butalia 2000). Indentured labour practices also factor in the discussion around diaspora. For instance, between 1860 and 1911, over 15 million Indians were brought to KwaZulu-Natal (formerly Natal) in South Africa, which was at the time a British colony. Working primarily in sugar plantations and railways, the British Indentured Labour system was responsible for the Indian diaspora becoming as expansive in South Africa today. Similar labour practices were introduced in other places across the world much earlier, for instance the Caribbean.

From the discussion above, it is evident that postcolonial theory is in fact intersectional and dynamic as the diaspora it addresses. It also becomes essential in understanding the impact of colonial violence on the individual and national identities of those living in once-colonised countries, and who now form part of these many diasporas. In this study, the Indian diaspora which exists in the Caribbean is examined by paying attention to particular characters such as Mala and Chandin Ramchandin in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) who are the product of colonial imposition and violence through the inhumane Indentured Labour system in Trinidad. Further to this, these characters may be recognised through the postcolonial lens of the Other or the Orient as discussed in the chapters to come.

To begin, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) broadly describes the term as the way discourse has been used to isolate, stigmatise, and misrepresent the image of the East, whose identity is

referred to as the Orient or Orientals. Said (1978) purports that discourse has been strategically used to advance this representation and create binaries which are founded in absolutism:

In a sense Orientalism was a library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held. What bound the archive together was a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective. These ideas explained the behaviour of Orientals; they supplied Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics (pp.49-50).

This is particularly relevant to my study which considers the role of language in furthering the monolithic discourse describing Mala Ramchandin in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Mala is demonised by her community and becomes the target of gossip over the years, left to be perceived as a “spectre” and “crazy lady” (Mootoo 1996, p.7). I argue that it is only through empathy that she is recognised, and her memory is acknowledged:

I rested my palm gently on her hair. I expected it to be coarse and wiry, qualities that would fit the rumours [...] This one touch turned her from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had devoted my life to serving. I needed to know the woman who lay hidden behind the white sheet (Mootoo 1996, p.11).

Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) explores the dynamics of culture, power and resistance in the context of postcolonial discourse. Bhabha (1994) has also significantly contributed to the field of postcolonial theory in his articulation of colonial ambivalence. According to Bhabha, the ambivalence is illustrated through colonial discourse which places the colonised as the subject of both fixation and resentment. This is again highlighted by his essay “Of Mimicry and Man” which locates this strange ambiguity as the “ambivalence of mimicry, almost the same, *but not quite*” (2004, p.86).

According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (2007), colonial mimicry can be best understood as the oppressed taking on the form of the oppressor, both in stature and nature. It may be described as the “ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized although, when colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to ‘mimic’ the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits” (2007, p.124). Chandin arguably displays

colonial mimicry when he seeks to emulate the British missionaries who arrive in Lantancamara so that he may win the affection of their daughter, Lavinia. Despite his qualifications and demeanour, Lavinia's parents still reject Chandin because of his race. He internalises their prejudice and perpetuates this hatred towards his family for being Indian, which he comes to strongly resent. He deeply desires a life with Lavinia, who in turn, falls in love with his own uneducated Indian wife. The hypocrisy of the situation only fuels Chandin's anger further.

When Mala and her younger sister Asha are abandoned by their mother, they are left to face public humiliation and their father's wrath. Mala's existence is a reminder of the embarrassment and rejection her father experienced at the hands of the coloniser and the pain he inflicts on her is his way of externalising his own traumatic experiences. As a result, the Ramchandin home becomes a site for sexual abuse and imprisonment for Mala (Pohpoh):

Chandin Ramchandin never set foot in the school house or church again. He fenced off his house crudely with chicken wire and stayed indoors. [...] He did not let them out of his sight. He stood guard as they showered in the outdoor bathroom. He waited for them not far from the latrine [...] One night he mistook Pohpoh for Sarah. He put his arm around her and slowly began to touch her [...] The following night he sent the two children to sleep in their own room, but they both came to know that he would call for one or the other to pass at least part of the night in his bed (Mootoo 1996, p.66).

While Mala is dehumanised and her narrative and memory are repeatedly silenced throughout the novel, I argue that there remains evidence of resistance through narrative techniques employed in the text, such as multiple levels of narration and structural narrative ambiguity. The urgency for the oppressed to reclaim their agency is highlighted in Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1998) which discusses the concept of Othering. Othering can be described as the dialectical act of distinguishing differences between oneself and another individual or group, whereby the self is affirmed and considered superior as part of a dichotomy of characteristics. In a colonial context, Othering "describes the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects. Othering functions as a reciprocal process in which the identity of the coloniser comes into being simultaneously with the construction of the colonised as dependent subjects. (Ashcroft et al., 2007). This act of political and economic domination places the marginalised identity "under erasure" (Spivak 1998, p.24).

Spivak (1988) notes that in patriarchal societies, females face Othering in a two-fold manner, not only due to their race but also as a result of their gender.

Trauma Theory: Recognising the Traumatic impact of Colonial Violence

Critics such as Peter Levine (2010, p.13) and Cathy Caruth (1996) suggest that trauma is not so much caused by an “external event that has the potential to inflict physical or mental pain but in the sense of helpless immobility the victim faces, in repeatedly experiencing the event after it has passed, sometimes, without witness:

Trauma is caused when we are unable to release blocked energies, to fully move through the physical/emotional reactions to hurtful experience. Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness. (Levine 2010, pp.13-14).

These traumatic events may be understood as dormant volcanoes, where any experience could serve as a potential trigger for what mental angst lies beneath the conscious surface. Trauma is not present simply in the “original event in an individual’s past” but rather in its “unassimilated” nature which returns to “haunt the survivor” later on (Caruth 1996,p.4). In theorising trauma, Caruth (1996) articulates the urgency to represent this trauma and the necessity for it to be witnessed in order for it to be processed, highlighting the relationship between language and trauma:

Such a question, I will argue, whether it occurs within a strictly literary text or in a more deliberately theoretical one, can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding (p.5).

Caruth (1996) argues that trauma historically presents itself in a disjointed and disruptive manner, which is evident in the non-linear and unconventional narrative techniques employed by Mootoo in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). In *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), the narrative oscillates between the past and present, employing multiple narrators and parallel narratives which take place in Lantanacamera as well as abroad. The effect causes the reader to critically compare narrative elements such as characterization and settings, as well as reflect on the potential connections between trauma, memory, silence and identity. Caruth (1996) further asserts that the power of memory is present in the ability to liberate a character and create space for a potentially new narrative. She illustrates the power of reference and

address in her study of the 1959 French Romantic film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, directed by Alain Resnais. According to Caruth:

the truth of the woman's story thus emerges not only in the power of its reference but in the address that enacts the impossibility of her history. Yet it is also precisely within what this address cannot fully know that the possibility of another history opens (1996, p.39).

In line with Caruth, I argue that the act of bearing witness to traumatic memory through narration and remembering is vital in the reconfiguration of identity, as is the case with Mala Ramchandin's history. In the context of postcolonial studies, trauma theory becomes a critical framework to critique the impact of trauma on the personal and collective experience that former colonies endured, especially in respect to their psychological and physical wounds, their memory and their culture. As stated above, the nature of trauma is often cyclical, returning in different forms for the victim, seeking some form of address:

it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth 1996, p.4)

It is fitting then, that trauma theory is primarily concerned with memory. Trauma as already discussed, is disruptive, causing memory to become fragmented, distorted and even altogether repressed. Details of the traumatic event and even the victim's life may become disorientated or, in a narrative sense, erased. Because the weight of trauma is often experienced in a delayed manner, it can also have an impact on how the personal or collective experience time.

From a theoretical perspective, trauma is also largely concerned with the physical and psychological, or trauma and the body. This is theorized by Bessel van der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) as an embodied sort of trauma, where the traumatic event affects the body, making it the site of violence and having an impact on the nervous system and functioning. Not only does the trauma have an impact on memory as stated earlier where, "traumatized people simultaneously remember too little and too much", but also on the body where an individual has been so severely harmed by the traumatic incident that they dissociate themselves from their body, commonly referred to as 'an out of body' experience (Van der Kolk 2014, p.196). Since the body is sometimes systematically and repeatedly

forced to endure this violence, the body comes to encompass the pain of the event. This sometimes causes the victim to use the body as their primary tool for communication through gestures and body language, forfeiting their ability to speak or reducing them to silence. This silence is discussed extensively in the chapters to come, where Mala in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) does not employ language to communicate and relies on her body to articulate herself.

Trauma theory also attempts to better understand the reproduction of trauma, where the victim may not only forget or disassociate but also reenact the event as a means of processing what has occurred. In Van der Kolk (2014, p.196), psychologist Jean-Martin Charcot presents the case of Irène, a young woman who grieves the loss of her ill mother:

In addition to amnesia for her mother's death, Irène suffered from another symptom: Several times a week she would stare, trancelike, at an empty bed, ignore whatever was going on around her, and begin to care for an imaginary person. She meticulously reproduced, rather than remembered, the details of her mother's death.

In the case of Irène, the reenactment is not particularly harmful to anyone else. However, the case above is useful when considering the impact of intergenerational trauma, where cycles of violence are evident within families. This is relevant in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) where Chandin's own painful experiences are reenacted and take the shape of physical and sexual abuse of his daughters.

Memory Studies: The Politics of Forgetting and Remembering in a Postcolonial Context

Memory studies exist in an interdependent relationship with trauma and identity. Simply put, a traumatic event has an impact on one's memory, or even one's ability to remember.

Memories, both personal and collective, have the ability to shape our identity. Ultimately, memory or the erasure and manipulation of memory becomes involved with the political, and from a historical perspective, memory largely impacts the power dynamics resident in colonial discourse.

Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field which makes use of a variety of other fields such as psychology, sociology, literature and even neuroscience to better understand the act of remembering and the construction of memory (Roediger & Wertsch 2008). In recent years, memory studies has grown exceedingly popular as political contestation over issues of land retribution, origin and identity have arisen globally. From this statement, it may be evident

that memory studies was originally focused on the individual memory but soon transitioned into looking at how memory is socially constructed and how the collective memory comes to be (Olick and Robbins, 1998). Since memory studies is a broad and forming field, my dissertation will make use of two key concepts under this theoretical framework; first, the role of memory in identity formation, as articulated by Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998, p.133) who state, “[M]emory is a central, if not the central, medium through which identities are constituted”. Second, memory and remembering is both socially constructed and politically motivated, where “individuals and groups recall the past not for its own sake, but as a tool to bolster different aims and agendas” (Hoelscher & Alderman 2008, p.349).

French sociologist and father of memory studies, Maurice Halbwachs pioneered much of the foundational work on the social value of memory and was strongly influenced by Emile Durkheim in asserting that “memory is not simply an individual phenomenon, but is relational in terms of family and friends, and also societal and collective in terms of the social frameworks of social groups.” (Bosch 2013, p.2). Since Halbwachs argues that there are several memories of the same event belonging to several different groups, memory studies considers the various representations of memory.

In *The Social Frameworks of Collective Memory* (1925), Halbwachs maintains that the social environment serves to shape our memories since it is usually our conversations with those around us that spurs us on to recall something:

Yet it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories. If we enumerate the number of recollections during one day that we have evoked upon the occasion of our direct and indirect relations with other people, we will see that, most frequently, we appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions which others have asked us, or that we suppose they could have asked us.(p.38)

Halbwachs(1925, p.40) goes on to assert that it is our belonging to certain social groups which assists us in the recollection of our memories, arguing that when we recall an event, it is considered “necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the group or groups”.

Critics have offered a variety of frameworks in order to locate a more concise definition and function of memory studies. According to Yadin Dudai (2014, p.51), “collective memory” is better understood when viewed as possessing three distinct entities: “a body of knowledge, an

attribute, and a process”. Moving away from the concept of a fixed form of memory, Wertsch and Roediger (2013, p.96) describe the act of remembering as fluid:

collective remembering is viewed as a dynamic process that often involves active and contentious contestation rather than a static body of knowledge. Furthermore, it is tied to some identity project and is in that sense subjective, as opposed to the sort of objective representation of the past that historical scholarship aspires to provide.

As I have mentioned, memory studies is not only concerned with memory formation but also the political act of remembering:

How these forms of remembering operate as collective representations of the past, how they constitute a range of cultural resources for social and historical identities, and how they privilege particular readings of the past and subordinate others” (Keightley and Pickering (2013) in Bosch(2013, p.2).

According to Sturken (2008), since memory is socially constructed, historical groups rely on memory to preserve their self-image when passing it down to each generation, and for this reason, memory and remembering must undergo cultural negotiation. It is clear, then, that memory plays a crucial role in affirming the identity of both the individual and the group, as well as the power they hold. This is also highlighted by Hoelscher and Alderman (2004, p.349) who argue that “the study of social memory inevitably comes around to questions of domination and the uneven access to a society’s political and economic resources”.

Theorizing Silence in Literature: Psychological and Existential Readings of the Unspoken

Jacques Derrida significantly influenced literary studies on silence because of his groundbreaking theories on deconstruction. In one of his most popular works, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1967) proposes that language may be understood based on a system of differences. That is to say, language does not necessarily possess a fixed meaning but rather, meaning is to be derived from being deferred. This approach to deconstructing language is particularly useful in theorising silence, since language based on deferment prioritises, or brings to the forefront, the significance of what is unsaid, or silence (absence of speech or the unspoken). While Derrida does not directly theorise silence in literature, his foundational work on how meaning in language is never fully present is highly significant in understanding the role of silence in meaning-making.

Charles Glicksberg's (1970) "The Literature of Silence" approaches the absence of language slightly differently. Glicksberg's (1970, p.166) contribution to theorising silence is cross-cutting with the fields of psychology and philosophy, where he suggests that the writer's efforts to produce a literature that expresses his position in the world very often renders with it a sense of futility as he quickly comes to the conclusion that literature is not enough:

Among some modern writers the movement is triggered by a haunting realization of the essential futility of literature. That is why they aim to create anti-literature: works that spell the death of literature. For why write, they ask, if not out of some profound ontological urge? But literature, alas, cannot satisfy that urge. It can only raise questions it is powerless to answer. It can only stir up a dusty whirlwind of words and thus betray its own utter ineffectuality.

According to Glicksberg (1970, p.166), silence in literature is not simply what is not said or the absence of speech, but a "metaphysical paradox". This paradox hinges on the acknowledgement of two vital concepts: first, language attempts to articulate our human experience. Second, language fails at articulating that human experience. In understanding how this relationship works, Glicksberg (1970) suggests that it is what is not written (or spoken) that often communicates the complexity of humanity while still recognizing the futility of language. In arguing that silence contains meaning, Glicksberg (1970, p.167) draws on Alain Robbe-Grillet (1965, p.60) in *For a New Novel* who states:

I call out. No one answers me. Instead of concluding that there is no one there—which could be a pure and simple observation, dated and localized in space and time—I decide to act as if there *were* someone there, but someone who, for one reason or another, will not answer. The silence which follows my outcry is henceforth no longer a *true* silence; it is charged with content, a meaning, a depth, a soul—which immediately sends me back to my own. The distance between my cry, to my own ears, and the mute (perhaps deaf) interlocutor to whom it is addressed becomes an anguish, my hope and my despair, a meaning in my life. Henceforth nothing will matter except this false void and the problems it raises for me.

While Glicksberg (1970) argues that silence is a placeholder for meaning and that it carries with it a great measure of existential truth, he also highlights the use of silence as a form of resistance. This takes the shape of resistance to the inherent power structures that language validates and confronts language's inability to articulate the trauma or pain a character may

face. When considering how Mala in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) withdraws from language, readers are left with an “untranslatable surplus of meaning” in the form of gestures, body language and random sounds (Marchisotto 2021, p.68). Silence in literature then demands what Cathy Caruth (1996, p.66) calls “a new kind of listening” (to trauma), making the literature of silence linked to what trauma theory proposes is the need for recognition. Silence is not intended to be glanced over or ignored. In “Concerning Silence”, Aaron Zwintcher (2019) asserts that silence may be read as a demarcation and that every demarcation produces some sort of noise or meaning:

Passing over in silence is still addressing an issue, still adopting a position, still demarcating what can be addressed and what cannot. And every demarcation creates its own noise. Noise, when confronted and carefully considered, forces us to ask knotty questions about what we want, what we don't want, and how we negotiate between the two. Noise is the fine print in our contract with the world. It cannot be escaped, eliminated, or silenced. Silence is impossible, no doubt in the same way that the experience of death is impossible (since death takes away the consciousness necessary to experience). By extension, to be silenced is tantamount to losing one's self. (p.96)

As Glicksberg (1970) would argue, the absence of speech is an intentional positioning of meaning in the narrative and demands acknowledgment and recognition, even if it is not understood. Reading silence from a postcolonial perspective, Zwintcher's (2019) critique of silence and noise creates questions surrounding the freedom to speak for one's self rather than being disenfranchised of one's own personal narrative. This is referred to as “contemplative silence”, and Zwintcher (2019, p.96) regards it as necessary because “without it we cannot hear the voices of others who had been drowned out by our certainty.” In addition to this, Gayatri Spivak (1985) draws on the role of colonial discourse which has historically silenced the Other and replaced their narrative with a homogenised identity that benefits the cultural hegemony.

Using a postmodern lens, silence does not require the witness to understand its meaning or for the victim to fully assimilate the trauma it is derived from, but simply to bear witness to it (Caruth 1996). Like Tyler, who disclaims at the start of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), that the narrative to follow is only his version of the events and is susceptible to bias, Mala's silence is recognised to hold a wealth of meaning but can never be fully understood. Silence

in literature serves this resistive function, not only in challenging the limitations of language but also as resistance to narrative authority.

From a postmodern and psychoanalytical perspective, the spectator is reminded of his inability to fully comprehend the silence, while simultaneously defying the need to ascribe his own meaning to it:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (Caruth 1996, p.3)

In other words, in ascribing meaning to silence, the spectator gains power, and the silence of the victim is reduced to futility. By maintaining control over language (or its absence), the victim remains the custodian of their narrative, and the spectator must come to terms with its nothingness.

Chapter Four: Haunted Heritage – Reading Chandin and Mala’s relationship as a depiction of Colonial Violence and Trauma

“In another version of this same myth, Perseus collects a drop of blood from Medusa’s wound in two vials. The drop from one vial has the power to kill; the drop in the other vial has the power to raise the dead and restore life. What is revealed here is the dual nature of trauma: first, its destructive ability to rob victims of their capacity to live and enjoy life. The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect.”

Levine (2010, p.59)

One of the central themes in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) is how different kinds of trauma is experienced and processed by several characters across generations in a single location. This chapter aims to examine how an abusive relationship between a father and daughter may be interpreted as a trans-generational representation of how colonial violence has been enacted and impacted those living in the Caribbean.

I begin with a brief analysis of the trauma Chandin Ramchandin faces in his early life in the novel and introduce key postcolonial theoretical concepts which will be helpful in understanding the severe impact of racial discrimination on Chandin’s identity. I will thereafter discuss how Chandin processes this abuse by rejecting his own identity and perpetuating this trauma. Following this, I will examine how Mala becomes a victim of physical and sexual abuse, and how trauma theory may serve as an insightful framework to better understand the complexities of Mala’s experiences. Finally, I will highlight how the inherited trauma represented through the Ramchandin family may be read parallel to the legacy of colonial violence experienced in the Caribbean.

While in the Greek, *trauma* relates to a physical wound, it was Sigmund Freud who later came to articulate trauma as not simply an injury inflicted upon the body but a wound to the mind which, unlike a physical impairment that may require simple tending to, “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth 1996, p.4). Bearing this definition of trauma in mind, one becomes grossly aware of the significance of the ‘aftermath’ of the traumatic event since it would appear that what takes place after the point of wounding possesses the transformative/destructive “power” earlier outlined by Levine (2010, p.59). Chandin Ramchandin experiences a traumatic event more than once in

Cereus Blooms at Night (1996), yet the encounters have one recurring theme; that is, Chandin is rejected because of who he is, or his *identity*.

Uprootedness and Trauma in Chandin's Dislocation

Ashcroft et al. in *The Empire Writes Back* (2004, pp.81,218) define displacement as a sense of "not-at-home-ness" or an "unhousedness". Displacement and dislocation become synonymous terms here to describe an uprootedness that transcends geographic relocation:

Finally, dislocation in a different sense is also a feature of all invaded colonies where indigenous or original cultures are, if not annihilated, often literally dislocated, i.e. moved off what was their territory. At best, they are metaphorically dislocated, placed into a hierarchy that sets their culture aside and ignores its institutions and values in favour of the values and practices of the colonizing culture. (Ashcroft et.al 2007, p.66)

While the Reverend and Ramchandin were amicable in their discussion of Chandin's future, and Chandin's removal from the barracks would no doubt present several opportunities for him that his father could not offer, his dislocation from his home did not come without a kind of wound to the mind referred to at the start of this chapter. While displacement is often read as an act of physical violence since the individual is forcefully removed from their home, it may also be understood as a forced shifting of one's identity and what they associate with their self-image. Chandin's conversion to Christianity and migration to the Thoroughly's home marks the beginning of his trauma and uprootedness from his culture, his community and his identity. In the context of the novel, it is imperative to clarify how Chandin's identity undergoes a radical transformation. This transformation serves as a harrowing example of assimilation, but it is nonetheless a counter-narrative to the homogenous identity perpetuated upon colonised groups by British imperialism. Chandin, as the Other, exists in opposition to what Said (1978, p.14) defines as the European construction of "a system of ideas that can remain unchanged". This mutable identity is best seen through the changes he undergoes when he is adopted by Reverend Thoroughly and his family and offered the privilege of living outside of the indentured labour barracks and study at the seminary the Reverend had built. Chandin was to be the first Indian child in Lantanacamara to pursue a profession and receive a title, making him an important member of his community and key influence in a much larger project of religious conversion among the Indian community.

Despite the Ramchandins' conversion to Christianity for the sake of their child, Chandin felt their change was insincere and he was "embarrassed by his parents' reluctance to embrace the smarter-looking, smarter-acting Reverend's religion, and there soon came a time when, to his parents' dismay, he no longer visited." (Mootoo 1996, p.10). Although inducted into the home and lives of the Thoroughly's as seen in "Chandin went everywhere with his new family", and "He was introduced as the Reverend's son" (Mootoo 1996, p.39), Chandin's place among the Thoroughly's was not altogether organic or convincing, "especially to see him sitting up there in the front, looking very foreign in spite of his dark skin, all dressed up in his jacket and tie, right next to the Reverend's wife" (Mootoo 1996, p.29). Although his dark skin was not uncommon for a Lantanacamaran boy, his position within the family and his identity are seen as unstable. This instability produced a rift in him, being torn away from his family and those who he once related to.

While name changes were a common practice when a missionary had converted a child, Chandin's new biblical name was up for debate; "Mrs. Thoroughly suggested Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. [...] The thoughtful Reverend, however, suggested [...] the novel idea that people were most likely to be swayed by one of their own kind. Chandin and Mrs. Thoroughly gave in to the Reverend's idea that Chandin's own name would win his people's trust." (Mootoo 1996, p.10). Within postcolonial discourse, new names bestowed upon converts often signalled approval from missionaries who recognised and praised these individuals for being no longer tied down to their cultural and religious pasts. Eventually, Chandin does not receive this new name or the endorsement attached to it, placing him in a space of liminality. Bhabha (1994, p4) refers to liminality for a postcolonial subject as a transcultural space, "a pathway between upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness and whiteness". The fact that Chandin does not receive a new name, the jewel of conversion, further emphasises his alien position among the Thoroughly's. Chandin has been displaced and does not belong to the Ramchandin home or the Indo-Caribbean culture but neither does he belong with the Thoroughly's or the white community in Lantanacamara.

Mootoo communicates this experience of dislocation and Chandin's liminal status through the object of a chair in the Thoroughly's dining room which signals the one space Chandin could identify as his own; "Although it was only a physical place, the chair became an antidote to the chaos of his uprootedness." (Mootoo 1996, p.11). The relationship between displacement, both physical and metaphoric, and identity cannot be overstated since it is displacement that produces a "crisis in self-image" and an "alienated vision" (Ashcroft et al. 2007, p.9).

Chandin's Performative Transformation as a Trauma Response

The trauma attached to being removed from his family and the urgency to belong to his new one calls for a performative transformation. The changes that Chandin undergoes reveal his longing for belonging and his desire for legitimacy as a trauma response. Mootoo manages to depict Chandin's growing repulsion for his Indian culture while symbolically signalling his deep desire to take on the same identity as that of the Thoroughly's. This is specifically seen through the symbol of the chandelier in the Thoroughly's home; "He felt an immense distaste for his background and the people in it. Gazing awestruck at the chandelier, he would daily renew his promise to be the first brown-skinned person in Lantanacamara to own one just like it." (Mootoo 1996: 11). The chandelier is not just symbolic of the life Chandin aspires to live but the actual identity he wants to subsume. This symbol is particularly significant later on in the narrative, where Chandin installs a chandelier in his own home, almost as a sign of affirmation, ahead of Lavinia's visit:

Chandin was like an excited child. He returned home the next day with a modest chandelier, [...] He went out on the front porch and re-entered the house, imagining what a visitor would see on first entering. He stood on the porch again and looked in and admired his chandelier. (Mootoo 1996, p.51).

The chandelier is then mentioned again, towards the end of the novel. When everything else was gone, the chandelier remained as the last vestige of an identity Chandin desperately aspired to. In contrast to its earlier reference to opulence, the later passage is marked with the weightiness of its misplaced and isolated status among the dust and decay, and one cannot help but draw a parallel to Chandin's own identity in the text:

On the other side of the furniture blockade was a spacious room that had once served as drawing room and dining room. The space was now empty. All that remained was a cut-glass chandelier. (Mootoo 1996, p.129).

Like the Other who is shaped by this peculiar ambivalence of aiming to be what it cannot be, Chandin resolves to detach himself from his Indian identity, and work towards what he understands to be a more superior persona:

In the privacy of his bedroom Chandin watched himself in the long mirror on the door of the armoire and saw what he most feared: a short and darkly brown Indian-

Lantanacamaran boy with blue-black hair. Without question, he resembled the other boys in his class and from the barracks in the fields.

He would change, he decided once and for all, what he had the power to change. Chandin took note of the Reverend's rigid, austere posture, so unlike his own father's propensity to bend or twist or fold his body whichever way the dictates of comfort tipped him. He practised sitting upright, with his back unswayed and his legs planted firmly on the ground or crossed severely at the knees. Other times he diligently studied and imitated the Reverend's pensive stroking of his chin or tapping of his fingers against a book. (Mootoo 1996, p.34).

His efforts reflect on what Bhabha notes as the “resemblance and menace” of mimicry (1984, p.127). The ambivalent relationship that exists in mimicry may be better understood in two parts. First, the Other must adopt the values, language, culture and practices of the colonizer, making it easier to enforce structures of power and control linked to colonisation without resistance. Second, and paradoxically, no matter how much the colonised resembles the colonizer, they can never come to fully assimilate the identity without exposing its inherent flaws. Therefore, the existence of the colonial mimic is not only commended but also rejected by the one who produces knowledge on it.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1932), Frantz Fanon discusses how the process of decolonisation or the “revealing and dismantling colonialist power” in cultural and institutional brings with it the development and introduction of a new generation of elites who replicate the same violent colonist structures which were enforced upon them forms (Ashcroft et al. 2007, p.56). In the preface of Fanon’s text Jean-Paul Sartre writes:

The European elite undertook to manufacture a native elite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of Western culture; they stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country they were sent home, whitewashed. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers; they only echoed. (1963, p.7)

Memmi argues that the colonised is left with two options in deciding his fate; first, he may assimilate the face and persona of the colonizer, view his people through the eyes of the oppressor, and still face rejection:

In order to be assimilated, it is not enough to leave one's group, but one must enter another; now he meets with the colonizer's rejection. All that the colonized has done to emulate the colonizer has met with disdain from the colonial masters. They explain to the colonized that those efforts are in vain, that he only acquires thereby an additional trait, that of being ridiculous. (2003, p.168).

Chandin's plight to conform to the identity that the Thoroughly's presented inevitably leads him to believe that he would be a suitable match for their daughter. However, Reverend Thoroughly denies Chandin the opportunity to pursue his affections, saying that Lavinia is like a sister to him, and using religion to mask the rejection, "Look here. You are to be a brother to Lavinia and nothing more. A brother. She is your sister and you her brother. [...] But that love must remain pure, as pure as God's love is for his children." (Mootoo 1996, p.37). On the grounds of religion, Reverend Thoroughly justifies his prejudice against Chandin, arguing that any potential relationship between his daughter and 'son' would be ungodly. Unsatisfied with this explanation, Chandin secretly begins forging an identity that he hopes will be accepted by Lavinia:

He copied their manners and dressed like them in the white shirts and trousers the Wetlanders considered the height of tropical fashion. He would turn their accented phrases over and over in his mind until he was brave enough to air them: "I'd be very much obliged, Chandin, my good fellow..." "...upon your honour!" "...how infinitely superior..." (Mootoo 1996, p.38).

Rationalising these changes and confident of the distant connection between himself and the Thoroughly's, Chandin becomes determined to persuade Lavinia to marry him:

He feared that without some firm action on his part, someone else with more aplomb would step in and steal her away. He had proven himself in school and in the seminary. They were now both adults. And furthermore, they were not siblings, he shouted in the silent space of his own head. (Mootoo 1996, p.39)

The final blow by Reverend Thoroughly comes by way of his approval of the marriage between his nephew and Lavinia, causing Chandin to not only recognise the hypocrisy of the Thoroughly's initial dismissal but also his repeated inability to fully engender an identity pleasing enough for them (Mootoo 1996, p.45). This consistent shaping of Chandin's identity and subsequent refusal not only severely damages Chandin's state of mental health but also falls within the definition of what Homi Bhabha describes as "colonial mimicry", contending that it is

the “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite like.*” (Bhabha 1984, p.130).

Chandin’s Failed Assimilation

Despite his attempts, Chandin will never be enough, and this realisation causes further psychological trauma which Mootoo (1996, p.45) sets the stage with, “Chandin's world spun and blackened as if the sun had suddenly been switched off. He broke out in a sweat and began to shiver”. Later, when it becomes clear to Chandin that Lavinia prefers his wife and his children over him, he feels a “familiar sting of Lavinia’s unattainability.” (Mootoo 1996, p.52). While readers are aware that Lavinia is not interested in Chandin because of her romantic affections towards Sarah, her rejection reminds Chandin that the identity he has taken on has again proven insufficient and he feels that Lavinia had, by steering her attention towards his daughters, “once again dismissed him” (Mootoo 1996, p.52). This consistent rejection contributes to Chandin’s crumbling mental state, “all the while crying and making growling sounds. His children cried even more seeing him cry.” (Mootoo 1996, p.64).

As mentioned earlier, trauma is most evident after the point of “wounding” through recurring experiences that remind one of its “incomprehensibility” (Caruth 1996, p.4). This is illustrated in Freud’s reference to an accident in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1932) where the accident itself comes to symbolise an unexpected and violent event, yet it is the complexity of the event and not the accident itself that has not yet been processed that is far more terrifying. According to Caruth (1996, p.6), it is this incomprehensibility that serves as the foundation and the driver of trauma since what returns is “not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.”

Chandin’s initial displacement may be read as Freud’s accident and could have elicited a domino effect where several other traumatic occurrences (the Reverend’s dismissal, Lavinia’s engagement to her cousin and Sarah’s departure) become a recurring reminder of how Chandin’s trauma is rooted in his inability to fully grasp the magnitude of the traumatic event. Furthermore, this shocking lack of comprehension or the loss of "the locus of referentiality" could be symbolic of Chandin’s identity once Lavinia and Sarah leave (Caruth 1996, p.6). When the Other is without someone to mimic, or a definitive and authentic culture to which it may return, it stands in a lonely and perpetual state of alienation and incongruity, much like the chandelier in the latter passages of the novel (Mootoo 1996). Commenting on the status of the colonial mimic after the Other has been severely dehumanized, Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer*

and Colonized (2003, p.130) confirms this by arguing that such a man is “surely no longer an alter ego of the colonizer. He is hardly a human being. He tends rapidly toward becoming an object.” According to Memmi (2003, p.183), the colonised individual often ends up asserting himself in violent ways after having failed at assimilation:

The colonized's self-assertion, born out of a protest, continues to define itself in relation to it. In the midst of revolt, the colonized continues to think, feel and live against and, therefore, in relation to the colonizer and colonization. [...] Uncertain of himself, he gives in to the intoxication of fury and violence. In fact, he asserts himself vigorously.

In the case of Chandin, one may identify how this revolt is primarily a response to the trauma outlined in the novel and in the preceding chapters. His violent reaction to Sarah and Lavinia leaving serves as a sobering and unwelcome realisation of what is described above as a failed “assimilation”, further intensifying his internal conflict, “He kicked the banister again and again. [...] They watched as he swiped at the kitchen counter, sending pots, pans and cutlery crashing to the floor. [...] Her father tore through the house smashing ornaments.(Memmi 2003, p.2; Mootoo 1996, p.64).

Chandin becomes a notorious drunkard in Paradise, and he retreats into the quiet of his home, away from the ties that connected him to the Thoroughly's. He exercises a dominating and obsessive kind of control over his daughters: “He did not let them out of his sight. He stood guard as they showered in the outdoor bathroom. He waited for them not far from the latrine.” (Mootoo 1996, p.65). This was primarily due to his paranoia that “one or both of the women would return and nab the children” (Mootoo 1996, p.63). While this strained and strange relationship could be read as Chandin's need to exercise control over his domestic sphere in an effort to assert his already fragile identity, his treatment of his children does align with the coloniser-colonised relationship, where the oppressed are viewed as spectacles of both fascination and repulsion (Bhabha 1994). Mootoo (1996, p.49) describes this ambivalence in which Chandin mimics the coloniser's gaze as “he enjoyed observing his daughters, albeit at a distance.” His fear of Lavinia and Sarah returning further expresses what is commonly referred to as postcolonial anxiety which is inherently linked to the trauma one has experienced in the past within the colonial context. Even though former colonial powers cease to exercise control in colonies, the postcolonial subject still fears their return and the trauma of colonial violence is still frequently revisited psychologically. Chandin's own displacement and the abrupt dislocation he experienced as a child is repeated in the act of Lavinia and Sarah leaving. This causes him

greater anxiety about undergoing the same trauma again and his internal conflict is reflected in his fear that his children will abandon him too, even if this threat is not real.

Throughout the novel, Chandin's identity undergoes trauma on three levels: his uprootedness in childhood, his traumatic response to dislocation through performative transformation and his failed assimilation to coloniser culture, leaving Chandin with a collapsed identity.

Trauma Internalised through Mala's Split-Self

Chandin's response to trauma is externalised and transitions from physical to sexual abuse through the act of rape, which quickly becomes a normalised practice in the Ramchandin household. The first sexual encounter between Chandin and Mala is characterised by fear and confusion, mistaking his daughter for Sarah. However, this moment of confusion soon gives way to a deliberate and sustained pattern of sexual abuse, as Chandin begins routinely summoning his daughters to his bed (Mootoo 1996). Mala, frequently referred to as Pohpoh in the earlier parts of the narrative, tries to save her younger sister by offering herself up to her father in place of Asha, "Pohpoh unwrapped herself from Asha and went. As if it were nothing at all." (Mootoo 1996, p.67). Where Chandin's trauma is dealt with openly and in violent, physical ways, Mala's pain, often at the hands of her father, is internalised.

Mala not only bears the image of her mother, "You [Mala] look like Mama" but also inherits the consequences of her mother's actions, bearing witness to the impact of Sarah and Lavinia's relationship, "Through the lens he watched carefully and saw Lavinia's hands rest tenderly on Mama's waist. He saw it all only because, that day, he intended to. And Pohpoh watched him as he did." (Mootoo 1996, pp.58,79). Mala becomes a victim to the trauma of abandonment by her mother, the trauma associated to keeping a secret from her father and the trauma of enduring physical and sexual abuse in her home and finally, the trauma of being torn away from Asha.

As discussed earlier on, Caruth (1996) views trauma as an unrepresentable act which the mind cannot fully come to terms with. Caruth (1996, p.4) argues that trauma creates a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world". This breach could be interrupted as a fracture to the self, simply because the mind of the victim cannot make sense of, let alone survive, the reality of the event. This fractured self is not only the result of trauma but also the mechanism that intends to protect the mind from further injury.

Mootoo intentionally represents this split-self in her reference to Mala and Pohpoh in separate parts of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). While Chandin projects his trauma on

others, Mala internalises it. Although both names refer to the same character, it is Pohpoh who symbolises childhood innocence, fighting off bullies in the school yard alongside Asha and her best friend Boyie, encountering her first romantic crush and subsequently becoming a victim of rape at the hands of her father (Mootoo 1996). Mala is described through the narrative as a much older, more detached individual who eventually loses her ability to communicate altogether. The split becomes necessary in understanding the impact of the trauma on Mala's psyche.

Du Bois's (1903) theory of the double consciousness serves as an insightful guide to interpreting how the two identities or the double self are representative of the internal conflict the postcolonial identity experiences. Du Bois discusses the concept of a double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which he wrote in the context of the Black experience in America. To clarify, Du Bois (1903, p.3). argues that the oppressed navigate the distinction between their true self and another identity which has been imposed upon them by the oppressor:

—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

For Mala, this fractured-self aligns with Du Bois' concept of the double-self which is deeply psychological and can be applied to the younger Pohpoh and her older, ostracised and detached self, Mala, or old lady Ramchandin, as she ends up being called as Lantanacamara's social pariah. She is demonised, vilified and exists in complete isolation from everyone else on the island around her.

From a psychoanalytic lens, Riccio (2017) posits that certain cases of "recurring trauma" can cause dissociation which "impairs body, mind, and responses" and may go on to "limit identity, memory, or consciousness" (p.43). Further to this, trauma is usually dealt with through a fight or flight response, but Riccio (2017, p.45) offers a third option for survival in the form of "freeze" where one must "imprison the mind and the body, a shutting down"; which leads to "dissociating or splitting" because "there is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide". Since Pohpoh

is trapped at the site of a recurring trauma, developing a split is the only viable option to process the event. Pohpoh then becomes frozen in time and lost, and Mala becomes the central figure in Mootoo's narrative.

Reading Chandin and Mala as Coloniser and Colonised

From a literary perspective, postcolonial texts often frame the abuse of a nation within the metaphor of an abused individual, where the self and nation are inherently connected. The individual serves as a microcosm for a greater developing independent society, struggling to navigate more than one identity. This is evident in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960), V.S. Naipaul's *Mimic Man* (1967) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) whose protagonists are victims of a conflicted identity and whose nations are also traumatised with a complex and contested past. In *Mimic Men* (Naipaul 1967, p.146), Ralph Singh expresses the duality of the postcolonial condition, plagued by an internal chaos:

We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new.

In *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Chandin's relationship with Mala may have several potential readings in the context of colonial violence. First, Chandin's enactment of violence towards Mala is symbolic of the dominating power structures employed by colonizers over the colonized. The relationship between Chandin and Mala is characterized by possession and objectification, similarly to how a master may own a slave, "A man tiefing my baby? He brave to even try. I ent let nobody tief my woman again." (Mootoo 1996, p.220). At the sign of Mala having a visitor over, Chandin frantically tears the house apart and violently rapes Mala. Here, the connection between the pain and trauma inflicted on Mala's body can be read parallel to the domination the colonised body undergoes:

Chandin locked the bedroom door. He set the cleaver down by the bed. He raped her three more times that night. He made her stay in his bed.[...]. Mala got up slowly. To her astonishment he did not hurry her. He did not utter a word. Every inch of her body pained. She licked her lip. She could tell it was swollen. She could feel that her eye was also swollen. Her pelvis and thighs hurt so much that the slightest motion made her dizzy. (Mootoo 1996, p.223).

Second, Chandin's perversion, the rape and physical assault of Mala is rooted in paranoia and insecurity. By dehumanizing her, Chandin intends to remind Mala to whom she belongs and, in the process, affirm his own identity. Without Mala, Chandin's identity becomes obsolete as he has no one to exercise dominance over. His existence is dependent upon Mala's distorted identity, which is theorised by Said in his description of the Orient, where the coloniser constructs its own identity in opposition to everything the Orient is (Said 1978). Building on this, Burney (2012) further illustrates the binary relationship between the coloniser and colonised through discourse that is characterised as not self-sustaining, which is to say, the West cannot define itself outside of defining the Other:

In other words, Said argues that Orientalism is a built-in system or method by which the West not only socially constructed and actually produced the Orient but controlled and managed it through a hegemony of power relations, working through the tropes, images, and representations of literature, art, visual media, film, and travel writing, among other aspects of cultural and political appropriation. Said contends that 'the Orient' is a European invention. [...] Thus the East and West have been historically, culturally and politically defined as binary oppositions. (p.24)

In dehumanizing Mala, Chandin reclaims - even in a false sense - a vestige of authority and mimics the only identity he is familiar with, that of the oppressor. We cannot discount this metaphor of domination and control which mirrors the colonial project. Michael Foucault's discourse on *Discipline and Punishment* (1975) does not necessarily relate to colonisation but may be of some help in better understanding how the exercising of discipline, surveillance, and normalization over the body is closely linked to the political. Foucault (1995, p.11) argues that the body is a contested site for control which serves as an "instrument or intermediary", where if someone "intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property."

Mala's trauma is inherited and she, like the postcolonial Other, must not only bear the weight of transgenerational pain associated with colonialism but must also try to negotiate a new identity and redeem her distorted narrative. It is the very same trauma, while extremely painful, that causes the split-self to occur which becomes her survival mechanism, helping her endure the violence and abandonment she experiences through the narrative. What is particularly interesting is that with the help of Nurse Tyler, Mala begins articulating herself again, if only through one audible word:

In a tiny whispering voice, she uttered her first public words: ‘Poh, Pohpoh, Poh, Poh, Poh.’” (Mootoo 1996, p.249)

At the end of the narrative, it would appear Mala finally sees Pohpoh flying across the sky and waves back at her. While the phenomenon transpires only in her mind, it is perhaps indicative of the liberation her younger, traumatised self finally experiences. The reconciliation and amicable departure between the two identities offer hope within the context of postcolonial narratives and nod at my earlier reference to the tale of Perseus and Medusa, showcasing the destructive and transformative nature of trauma.

Chapter Five: The Sound of Silence – Narrative Erasure and Oppressive Silence

“If she were to speak, would we be able to listen to her? If she chooses not to speak, should we not listen to her silence?”

Hooper (1992, p.47)

One of the primary concerns of this thesis is to examine the impact of colonial violence on an individual’s body and mind. The aim of this chapter is to investigate the link between these traumatic acts and their impact on identity, before I can examine any means of resistance to these forms of violence in the next chapter. In conducting this sort of analysis, the role of narrative and language becomes relevant since these concepts are inextricably linked to the expression of identity. This chapter discusses how the absence of narrative and language, and the act of silencing or erasing one’s narrative – or even speaking on another’s behalf – is a means of manipulating and controlling the identity of another.

In order to illustrate the relationship between narrative and identity, this chapter will have its analysis focus primarily on two themes. First, how narrative erasure is closely linked to the strategic disfiguring or misrepresenting of the identity of the Other as a colonial practice. This will be analysed in the context of how Mala’s personal history and identity have been erased or warped within her domestic and communal spaces over time in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Second, and working in tandem with the concept of narrative erasure, an examination of the relationship between silence and identity will be undertaken. Mootoo (1996) represents this silence through Mala’s inability to speak or comply with traditional forms of communication and through the wilful ignorance presented on the part of her community.

Colonial Discourse Erasing Narrative Identity

As ironic as it may appear, silence is an extremely difficult and precarious idea to communicate in literature. In this chapter, silence implies not only the absence of speech but the act of silencing the Other and replacing their voice with an alternative narrative. Homi Bhabha (1994) wrote that knowledge produced about the Other must be both rigid and repetitive. In other words, it cannot be fluid and open to change. It should be stated plainly, as if the stereotype is actually factual. In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994, p.66) argues that this knowledge needs to be disseminated so frequently and repetitively that it inevitably replaces any existing information about the Other until it is accepted as the truth:

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of the other [...] it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition.

Historically, the representation of the identity of the Other has been manipulated by colonial forces in order to exploit and subdue marginalised communities, proving that the narrative around identity is inherently connected to power dynamics. The false representation of the Other comes to replace their identity despite the ‘false narrative’ having several contradictions and ambiguities. Bhabha (1994, p.67) writes that this discourse “demands articulation of forms of difference-racial and sexual” and that it is in fact an “exercise of colonial power”. In the process, the Other becomes a silent role-player in the construction of their own identity. By stripping the Other of their identity, the coloniser is able to justify their violent act to gain control over colonies:

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population as the degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. (Bhabha 1994, p.71)

As mentioned earlier, the conditions which facilitate the production of colonial discourse are not only ambivalent, that is they are characterised by both desire and repulsion, but also crucial for the acquisition of power. Foucault (1980, p.196) in *Power and Knowledge* argues that the force of colonial discourse is by nature, strategic:

which means assuming that it is a matter of certain manipulation of relations of forces, either developing them in a particular direction, blocking them, stabilising them, utilising them, etc. The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it.

Bhabha (1994, p.75) goes on to describe this knowledge as a stereotype which is not just a simplification of the Other because of its “false representation” but rather because of the arresting nature of this knowledge, freezing the Other in time for all time. This knowledge does not exist in isolation but depends upon other stereotypes to sustain it, which Bhabha (1994, p.77) describes as the “metaphoric masking”.

Since narrative is linked to identity, its erasure may be read as an attempt to contest the Other’s identity or place in the world. In the context of colonial discourse, Lund (2023,

p.222) illustrates this link between narrative erasure and colonialism by stating, “the logic of elimination, in other words, the desire to destroy and replace the native society, also applies to concepts such as history, narratives and imaginaries, and not only to territorial conquest and control over bodies and resources”.

The Suffocated Self: Narrative Erasure in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)

As mentioned earlier, colonial discourse intends to strategically replace the identity, narrative and history of the Other with a false representation necessary to control them (Bhabha 1994). This means of control offers the coloniser a way of acquiring power over the subject, complicating the sense of self in the process, until the colonised becomes dependent on their master for definition. For the purpose of this study, I will consider Sarah and Lavinia’s departure as the point at which Mala’s narrative begins being shaped by Chandin. Although Chandin’s treatment of Mala prior to this may be characterised as cold and distant, it is the shame attached to his wife’s scandal and the reoccurrence of past trauma that incites his abuse.

The first aspect of narrative erasure that this chapter focuses on is how one can draw a parallel between the way Chandin treats Mala and the coloniser-colonised relationship. This is particularly regarding how he constructs a distorted identity for Mala to subscribe to, replacing her true self with a more shameful and deplorable narrative. This is undertaken through the strategic use of language, similar to how colonial discourse functions. Chandin’s repulsion and desire of Mala may be read in the same vein as Bhabha’s (1994) theory of ambivalence in colonial discourse. Bhabha (1994, p.67) describes the treatment of the Other as “at once the object of derision and desire, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity”. Earlier on in Mala’s life, when she is referred to as Pohpoh, readers are able to observe how Sarah’s leaving, and Chandin’s abuse affects her emerging identity. Pohpoh comes to behave like her mother and then like a slave. When given the opportunity to negotiate her identity she is faced with the distorted narrative Chandin has invented for her. When Sarah and Lavinia leave, Mala does more than just organically transition to the role of mother; she embodies her mother’s own repressed and painful existence. She hauntingly imitates Sarah and fearfully submits to Chandin in the same way the colonised are psychologically repressed by the coloniser. This includes constantly escaping the house despite the wrath they were guaranteed to face, “The momentary escape, however, was worth any sting afterwards.” (Mootoo 1996, p.78). Mala would live in constant

vigilance and fear, “One ear continued to monitor her father’s sleep.”(Mootoo 1996, p.79). Pohpoh also imitates her mother when caring for Asha, further confirming how she has assumed Sarah’s role, “She took more care with her sister’s hair than her own, handling and nudging Asha’s head this way and that, imitating their mother’s manner.”(Mootoo 1996, p. 80).

Although the timeline is not clear, sometime after Lavinia and Sarah leave, Pohpoh begins sneaking out at night, breaking into neighbours’ homes. These acts are not driven by delinquency but by a desperate need for escape and a sense of agency. During one such adventure, she encounters her reflection in a grand mirror for the first time and is struck by the dissonance between the image she sees and the identity she has internalised. In this midst of this powerful moment of self-awareness, the memory of her father intrudes, distorting her ability to fully claim her own sense of self; “Pohpoh wondered which was her true self—the timid, gaunt, unremarkable girl staring at her, or the one who dared to spend nights doing what no one else ever dared to do. The image of her father about to lower himself on her body charged at her suddenly, complete with smells and nauseating tastes.”(Mootoo 1996, pp.158-159).

Further complicating Mala’s identity, Chandin explicitly communicates his hatred towards her yet frequently imposes himself upon her through the violent act of rape. Inscribing upon Mala’s body and mind his own painful past, Chandin openly blames Mala for Sarah leaving, enforcing his narrative upon her. Mala’s self-narrative is gradually transformed because of this and her identity shifts from the innocent daughter to the shameful wife. This is enforced through the act of rape and the discursive practices employed by Chandin carrying strong themes of objectification and possession:

I ent go let nobody tief my woman again. No man, no woman, no damn body go tief my property again. I go kill he. I go kill she too, if it come to that. I go kill meself too. (Mootoo1996, p.220)

The words Chandin chooses in his fits of rage all signal the hateful association he has made between Mala and her mother. The discourse he employs is impregnated with disdain for her image and Mala is condemned for Sarah’s actions:

"Idleness is the workings of the devil, you lying bitch. You want to have your own way— just like your mother. You is a liar just like your mother. I will teach you. I will see to that. (Mootoo 1996, pp.205-206)

Mala is grossly aware of the connection Chandin has made between herself and her mother and has acted as a substitute, protecting her sister from Chandin's abuse. However, amid being beaten by her father, Mala chooses to recall the memory of her mother leaving. Whether on a subconscious level or not, Mala associates the burden she bears and the pain she endures as the punishment for her mother leaving. As such, she takes on the role of Sarah:

Then his face flared with anger, he jerked his body away from her and pulled out the chair. He held it by its back and lifted it high above his head and slammed it down on the kitchen floor. The chair shattered. Mala put her face in her hands and wailed, doubling over in fright. The memory of her father when he discovered her mother gone came flooding back. (Mootoo 1996, p.221)

Chandin uses vulgarity and degradation to hold Mala captive, referring to her as if she is his sexual object, not to be shared with anyone else. The threat of someone else, like her childhood friend, Boyie, possessing her is terrifying for him:

"What is this, you whore? He give this to you? You taking presents from a man? What other presents you get? How long you doing this kind of thing? Everybody but Ramchandin know his daughter is the town whore?"

Mala turned her face to the ground and cried. He kicked her in the thighs.

"Answer me, you little whore. That man who was here give you this?" He flung the cleaver into the floor next to the gramophone.

Mala looked up. "Yes, Pappy. It was a gift for you and me."

"For me? What you think I is? Don't give me that shit. And what you give him? Come give me what you give him." (Mootoo 1996, p.225)

In the scene above, we can interpret Mala's submissiveness and response to Chandin as a sign of her assuming this Other identity. Mala's identity is by no means a simplification, nor is it just a deformation, nor reduced to a false representation. This new and distorted identity is a product of Chandin's own experiences. Said (1978) first introduced the concept of binarism into the discussion of the Orient to signal how the representation of the Other stands as a polarised articulation of the centre. As such, Bhabha (1994, p.73) argues that binary oppositions—such as Self and Other—are limiting, as they overlook the existence of what he calls a "median category." This suggests that the identity of the Other is not constructed

around the unknown and unfamiliar but rather around something disturbingly familiar. It is precisely this unsettling familiarity that generates fear in the colonial centre. This space between what is known and unfamiliar is referred to as the third space. In this context, the portrayal of the Other is less about presenting the Orient as savage or uncontrollable, and more about the centre's own unstable identity. Colonial discourse, then, becomes a tool through which the West both reaffirms its own identity and simultaneously degrades that of the Other:

The threat is muted, familiar values impose themselves, and in the end the mind reduces the pressure upon it by accommodating things to itself as either 'original' or 'repetitious'...The orient at large, therefore vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in-or fear of-novelty. (Said 1978, p.273)

I argue that in the construction of Mala's Other identity, Chandin's true anxieties are revealed. If Chandin is to represent the centre in this illustration, then he has indeed affixed something "unfamiliar to something established" (Bhabha 1994, p.73). The familiar in this regard refers to Chandin's socially influenced understanding of concepts like power, gender and cultural superiority:

"You wash clothes today?" he gruffly asked.

"No, Pappy. Today is Wednesday. I does wash clothes Tuesday and Friday."

"You sweep the yard? It didn't look to me like you sweep."

Becoming afraid, Mala whispered back, "No, I sweep yesterday. I will go and sweep now-now if you say so." (Mootoo 1996, p.204)

Chandin's treatment of Mala can be likened the master-slave narrative as he flings his clothes about and demands food be prepared. Mala's response is telling as it implies that she has accepted this narrative:

I tell you I want curry fowl. It don't matter to me where you get a fowl from but you will go and find one. Tonight self. You hear me? You ent sleeping until I eat curry fowl and this kitchen clean up good."

He ripped off his pajama shirt, which was spotted with bodi and tomato, bundled it up and flung it at her face. Slyly pleased with herself, Mala hung her head low and stared at her bare feet. (Mootoo 1996, p.206)

The underlying unfamiliarity, hidden within Chandin's anxieties about racial and sexual difference is his discomfort with his own identity. Mala is the reminder of his race, one that he has come to detest because of his sour relations with Lavinia and the Thoroughly's. Mala's image also reminds him of the multiple times he has faced rejection, further perpetuating and affirming his fears that his present identity is inadequate. If he surveys Mala and Asha, and controls them in every facet of their lives, perhaps he can avoid the recurring trauma of an unstable identity that is grounded in the standards and social decorum of the Thoroughly's:

Trying not to show his nervousness that she [Lavinia] might not come, Chandin lay in the hammock on the back porch and rocked. He thought about his wife and felt strangely distant from her, unrelated to her, as if a thick veil had dropped between them. His children's skin seemed suddenly too dark and their manner of talking crude. He wanted to remove himself from his wife and his children but knew it was impossible. (Mootoo 1996, p.51)

From the scene above, we are able to ascertain that Chandin's production of the Other identity which he enforces upon Mala is rooted in his own dissatisfaction with his identity and began with his children at an early age. Since he could not "remove himself" from his present identity, he removes Mala from her own and then dominates over it (Mootoo 1996, p.51).

Silence as Suppression in Literature

Leslie Kane (1984, p.15) in *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* theorises the distinctive and dynamic nature of silence in literature, suggesting that silence is not merely "the absence of language":

The retreat from the word encompasses not only nonverbal symbolism, but also many forms of connotative, indirect dramatic expression such as innuendo, intimation, hesitation, reticence, and bivalent speech that implicitly conveys more than it states When I refer to silence, I am employing the term in its broadest sense, encompassing both the absence of speech and implicit expression.

Spivak (1998) focuses on how suppressed voices are often misrepresented in dominant culture and she poses the question of whether social and cultural productions, including literature, will ever allow for these identities to be fully expressed outside of hegemonic frameworks. In particular, Spivak (1998, p.28) presents a case of the marginalised

postcolonial female as “doubly effected”, whose voice and identity have been poorly represented twice over; first because of race and then as a result of sex. Spivak (1998, p.28) remarks that the construction of gender, where the female is the subject of subaltern historiographies or insurgency remains male dominated and that the “relationship between women and silence can be plotted by women themselves”. This marks the female subaltern as void of a history or narrative, who “cannot speak” and whose identity is “even more deeply in shadow” than one would imagine (Spivak 1998, p.28). This issue of suppressive silence has manifested itself as a recurring theme in literature in some of the most popular and acclaimed novels, such as the work of Modernist writer Virginia Woolf. In referring to Judith from Woolf’s (1929) *A Room of One’s Own*, Hadam and Mleitat (2024) argue that “women’s passivity has been mostly defined, appropriated, and accepted as a form of social subservience, discursive withdrawal, or physical silence that can, nevertheless, frequently embody new meanings of female transgression and resistance.”

The violence stemming from colonisation and the dominating nature of colonial discourse no doubt results in the manifestation of silence on the part of the Other. Charles Glicksberg’s *Literature of Silence* (1975) provides insight into the meaning of silence in literary texts and how this silence may be symbolic of an inability to articulate one’s being or existence for several reasons, including the political. The latter part of this chapter is largely concerned with the production of silence as a psychological result of trauma. Analysing silence as a signifier within the context of semiotics studies is helpful in understanding the variety of meanings that silence could come to encompass, even from the perspective of resistance. While the hegemonic structures presented in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) attempt to erase Mala’s narrative and control her identity, her silence still produces meaning. Glicksberg (1975, p.167) notes the potential of silence in this way:

I call out. No one answers me. Instead of concluding that no one is there-which would be a pure and simple observation, dated and localised in space and time- I decide to act as if there *were* someone there, but someone who, for some reason or the other, will not answer. The silence which follows my outcry is henceforth no longer a *true* silence; it is charged with a content, a meaning, a depth, a soul-which immediately sends me back to my own.

According to Kakon (2020), silence in the context of rape narratives in literature may be interpreted through three modalities based on past, present and future. The past and present

modalities of silence are oppressive in nature, referring back to past violence or speaking to the present act of rape. The third kind of silence is marked as a mode of resistance and will be explored in my closing chapter. Kakon (2020) describes the first two of these modalities as oppressive as they are a response to the act of rape. First, “under the physical domination of another, silence is at once an expression of fear and a direct reaction” to rape, and second, silence as a production of the rape “once the imminent danger has passed”, since the victim cannot articulate herself within the parameters of the conventional, heteronormative and phallogocentric language that exists (Kakon 2020, pp. 35-36).

Silence here could be read as the inability to participate in one’s narrative identity or self-construction, as illustrated in the earlier part of this chapter. It is the suppression of one’s autonomy, agency and will to shape their narrative after a violent encounter. In the case of Mala in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), silence is not only linked to colonial and systemic violence but also the obvious result of abuse from Chandin and abandonment by Sarah, Lavinia, Asha and Ambrose. The figure of the silenced and suppressed woman in the colonial context has long been interpreted as hysteria. According to Freud, who first theorised hysteria, the hysteria experienced in the mind is translated into the body where the trauma becomes embodied:

a key symptom of hysteria is the tendency to take metaphor literally or anatomically, as described by or inscribed on the body. Putting it another way, the hysteric expresses her condition through converting ‘mind’ to ‘body’, translating her fears and repressions into a language of body images. (Boehmer 2005, p.128)

Referred to as psychosomatics today or “the bodily expression of unspeakable trauma”, Godart (2016, p.9) suggests that hysteria is “cast typically as a female phenomenon”. The relationship between silence and suppression is one of body politics, where trauma is not only inscribed upon the marginalised physically but mentally as well. The absence of speech as a narrative technique may be traced as far back as Ovid’s Tereus cutting off Philomela’s tongue to keep her from exposing the sexual violence he inflicted upon her. Today, narrative silence is continuously exercised by many contemporary and postcolonial writers who are interested in communicating the connection between trauma and silence through characters like the slave called Friday in J.M. Coetzee’s (1986) *Foe* where the character’s tongue is physically mutilated, forcing him into a state of subservience and silence. Other examples include

Kambili in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2003) *Purple Hibiscus*, who internalises her fear of her abusive father and resorts to silence as a form of obedience.

Read in the same vein as colonial conquest, rape becomes a political act of forcing one's self upon another. Like colonial domination which purges the indigenous community of an authentic identity, the perpetrator and rape itself erases the self from the victim and removes any means by which to articulate the experience or reconstitute one's identity in the aftermath. As Gay (2018, p.140) points out, the trauma "removes a person with agency, autonomy, and belonging from their community, to secrete them and separate them to depoliticize their body by rendering it detachable, violable, nothing."

The Silenced Self: Forms of Oppressive Silence in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)

In applying this understanding of erasure and silence, my discussion now focuses on examining Mala's withdrawal from speech as well as the role of the community in perpetuating what I call 'selective reticence' in the novel which I will address later.

The rape Mala endures forces her to become silent, not only within the passive connotations of the word but also through the withdrawal of language. The very first sexual encounter she has with Chandin highlights how she is subjected to silence both in a physical and metaphoric sense. Mala initially pretends to be "fast asleep" but later, the parallel between colonial domination and Chandin's attempt to possess her becomes clear when he physically gets on top of her, asserting physical control and symbolic power (Mootoo 1996, p.65). The text reads that Chandin "brought his body heavily on top of hers and slammed his hand over her mouth" (Mootoo 1996, p.65). The placement of his hand over Mala is synonymous with removing Mala's ability to resist the violence. This is in reference to the first modality outlined by Kakon (2020) where the silence is a reaction or response to the rape. Chandin practices the same violent and dominating practices of the coloniser over the colonised body by denying Mala a voice. Each time he rapes Mala he is further enforcing this silence, expecting Mala not to speak out or resist him in those moments. Later in the novel, Mootoo infers through the narrative that although Mala is silent during the rapes she still maintains an inner dialogue and shares these thoughts with us through third-person narration where Mala is focalised. This provides an interesting perspective to the rapes Mala experiences even as it distances her from the violence. Instead of fighting back during the rapes, Mala chooses to focus on other things to fill the silence in her mind, often referred to as peritraumatic disassociation, "She felt no pain. She tapped her tongue against the roof of her mouth

checking the stew for seasoning. She tasted blood.[...]she focused her eyes on the half-moon-shaped, chicken pox scar on her father's forehead.[...]The taste of garlic and anise erased his smell." (Mootoo 1996, p.205). Dissociation is common for victims of rape since their silence is both a response to the trauma and opportunity to escape (Dokkedahl and Lahav 2024). In the final climatic description of rape before Chandin dies, he enforces his position of power over Mala by leaving his cleaver by the bed next to her and locking the door (Mootoo 1996, p. 223). The scene highlights his expectation of Mala to remain fearful, silent and paralysed, reminding her of her marginalised and powerless position

The second modality of silence as outlined by Kakon (2020) refers to how the trauma of rape and the silence it produces reshapes the victim's relationship to language, memory, and self. In this sense, silence is not just a symptom—it is the product of having endured the unendurable. The silence that Mala retreats into comes to highlight the inadequacy of language to articulate the experience she lives through. Mala is acutely aware that the community she lives in functions within a hypocritical hierarchy when dealing with shame and that it is no use attempting to communicate her pain. Mala chooses silence over speech because she understands that the community she lives in offers no space for her to speak her truth. What I mean by this is that Paradise decides which acts of shame are worth discussing while ignoring others. For instance, Nurse Tyler's narrative is shared on the periphery of Mala's own story. We are made privy to his own struggles with his sexual orientation and finding a safe space to express himself in Paradise since everyone deals harshly with him as if being queer is something abnormal or to be feared. This can be observed in how other characters treat Tyler, for instance how the gardener, Mr Hector, reacts to Tyler's touch as he hands him a flower "I don't mean nothing by that, you know! I mean, don't take it the wrong way. I married and thing. I not funny, you know" (Mootoo 1996, p.69). Tyler's own sexual orientation is seen as unacceptable and strange in Paradise while the incest in the Ramchandin house is simply a taboo or a reasonable result of lunacy. Much of the gossip that circulates on the island works to support stereotypes around Other characters like Mala and Tyler rather than bring about accountability and justice. Fearful of Ambrose's response to the rape, she decides to wait to tell him so that he will not distance himself from her so soon after returning. Although Mala is the victim of rape and she has done nothing wrong, she fears Ambrose will not understand her:

How little could she tell him, she wondered, and still expect him to catch her meaning? She could never bring herself to graphically reveal her situation, yet she

desperately hoped that he, of all people, might understand the things she couldn't say.
(Mootoo 1996, p.196)

In discussing the difficulty Mala has in articulating her experience, she is met with a community that refuses to testify to her suffering. This is what I refer to as selective reticence. While reticence usually implies one's reluctance to participate in speech, the community maintains a passive stance to the abuse at the Ramchandins and refuses all communal accountability. The novel characterises the town of Paradise as a hub of gossip:

Even though Paradise is spreading out, inch by inch, and taking over the sugar cane fields that surround it, it remains one of the smaller towns in Lantanacamara, so small that merely the news of one stranger passing through can be enough to ignite a wild fire of curiosity and jabber among its citizenry. (Mootoo 1996, p.5).

While the community is prone to slander, Chandin's erratic and abusive behaviour alongside the scandal of his wife's affair disrupts their sense of normality. Instead of confronting the matter, much of the discourse surrounding Chandin highlights the community's tacit acceptance of his abuse and communicates their pity for him, justifying his behaviour rather than addressing it. Instead of focusing on how Chandin has raped and violently abused his daughters, they regard him as a man of God who was driven to lunacy because of Sarah. Rather than regarding Mala as a victim, they look upon her with shame or pretend that she is not being abused. Over time, Chandin is forgotten and Mala becomes the demonised spectre. Like colonial discourse, this false knowledge (about Mala and Chandin) in circulation may only be sustained if it is both rigid and repetitive (Bhabha 1994). The knowledge should be unchanging by nature since the image of the Other is frozen in time and not dynamic or heterogeneous (Bhabha 1994). This means that Mala will forever be a picture of shame and this identity is fixed. If the identity of the Other remains static, then no threat or question may arise, therefore, it becomes perceived as factual rather than subjective. For instance, if the image of Mala were to be questioned, one may ask other questions that threaten the harmful discourse produced, such as; Why is she bearing shame? What has she done that she should be ashamed of? Was she the only one involved? and, Is she actually the victim? According to Bhabha (1994, p.66), rigidity and repetition wrongly validate the claims made about the Other:

It connotes rigidity and an unchanging order [...] Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates

between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated...as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse be proved.

The way the community talks about Chandin—his spiral into alcoholism, his financial decline, and the abuse he inflicted on his daughters—serves to diminish his accountability, presenting his behaviour as regrettable but somewhat comprehensible. In contrast, the community constructs a narrative around Mala that alienates her, casting her as mentally unstable and even threatening, thereby justifying her exclusion and erasure. Zacheriah (2012, p.6) argues that despite Paradise being aware of Chandin's crimes (since Tyler's cigarette-smoking Nana regards it as public knowledge), they choose to condone it through discursive practices:

Despite the townspeople's common knowledge of what happened, they seem to be more comfortable with a statement like 'Chandin pick up with the older daughter' (p.65) instead of using a clear statement such as 'Chandin rapes Mala'. This example shows the townspeople's silence when it comes to taboo issues such as incest. It is incredulous that the crime seems to occur on a frequent basis, yet many of the locals do not seem to try to break the cycle of violence, simply dismissing Chandin's crime as an act of madness : 'While many shunned him there were those who took pity, for he was once the much respected teacher of the Gospel, and such a man would take to the bottle and to his own child, they reasoned, only if he suffered some madness' (p.195)

Whether the community chooses to alter the events of her life (through discourse), or glance over the matter altogether (through silence), both forms of narrative erasure are harmful for Mala's self-constitution. Rather than acknowledging the violence, Paradise waters down Mala to "a woman whose father had obviously mistaken her for his wife, and whose mother had obviously mistaken another woman for her husband" (Mootoo 1996, p.109). In the place of a victim who repeatedly endures abuse at the hands of her father, the community deprecates her image, marking her as the typified old witch who lives in a shanty house in a hidden corner of the island. The children in Paradise sing songs about breaking into her yard, immortalising her like a mythical figure passed down in folktales and essentially immobilising her identity.

Others in Paradise would intentionally torment her and be accorded honour for simply making it far enough into her yard as if she were a monster. The passage below from *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) denotes the impact of this false representation on Mala's identity. As Mr. Hector notes, the "stories" about Chandin and his daughters silence Mala, dehumanise her, and erase her identity altogether:

Plenty people used to go and harass the lady, but, you know, is strange, I was never one, myself, to torment anybody. Children used to go and pelt she and pelt she mango and come back frighten-frighten but still excited that they break a window or sling-shot a bird.[...] Somehow you don't question things until you come face to face with the person and suddenly— suddenly you realize that behind all them stories it have a flesh-and-blood, breathing, feeling person who capable of hurting, yes! (Mootoo 1996, p.68)

Portions of Mala's childhood are recalled throughout the novel in a non-linear style of narration, allowing readers to perceive the parallels between the forms of rejection and abuse Mala faces over the years. In a passage which focuses on Mala and Boyie on the playground, the behaviour of the other children reveals Paradise's true feelings about Mala and the Ramchandin household. Their actions not only shape Mala's identity but their discourse is also heavily imbued with negative stereotypes, gossip and bias which were no doubt learnt from the adults around them:

Another boy, hardly bigger than Pohpoh, spurred on by the jeering, quickly "Ey, Pohpoh, is true what we hear about your mother? Where your mother, Pohpoh? You giving Boyie or you like girl?[...] Walter, wielding the stick, spoke again. "Look, this is we park. This park is only for good, decent people. Get away from here and don't ever, ever—you hear me?—don't ever come back in this park." He walked right up to Pohpoh and faced her, inches between the two faces. "Ey. Look here, if we catch you near any girl we go cut ass!" (Mootoo 1996, pp.84-87)

In his narration, Tyler includes descriptions of how the nurses, police officials and other members of the community have stigmatised Mala, reducing her to the image of a spectre rather than a human being. Instead of vindicating the victims of abuse, the community remains silent on the matters that count but contribute to the harmful narrative surrounding Mala. For instance, in commenting on Ambrose's friendship with Mala, Otoh's mother implies that Mala is a witch, "If I had known the spell that Bird put on you, I would've study my head good before I say I do to you, yes!" (Mootoo 1996, p.107). In another passage, Tyler

describes the staff's initial feelings towards accepting Mala as a resident at the Paradise Alms House, "Sister and the two nurses shrieked. None of them would approach me and my human bundle. Sister demanded that Miss Ramchandin be taken back to the office" (Mootoo 1996, p.12). All of this and Chandin simply disappears into the background, "But he disappear long, long time back, not so?" (Mootoo 1996, p. 182).

However, the community are not the only perpetrators, ignorant of the cries of Mala. Among the list of loved ones who have abruptly left Mala's life is Ambrose who abandons Mala and never speaks out about the violence she faces. Ambrose deserts Mala after witnessing an abusive attack between Chandin and Mala. His abandonment is a form of betrayal of their friendship and choosing not to advocate for her only further affirms her growing sense of isolation. His silence is particularly harmful to Mala's identity, since for so long she had suffered under the hands of her father and when he returns, even for a brief period, someone is able to witness her, "For the first time in her life Mala felt like a woman, a feeling both thrilling and frightening." (Mootoo 1996, p.196). Chandin's abuse had completely dehumanized Mala and Ambrose's visits served to acknowledge Mala in a way that she had not experienced for a long time – as a human. His presence served as a witness to her existence, where the outside world had either forgotten her or reduced her to the topic of unsavoury conversation. When Ambrose sees Chandin's violent attack on Mala, he runs away and Mala is left shattered, not unlike the day Chandin's world had come undone at Sarah's leaving:

"Ambrose, don't go. Don't leave me, Ambrose. Please don't go." Ambrose couldn't make out her words. Thinking she had gone crazy and fearing once more for his life, he turned and bolted from the house. Mala gasped in disbelief. She rushed to the verandah, screaming his name. He had already disappeared. She clutched the banister, choking as though there were no oxygen in the air. She fell to the ground. There was a bizarre familiarity in the moment. She remembered her father clutching at that same banister and felt herself lying on the verandah in that same position. (Mootoo 1996, p.228)

Filled with guilt, Mootoo (1996) describes Ambrose's response as developing a "propensity for month-long slumbers from which he miraculously awakened only long enough to replenish Mala Ramchandin's supplies." Sleep here may be read as a metaphor for ignorance or somnolence, where Ambrose intentionally chooses to ignore the violence he witnessed and remain silent.

Having extensively problematised narrative erasure and silence in this section, the chapter ahead offers an alternative reading of silence and examines the potential of memory as resistance, removing the victim from the exhaustive and heavily theorised ‘suppressed and restrained’ archetype, situating her in a position of power to defy the system which attempts to eradicate her image.

Chapter Six: Modes of Resistance – Between Silence and Remembrance

“The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king

So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale

Filled all the desert with inviolable voice”

Eliot (1988, p.11)

Having problematised narrative erasure as an effort to construct the identity of the Other in the preceding chapters, this chapter will look at the various modes of resistance employed by Shani Mootoo in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). The two narrative strategies this chapter largely deals with is silence as a form of defiance, and memory in the shape of testimony or witnessing. Both are counter-discursive practices which highlight the instable, limited and sometimes unreliable nature of language in dominant heteronormative discourse.

In order to discuss these forms of resistance it is necessary for me to emphasise that both colonial discourse and narrative erasure are inherently linked to language since language is the medium through which colonial practices are reinforced. As discussed earlier, Bhabha (1994) outlines both rigidity and repetition of the stereotype as the necessary factors for the production of colonial discourse. In the case of silencing, another must speak over, speak for or deny the narrative of the Other which further implies that language is central to epistemic violence. The Other may then resort to alternative methods of communication so that they may reclaim their narrative or make their silence meaningful.

The Problem with Language

It was Saussure (1916) who first argued that language is referential and does not reflect reality. The arbitrary relationship that exists between the sign and the signifier and the difference it can produce suggests that meaning can never be perfectly conveyed. In other words, language is incapable of fully capturing and articulating every lived experience since it is limited by what we are able to relate it to. It was this limitation that laid the foundation for theorists such as Derrida (1978) to argue that meaning in language is never fully present or fixed. According to Derrida (1978), who coined the term “defference”, meaning extracted from language is only possible in relation to other words but also depends upon the definition of those other words to elicit meaning. This creates an endless cycle and defers meaning rather than producing it. For instance, the word ‘happy’ may evoke reference to other words

such as joy, pleased, or cheerful. In order to capture the meaning of that initial word, I must now pursue the meaning of the new additional words. Rather than saying for certain what the definition of happy may be, I become increasingly aware that there is no fixed definition of it. As such, meaning is alluded to and becomes unstable and delayed.

The two theorists I have mentioned, Saussure and Derrida, highlight the limitations of language to fully capture reality and produce a stable meaning. As such, language becomes an imperfect medium for resisting harmful discourse, since these weaknesses are inherent. In addition to this, sociolinguists perceive language as dialogical, shaped by society and never produced in isolation:

No speech act is individual; they are always social, even if the addressee exists only in the speaker's imagination. And indeed, every word we utter is generated in interaction with an imagined audience in our mind, before any real audience ever hears or reads it. Thus, according to Voloshinov and Bakhtin, language is inherently 'dialogic', [...] This tension constitutes the arena of the class struggle where voices and signs are concerned. (Joseph 2006, p.65)

Since language is perceived as dialogic with the intermingling of various voices and perspectives, it becomes a contested space comprising of voices in conflict and agreement (Bakhtin 1981). From this discussion, it appears that for a marginalised figure, in the case of a victim of rape or other physical abuse, or the Other, language is not adequate for three reasons: (1) it is not stable enough to communicate a truth about one's horrific experience, (2) language does not reflect reality and so it struggles to fully articulate the subjugation the Other undergoes, and (3) language is shaped by social hierarchies and the political and therefore often expresses itself within the dominant hegemonic structures that suppress the abused. It would make sense, then, that silence on the part of the Other emerges not only because of oppression from being structurally excluded from dominant discourse, but also as a rejection of the system which has marginalised them (Spivak 1988).

Silence as Defiance

My earlier argument positioned silence primarily as a consequence of oppression or the result of surviving abuse. Traditionally, silence has also been understood through the lens of absence, whether as the absence of speech, presence, or meaning. Disciplines such as philosophy and linguistics have even favoured speech over silence and as Dauenhauer (1980, vii) remarks, "much of the manner in which we have studied language function has denied

the functioning of silence”. According to Ephratt (2008, p.1918) “speech is preferred to enactment” and “speech is deemed superior and subtler”. Ephratt (2008) goes on to argue that like language, silence also conveys meaning and holds communicative value. The example below illustrates its referential value:

In a Christian marriage ceremony the minister addresses the participants thus: “If anyone here can show just cause why this man and woman should not be joined together in matrimony let him speak now or forever hold your peace”. If no one stands up and speaks, this individual and collective silence is taken to express a negative answer, as if each participant has said— referentially, “No, I have no just cause to say that”. (Ephratt 2008, p.1915)

Silence also maintains an emotive function, often used in literary works to express pain or convey a desire to find peace and even to communicate resistance. Since language relies on grammatical and other linguistic conventions, silence forgoes these restrictions and does not depend on the same set of rules that language does. Language is also differential as outlined earlier in my discussion of Saussure and Derrida, but silence is incomprehensible. In other words, we may attempt to understand it as I do in this dissertation, but I will never be able to fully articulate what the silence means as it remains in the custody of the one who maintains it. It cannot be categorised; it cannot be fully interpreted, and it cannot be taken away in a power struggle. Because of this, silence arises as one of the most effective tools for communicating resistance and a symbol of transformative agency.

In recent years, literature has moved to transform the way silence has been characterised from a result of oppression to a means of challenging gender-differentiated power systems in a contemporary society. An example of this is seen in Malika Mokeddem’s portrayal of the experiences of Muslim women in Algeria who face cultural silence and work to reclaim that silence as a form of self-preservation and agency. Her protagonists range from being physically mute like Yasmine in *L’Interdite* (1993) to characters like Nora who suffers amnesia and remains silent until her identity resurfaces in *N’zid* (2001). Mokeddem’s characters employ what Evans (2010) refers to as tactical silence in order to find freedom from slavery, political and patriarchal oppression. This silence takes the form of choosing not to speak in order to survive and find new ways for living outside of their present circumstances. In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest of Eyes* (1999) Pecola is subjected to rape and bears the shame of carrying her father’s child. These events push Morrison’s protagonist to

the point of silence where Pecola refuses to participate in conversation. Morrison uses Pecola's silence to not only symbolise her mental breakdown but also highlight the serious political and social injustices of the time. Paradoxically, Pecola's silence exposes how complicit society is towards colourism, racism and misogyny. The characters in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) and Assia Djebar's *Children of the New World* (1962) also display a form of weaponised silence in the context of both war and domestic violence. Their protagonists are silenced because of political oppression and domestic abuse, but they maintain silence as a "means of creating a fortress" and a "refusal to show the oppressors the depth of their power by refusing to reveal the depths of one's pain" (Reeds 2006, pp.13-14). The character of K in Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) is forced into silence because of his physical impairment. Society reduces K to the role of outcast and silence is "originally instilled in him as a form of repression", but later becomes a "survival strategy, being the only available form of resistance" since K prefers the quiet because of its peaceful and unobtrusive nature (Guignery 2009, p.276).

Silence and the Surplus of Meaning in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)

From the examples above, silence as resistance takes on three major themes. First, silence becomes a means to survive or for self-preservation. Second, silence is a form of protest or refusal to participate in a violent and oppressive system. Finally, silence is a solace and helps etch out a safe space for victims of abuse in a chaotic and dangerous world. All three of these themes are exemplified through the character of Mala in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996).

By Mala withdrawing from language after Chandin dies, she also effectively removes herself from the immediate threat of violence which is the community of Paradise. She refuses to participate in any form of communication, shielding herself from any other potential danger. Peter Levine (1997, p.52) in his book, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*, likens the defensive trauma response of freezing to a survival strategy employed by animals who protect themselves from predators where "the purpose of running or fighting to escape danger is obvious". Freezing, immobility and silence connote a passivity that provides an "imitation of death that misleads the predator", where "predatory animals have greater difficulty detecting potential prey that are not moving" (Levine 1997, p.52). By secluding and isolating herself and in a sense, "imitating death", Mala and her father are eventually forgotten by most of the residents on the island and she becomes nothing more than a spectre to them and the generations after (Levine 1997, p.52). Tyler's Nana affirms this idea when she says,

“Nowadays you don't even hear his name. It's like he disappeared off the face of the earth.” (Mootoo 1996, p.25). In a conversation between Tyler and the gardener at Paradise Alms House, Mr Hector, Mala’s status as a mythologised boogey monster rather than a person is confirmed, “when I was a young fellow my Pappy used to threaten that if I didn't behave myself he would take me and drop me in she yard and leave me there.” (Mootoo 1996, p.68).

Mala’s silence also allows her to maintain control over her narrative. This is a form of resistance since language aims to articulate an experience and gain control over it. It is key to emphasise here that Mala is not simply a victim of trauma who is forced into silence but someone who actively chooses it; “In the phase just before Mala *stopped* using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there.” (Mootoo 1996, p.126, my emphasis). Noting the limitations of language, Marchisotto (2021, p.71) adds that Mala sees “language’s inability to truly represent experience: “verbalization, she came to understand, was not the feeling itself but a name given to the feeling: *pretty*, an unnecessary translation of the delight she experienced seeing the soaring birds. Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words” (126).” By Mala resisting language and communicating only through mimicking the sounds of nature, she refuses to participate in a community that thrives on speech and gossip. Mala’s deferral of language marks language as foreign and silence as organic. This subversion implies that it is actually language, which is intrusive, foreign and artificial in contrast to nature.

Lantanacamara is notorious for gossip, where news spreads with the “swiftness of a brush fire and the quietness of ripples in a sugar factory pond” (Mootoo 1996, p.64). Mala’s secret communion with her garden, her life and her past all remain her own because she denies the public access to it. She withdraws into the safety of her garden and evokes a sense of agency in this way. When she arrives at Paradise Alms House, the staff assume that she is deranged since all she does is make sounds mimicking a cricket or bird or she screams frantically at odd moments. Mala’s communication is indiscernible by those around her and cannot be understood using the traditional conventions that govern speech or language. Tobin Siebers (2010) argues that when traumatic experiences cannot be communicated using conventional modes and mediums, they become difficult to read and that perhaps trying to name and articulate them is just a way to control them:

When no language is manifest [in visual artworks such as a painting], readers are obliged to invent one; otherwise, the translation between the “language” of reading

and the “language” of the object does not take place, and the object remains unreadable. Perhaps the impulse to read an image is a measure of the desire to control it. Images too complex to be read refuse this control, and they challenge the authority of reading as a privileged activity because they demonstrate a surplus of meaning untranslatable into linguistic terms. (Siebers 2010, p.122).

Mala maintains power over her story and preserves herself, all while resisting definition by others. Tyler understands this and observes, “She said nothing but now I knew there was more in her head than bird and cricket and frog imitations and childhood chants.” (Mootoo 1996, p.76). The community demonises Mala and assumes she belongs in a mental health facility, all while debating whether she is a criminal or not. Their inability to categorise her or represent the unknown, like Said (1978) notes, causes frustration and fear on the part of the islanders as it would with the West trying to create the Orient or Other. She resists this representation and therefore resists the powerlessness it renders.

Mala manages to create an alternative space where she can find peace and express her identity through her silence. By resisting language and opting for the sounds of nature she embodies empathy, acknowledging the existence of life around her. Her silence becomes a solace where she can practice agency and live outside of the rules that define society:

Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words.[...] She coughed and sneezed and spat and wiped away mucus with no care for social graces. She laughed, sometimes as quietly as a battimamseile flapping its wing tips against water in an old drum, or as raucously as a parrot imitating her imitating it. She farted at will, for there was no one around to contradict her. [...] Mala's companions were the garden's birds, insects, snails and reptiles. She and they and the abundant foliage gossiped among themselves. She listened intently. [...] Flora and fauna left her to her own devices and in return she left them to theirs[...] Mala's mouth remained open, her lower jaw dropped partly in exhaustion, partly to release heat and let air in. Her flesh had come undone. But every tingling blister and eruption in her mouth and lips was a welcome sign that she had survived. *She was alive.* (Mootoo 1996, pp.126-134, my emphasis)

Mala’s silence and withdrawal from speech help her create what Homi Bhabha(1994) invokes as a third space or a place where her identity can be negotiated. Mala boards up her home, creates a barricade between her father’s decaying corpse and the rest of her house, and then lives out her life in freedom with nature. Mala chooses not to name or identify what

surrounds her, and silence frames her recognition of them, “unnamed insects that found refuge in Mala’s surroundings” (Mootoo 1996, p.130). This dimension that she creates is characterised by the sounds of nature and her choice to refrain from speech marks it as a hybrid space. Here her identity becomes fluid and open to change; “The intervention of the Third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code.” (Bhabha 1988, p.21).

By not practising speech she chooses to not impose herself upon her natural environment and opens herself up to truly listen to and empathise with everything around her. Mala’s silence is a productive force in her overgrown garden which enables her to thrive in her new world. The novel calls this mixing an “uncanny communion” (Mootoo 1996, p.152). Lincoln (2020, p.121) suggests that through this passivity, Mala “consistently honors their [nature] alterity without seeking to possess, control, or assimilate it.” Silence here is synonymous with acknowledgement and respect and conversely, speech or language stand out as mechanisms of power and regulation. In line with Bhabha’s (1994) insight into ambivalence and liminality, Mala’s silence helps to facilitate a space where identity is not stable and communication resists interpretation.

From a postmodern perspective, silence cannot be interpreted. At best, Tyler and the reader can only acknowledge that this is how Mala chooses to communicate and settle with the knowledge that we may never fully understand it. This calls to mind my earlier reference to Glicksberg (1970), who argues that silence does not mean absence – someone is there, we just cannot decipher what they are saying. To acknowledge without fully understanding paves the way for a new perspective around the ethics of empathy that Mootoo may have been leading readers towards. Like Mala, who knows that the natural world is alive but chooses silence to commune with them, real empathy may be characterised by a desire not to articulate, not to categorise and not to theorise the unknown. This would certainly make sense since colonial discourse and the power it maintains is rooted in the obsession with representation. When the Other resists representation through dominant language, hegemonic structures are destabilised, deprived of the means to define and contain it.

There are also other forms of redemptive silence evident in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Apart from the silence that Mala embodies in the text, there is also narrative silence in the presentation of events in the novel. This can be read as gaps in the novel, where certain

events are narrated to us and others have been deliberately omitted. As readers, we acknowledge that these gaps exist but must grapple with the silence and subsequent lack of definition they produce. In the interest of better examining these omissions and narrative silences I have included a timeline below, attempting to chronologically order the events in the novel. Although *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) does not offer fixed historical dates, the novel’s colonial context, generational span, and cultural references suggest that the narrative likely begins in the early 20th century. Chandin’s upbringing by Christian missionaries reflects a historical era—particularly in the late 1800s and early 1900s—when the lives of indentured labourers were heavily shaped by missionary influence

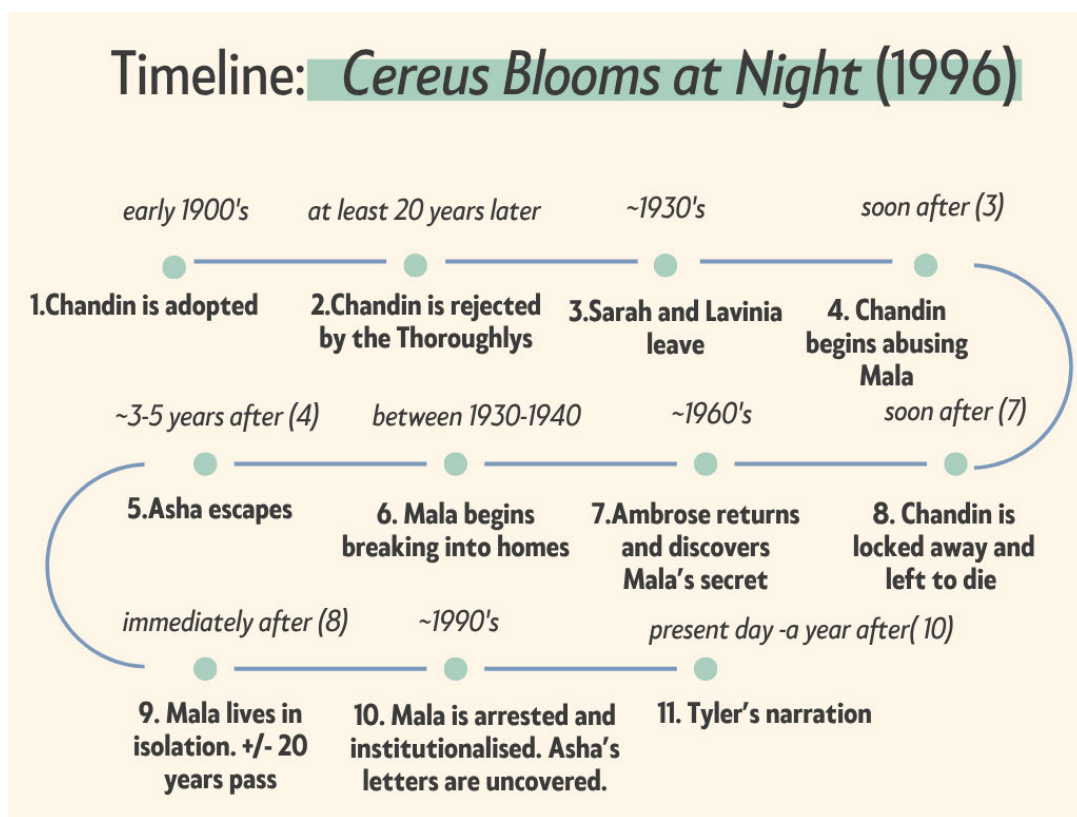


Figure 1: Timeline of events in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) in chronological order.

By viewing Figure 1, several omissions and lapses in time become visible. While these appear easy to identify, the significance of these lapses must be evaluated. Apart from the initial references to Chandin being adopted, having feelings for Lavinia and returning from the Shivering Northern Wetlands, at least 20 years of his life detailing his schooling and development is left out. There is no internal monologue or scenes describing his time away. This may be Mootoo’s attempt to foreground his later internalised rage and projection. The narrative omission suggests that we are not meant to understand Chandin fully, because he is a product of systemic violence, never taught to articulate his pain, and shaped by colonialism

to despise his own background. As such, the older Chandin becomes inaccessible and empty and the silence surrounding his former years is a picture of an empty and detached man who was traumatised by being uprooted from his home and community and then forced to conform to the image of the coloniser.

Another significant form of silence in the narrative is the absence of Ambrose who first leaves to study and then returns briefly to witness the violence between Chandin and Mala before fleeing again. It would seem that whenever Mala faces intense pain or abandonment, Ambrose is altogether absent from her life. For instance, in the novel, Ambrose never kept close to Mala in their youth because of Chandin, “Once, when they were in high school, he came to visit her. Realising that her tyrannical father was home, he left a note of his visit in the form of a stolen stalk of frangipani shoved into the earth by the back fence, inside the yard.” (Mootoo 1996, p.194). Once Ambrose leaves for the Shivering Northern Wetlands, his life is never narrated for us until his return nearly ten years later. His silence is highly symbolic and can be likened to absence or passivity during a time Mala needed him most. Mala loses Asha, is abused by her father, and is later forgotten by the town yet Ambrose never speaks up for her. The fact that much of his life was omitted indicates that he was never active in Mala’s life in a meaningful way, especially not to support or protect her.

Finally, what Mala does over the years after Chandin’s death (number 9 in Figure 1) is vaguely alluded to. According to the novel and Figure 1 above, this is the largest expanse of time not clearly detailed in the novel and accounts for at least twenty years of Mala’s life. This is extremely significant because it may point to Mootoo’s way of protecting Mala from being consumed by the reader’s gaze and thereby demonstrating true agency on the part of Mala. Mootoo respects the unspeakability of trauma and so the forty years omitted does not mean that they did not occur. The silence here carries meaning without a need for interpretation. Through the non-linear style of narration, Mootoo uses Tyler’s voice to string together what he deems relevant to the narrative, but readers are aware that not everything has been communicated: “Forgive the lapses, for there are some” (Mootoo 1996, p.3). In doing so, the novel self-consciously acknowledges its own incompleteness.

The silence in the examples above implies that a history and narrative do exist but have not been shared with us. By limiting our access to these narratives, the narrator and the characters that are affected maintain their sense of agency over their story. Mootoo uses silence, in a

way, to curb our desire to know more and control more, and ushers us towards an empathetic reading of the text in the face of the little knowledge we do possess.

Memory and Counter-Narrative

It was Maurice Halbwachs (1925) whose text, “Social Frameworks of Memory”, served as a foundation for discussions around the role of society and culture in memory studies. Within Halbwachs framework, he noted that memory is “relational in terms of family and friends, and also societal and collective in terms” (Bosch 2016, p.2). Further to this, memory is also considered political since it holds the potential to resist dominating narratives and invented histories which hegemonic powers produce. In the context of grand narratives, the idea of a single monolithic memory seems unrealistic. In contrast to this, social theorists argue that memory is dynamic, and its construction is susceptible to the melding and mixing of multiple other memories all of which are interlinked, depending on and conflicting with one another. Neiger et al. (2011) argue that collective memory, which is the idea that memory is a shared repository of histories constructed, transmitted and interpreted socially, is socio-political in nature because of its constant negotiation with evolving social and cultural dynamics.

The very idea that memory, which is traditionally interpreted as a singular fixed image of the past, can now be reconciled as a shared, perpetual and transformative phenomenon challenges the act of colonial erasure. It was also Said (2000, p.176) who confirmed this connection when he remarked that the past and history was “something to be used, misused and exploited”. It is colonial erasure which seeks to resist original narratives and replace them with memories produced with political agendas. In order to control a people group, colonial powers would need to first eradicate existing memory and replace it with a grand-narrative or as Bhabha (1994) argues, a body of knowledge founded on surveillance and stereotypes. Since the practice of producing this knowledge is a gradual process of propaganda and indoctrination until the oppressed believe that it is the singular memory by which they operate, it would make sense that the act of remembering is also a political process. Connerton (1989, p.3) contends that “our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past, and that our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order.” By operating under a social framework for interpreting how history is socially constructed, we may read memory as something to be contested and negotiated. In this way, memory serves as resistance and a counter-narrative to what colonial powers have inculcated in oppressed groups over the course of history.

There is a transformative power in remembering and Assman (2015, p.207) highlights that remembering has shifted from monologic to dialogic; “remembering rather than forgetting is chosen for its transformative power and implemented as a therapeutic tool to cleanse, to purge, to heal, to reconcile in the process of transforming a state or reintegrating a society.” In remembering, even when the past seems erased or indecipherable, society comes to acknowledge that it exists. This is also true of my earlier discussion on silence. While the public may not fully discern the meaning of silence or receive the first-hand account of memory, at least the acknowledgement of its existence serves as some form of redemption. Like silence, memory is thick and complex, and sometimes incomprehensible when using traditional methods to interpret it. Memory can often present itself in a non-linear, strange and irreferential fashion but that does not negate it of the virtue of existence. The question then arises, if the one whose memory has been erased has been silenced, who will do the remembering? The answer to this may be in the ideological and ethical realm of witnessing and narrative testimony.

Postcolonial literature often employs the narrative technique of presenting the fractured and traumatic past through the medium of testimony (Craps 2012). Here, testimony becomes the channel through which a counter-narrative against colonial erasure and discourse is produced. When a witness arises and provides testimony, they not only resurrect a dead (and forgotten) past, but they also demand urgency from the present. By bearing the responsibility of witnessing and testifying to another’s trauma, the witness also invokes a sense of responsibility from the one who witnesses their account. In the case of postcolonial literature, the readers also bear witness to the events reported and are shifted from a state of passive spectators to active participants both inside and outside of the text. Witness literature, in the context of postcolonial narratives, frequently breaks the fourth wall, inscribing this responsibility upon the readers, addressing them directly and therefore breaking down the barrier between private and public. By doing this, remembering becomes the agent which not only recalls the atrocities of the past but also demands a response in the present, reminding us that memory does not exist in isolation but that it is inherently social. In *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), memory and the act of remembering becomes collective process that resists dominant narratives.

Remembering and Resisting in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)

Because so much of the text is committed to remembering, Tyler's narration becomes one of the main forms of resisting the dominating hegemonic narratives around Chandin, Mala and even the queer community on the island. Mootoo's choice in non-linear narration which jumps from Tyler's arrival at Paradise Alms to Chandin's childhood, the abuse and Mala's survival all reflect how remembering is not done in a chronological or linear way. True memory, as opposed to the way grand narratives are produced, operates through asynchronous, disjointed and fragmented recollection. The way that Mala's story is narrated is meant to subvert and challenge the narration of false memory or in the case of the novel, the way histories for Mala and Chandin have been produced and circulated.

Marchitto (2021) contends that this way of remembering may appear random and disordered, but it is actually tied together using symbolic associations, for example, snail shells. In the novel, Mala collects snail shells at different times, but it is later that we learn that this was something that Lavinia had taught Mala to do to protect the spirit of the snail who will return to watch over them. Much later in the narrative we read that Mala and Boyie collect these shells together to prevent other children from torturing them. Towards the end of the novel, Mala reminds Ambrose of these memories. Each time the memory of collecting snail shells is repeated it is with someone Mala loves. This proves that, on some level, memory is a shared construct, even when it is deeply personal. In the novel, memory is repetitive and layered but not without purpose.

Tyler does not claim objective authority over Mala's life, nor does he pretend to fully understand her experience. Instead, he attempts to reconstruct a story from fragments such as overheard gossip, personal memory and community knowledge. In doing so, he acknowledges the unreliability and partiality of his perspective: "Might I add that my own intention, as the relater of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my own plight. However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present." (Mootoo 1996, p.2). It is important to clarify here that Tyler's narration doesn't represent memory directly but rather his narration or storytelling enacts the process of remembering. Tyler's insertion of himself in Mala's narrative should not necessarily be read as an act of control, but works towards reflecting the true nature of memory. Memory is fragmented and does not exist in isolation and to construct a memory-based narrative of Mala's life is to also recall the narrative of Chandin, cigarette-smoking

Nana, Asha, Otoh, Ambrose, Elsie, Mr Hector, Judge Bissey and even his own. By presenting the reconstruction of narrative in this way, Mootoo manages to create an entire complex network of interlinking associations, or a collective memory. This collective memory serves as a counter-narrative for the knowledge produced using colonial discourse.

Revealed in his narration, Tyler grapples with real vs imagined memory and is forced to actively reconstruct his understanding of the past, “Sometimes, I have to admit, I thought of the stories I had heard. I would edge myself out of Miss Ramchandin's sight whenever I tried to imagine her in the roles they had cast her in, for it did occur to me that this unusual woman might know what was going on in my head.” (Mootoo 1996, p.24). This is an example of how Tyler is aware of how memory is constructed and continuously readdressed, even as he works to negotiate its credibility. As a narrator and witness, Tyler is grossly aware that the testimony he offers has the potential to change the way the past and the identity of the Other have been interpreted all while resisting the threat of future erasure:

Tyler does a remarkable work of inquiry and reconstitution for Mala. Nursing her body, he also cures her soul and spirit. While the other nurses of the Alms House refuse to accept Mala's shrieks, bird songs and murmurs as a language, Tyler gives her all his attention. He patiently recollects every sound, word, mumbling, shout and song, and, in a superimposition of these expressions with his own memories, succeeds in recreating the patchwork of her life. He finds the key to Mala's broken reason, but he also allows the reader to penetrate the chaotic narration of a story shattered by madness and oblivion. (Donatien-Yssa 2008, p.100)

Apart from Tyler's narration, embodied memory also functions as a form of resistance in the novel. My earlier discussion on the relationship between trauma and the body relied heavily on the concept of embodied trauma; however, embodied memory and how the body recollects violence and maintains traces of past events can be extended to objects and other forms of life. Lincoln (2020, p.116) offers:

The novel's attention to vegetal life, and to traumatic violence inflicted on plants and animals as well as people, invites consideration of the potential for interspecies encounter and nonanthropocentric forms of witnessing in the context of trauma.

In the context of embodied memory, non-anthropomorphic features within *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) function as repositories of violence not only inflicted on Mala but also the marginalised group she represents. Janet Hoskins (2010, p.2), in her book *Biographical*

Objects: How Things Tell The Stories of People's Lives, proposes that memories and history can extend to the material and hold significant value in affirming self-identity and for self-expression: "I could not collect the histories of objects and the life histories of persons separately." In this sense, objects absorb this memory and become a reminder of the violence witnessed even when strategic erasure has taken place. This is not to say that the actual object remembers anything but instead, it serves as a mediator between the body of the victim, the mind and the environment. In the case of the cereus blooming cactus in the novel, the plant witnesses intergenerational trauma, violence and survival. On any other night, the plant can be easily mistaken for an overgrown weed, complex and difficult to identify. Tyler describes this as "the rare night-blooming cereus. Without blossoms the plant appears to be little more than an uninteresting tangle of leafage" (Mootoo 1996, p.22). However, when the blooms appear, the plant with its dizzying fragrance is viewed as a living archive symbolising Mala's personal history that cannot be ignored. The promise of the cereus blooming can be likened to the quiet assurance that the real memory or narrative of the marginalised will eventually emerge and be recognised.

Towards the end of the novel, Tyler reveals what that the secret power behind Mala's survival and resilience over all these years has been, "Asha, if these words have already found your eyes, for the sake of your sister who worships *your memory* please return and pay her ' a visit [...]" (Mootoo 1996, p.249, my emphasis). Despite not speaking or being able to fully articulate her memory, the one memory that does remain is of her sister. The memory of Asha has sustained Mala and allowed her to survive the violence she encountered over time: "She expects you any day soon. You are, to her, the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night." (Mootoo 1996, p.249).

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

“The cereus in the yard will bloom soon.”

(Mootoo 1996, p.5)

The opening and closing paragraphs of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) hold within them the prophetic reassurance that the cereus will eventually bloom and that the truth will come to light. This truth, whether it is Mala’s, Tyler’s, Otoh’s, Ambrose’s or any of the Other characters who narrate their story from the margins is sometimes revealed obliquely, like the cereus: briefly, beautifully, and beyond the grasp of fixed interpretation.

This project has endeavoured to better understand how the formation and representation of identity, particularly in the context of the postcolonial Caribbean, resembles an obstructed, delayed and difficult process, affected by factors such as trauma, silence, memory and the enduring legacy of colonialism. Through this dissertation, I have learnt that the elusiveness of interpretation, the instability of identity, the limitations of language and the politics or ethics around witnessing the truth all ultimately work to resist finality in meaning. Through strategic narrative techniques Mootoo destabilises the traditional way narratives are interpreted. In my opinion, this withholding of information is not to discourage the reader from interpretation. Instead, and from my experience with this text and other postcolonial novels, this indeterminacy produces a two-fold outcome; first, the reader is invited as an active participant in meaning making, blurring the lines between the world inside of a text and the world that exists outside of it. This is a way to demand that the world listen and move away from the passive consumption of narratives. Second, by reflecting the impossibility of a single truth, the novel works to challenge hierarchical ideologies which mediate our perception of narratives, whether these narratives take the form of a newspaper that remains silent about distant but devastating conflicts, the carefully curated social media feed that only exposes the prohibitions imposed by a popular politician, or even the stories passed down by our grandmothers and generations before them, prescribing the virtues and sacrifices expected of a good wife. Indeed, a novel like *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) radically shifts our understanding of authorial and narrative authority, opening itself up to multiple interpretations and even making Mootoo’s take of her own novel secondary. The multiplicity of meaning, fragmentation and even narrative silence within a text reflect the distorted nature of reality without explicitly stating, ‘this part of the novel is unclear and was left out – see

how this is just like everyday life?’ Narrative fiction can, in many ways, subtly and impactfully mirror life in a way that non-fiction cannot.

Understanding Intergenerational Trauma and Colonial violence

To better establish how Mala’s identity has been affected by some of the factors discussed above, this dissertation attempted to analyse Chandin’s representation in the novel, highlighting that the self is not formed in isolation and that identities living in a postcolonial state often experience the enduring legacies of colonialism through transgenerational relationships. In analysing Chandin’s personal traumatic experiences, namely, being removed from his home in the indentured labourer barracks, being adopted and rejected by the Thoroughlys and ultimately having his wife leave him for the woman he was truly in love with, I have been able to examine how Mala has been able to navigate the violence she has faced in her own life.

The novel draws a strong parallel between Chandin and Mala’s relationship with that of the coloniser and colonised. Chandin’s own trauma, later perpetuated through the horrific abuse against Mala is a starting point in understanding this allegorical reference. In *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Chandin’s transformation from the child of Indian indentured labourers from the barracks of Lantanacamara to a colonial mimic illustrates the profound trauma caused by the colonial presence in the Caribbean. His status as an adopted child in the home of white missionaries situates him in a liminal position, suspended between his own culture and the life of the Thoroughlys that he aspires to. Ultimately, Chandin is alienated, and his identity is severely fragmented by his own internalised hatred towards everything that reminds him of home. This colonial mimicry that Bhabha (1994) refers to demonstrates how colonial structures both encourage and disdain assimilation, creating a no-man’s-land for people like Chandin and inevitably affecting their sense of self. Chandin’s psychological collapse is better interpreted through trauma theory, specifically Caruth’s (1996) concept of trauma and the incomprehensible event, or Freud’s accident which proposes that trauma is not evident in the event but in one’s inability to come to terms with the event itself. This trauma reappears in a cyclical fashion, seen in Chandin’s treatment of Sarah and later on, Mala. Chandin becomes representative of the colonised who, having been refused legitimacy, exists in a state of perpetuated emptiness, reduced to the image of colonial expectations.

Drawing on Fanon, Sartre and Memmi, my dissertation illustrates how colonial structures produce colonial mimics only to reject them, thus highlighting the impossibility of real

assimilation in the first place. Chandin is repeatedly rejected in the novel, notably by Reverend Thoroughly (his father figure) in marrying Lavinia. This rejection sends Chandin on a spiral ranging from violent outbursts to paranoia, poverty and alcoholism. Through these, Chandin replicates the same behaviour enacted upon him by surveying and controlling his daughters. However, while Chandin externalises this violence on his family, Mala chooses to internalise it, resulting in psychological fragmentation. Mootoo represents this trauma through the split-self, or Pohpoh/Mala. Where Pohpoh symbolises childhood innocence, Mala is the older, observant and silent woman who carries the impact of abandonment and abuse. This concept of the fractured-self aligns with Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness, reflecting the difficulties the postcolonial subject must encounter when navigating between their most authentic self and the imposed identity. In drawing on Riccio (2017), I further emphasised on how this traumatised self often experienced dissociation and a freeze response in order to survive. In *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), it becomes Pohpoh who is frozen in time in order to preserve Mala's selfhood. Through the portrayal of both Chandin and Mala, Mootoo illustrates how trauma and identity come to mirror much broader postcolonial issues, underscoring the psychological costs of colonialism.

Postcolonial theory often makes a metaphor of the fractured identity of a nation in the aftermath of colonialism through the character of an abused individual whose power has been taken away from them. Chandin's abuse, derived from insecurity and a desperate desire for control and authority embodies Said's (1978) argument that colonial identities were constructed as binaries to one another. In dehumanising Mala, Chandin's own identity is affirmed. This demonstrates how colonial violence is enduring, not only evident in intergenerational relationships like Chandin and Mala but also for postcolonial nations today.

Narrative Erasure, Silencing and Suppression

The strategies that colonial powers have enforced historically are also similar to the sorts of violence Mala encounters through narrative erasure and the silencing of her identity. By doing so, the coloniser is able to produce an alternative identity and narrative for the colonised, one that best suits their agenda. This sort of silencing is a means of suppressing the voice of the other, substituting it with rigid and repetitive narratives (Bhabha 1994). These new systems of information appear factual but actually work to justify domination by colonial powers, presenting the colonised as weak and in need of order and control.

Imposing silence upon another as a means to erase agency and identity, and exert control is not new to postcolonial studies. Spivak (1998) explores how the subaltern, particularly women, are doubly oppressed, first by colonialism and then by patriarchal violence. This leaves them without a narrative that they can identify with. Aside from silencing the Other, silence can also signify the impact of trauma. Glicksberg (1975) observes how silence can carry meaning which may not use language to articulate itself but still bears a message of internal struggles and identity conflict. In the novel, Mala's silence reflects colonial violence and trauma, not just in the physical violence she endures but also in the psychological impact it has on her. The silencing depicted in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), both in Mala's relationship with her father and in the broader Paradise community, demonstrates how erasing identity and narrative functioned as deliberate mechanisms, alongside damaging colonial discourse, to marginalise and suppress the Other in both colonial and postcolonial contexts.

In place of this silence, damaging narratives which are intended to replace the true identity of the Other are used to maintain power. This is true for both the coloniser and colonised as well as Mala, Chandin and Lantanacamara. In the case of Chandin, his treatment of Mala is heavily impregnated with vulgarity and dehumanising language, linking her to the image of her mother so that she becomes ashamed of herself and submits to him. In believing that his abuse is justified and that she needs to save her sister, Mala takes on a false identity. This false identity constructed by Chandin is not really an indictment on Mala but is actually a result of Chandin's need to affirm his own self according to Said's (1978) concept of representing the Other. The community offer no reprieve either. Instead of taking accountability for what has occurred, they become silent and will not address the truth, enabling Chandin's violence and repeating the harmful discourse existing around Mala. This leaves Mala with very little control over her own narrative, identity and history.

The Subversive Power of Silence and Memory

In attempting to analyse viable pathways for resistance and reformation of identity against the colonial violence, narrative erasure and silencing outlined above, this project examined how memory and silence may be used as counter-discursive strategies to challenge language derived from heteronormative discourses. Since colonial discourse and narrative erasure are so closely related to language, it becomes a tool for the production and circulation of harmful narratives that silence the Other and rewrite their identity and histories. First, language

appeared to be a problematic medium to embody the challenges and experiences of the Other who has been through significant trauma. This project turned to both Saussure and Derrida to highlight the unstable nature of language, never being able to fully capture meaning. For victims of trauma, language is inadequate because it cannot present a stable and accurate truth that mirrors reality; hence, silence arises as a suitable medium to reject the hegemonic colonial structures and resist oppression.

What this dissertation aimed to highlight was the shifting understanding of silence, transformed from a symptom of oppression or absence of power to a dynamic resistive force. Ephratt (2018) argues that silence conveys significant meaning and has both communicative and emotive functions. Unlike speech, where language has its limitations, silence is not bound by the same grammatical rules and resists fixed interpretation. This makes it a powerful tool for communicating trauma and painful experiences but also effectively symbolises one's agency and defiance. Since silence is also largely interpretative, it maintains autonomy, marking it as a powerful means for self-preservation in harmful and oppressive environments. My study also revealed that recent literature has begun reimagining silence as an act of resistance, particularly against oppressive power structures rooted in politics and gender. Across the texts that I mention, silence emerges as an internal strategy and not an absence, resisting domination and asserting agency. In better understanding this silence in the context of Mala, silence manifests as a means of self-preservation, protest and solace, allowing her to protect herself from further violence in her community. After Chandin's death, Mala retreats into silence which is a similar response to freezing as Levine (2010) discusses. This freezing becomes a protective mechanism. Her silence also functions as a form of resistance, refusing to give the community access to her life and illustrating what agency over narrative looks like.

Beyond survival, Mala's silence also helps her produce a unique third space where her own identity becomes liminal and fluid. She goes on to live her life in quiet communion with nature and does not impose herself on the living creatures around her. Her silence connotes understanding and empathy because she refuses to categorise and dominate over her environment. In addition to the silence Mala maintains, Mootoo (1996) also makes use of narrative silence or gaps in the narration where information appears to be omitted. This strategy denies the reader access to the entire story in order to protect the characters' agency and challenge the way readers passively accept and consume the grand narratives that surround them in reality.

Memory also becomes a counter-discursive practice as well as a tool for resistance. Drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwach, this project examines the concept of collective memory, arguing that memory has political power capable of resisting dominant narratives and invented histories. Since the idea of a single, unified memory is used to maintain control over oppressed groups, collective memory becomes an ideal tool for resistance because of its dynamic nature. Collective memory is transformative and comprises of a variety of voices in continuous negotiation. Connerton (1989) observes how memory is not only shaped by the past but also works to legitimise social relations in the present. As such, memory emerges as a critical space to challenge the act of colonial erasure. Silence, like memory, can appear inscrutable but still manages to signal the existence of a hidden and suppressed history and narrative. Therefore, the act of witnessing or giving testimony becomes vital in redeeming this lost and erased narrative. Testimony functions not only to reconstruct suppressed histories but also to compel a response from contemporary audiences, transforming readers from passive observers into active participants.

Tyler's role as narrator and witness in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) illustrates the collective nature of memory. Tyler reconstructs Mala's story through his own perceptions and the stories of others, intertwining multiple narratives that challenge the colonial discourse that has shaped memory and narrative. Apart from Tyler's narration, Mootoo (1996) also makes use of objects and nature, like the cereus cactus, carrying traces of violence as well as resilience. The image of the cereus blooming becomes a powerful symbol of forgotten narratives and identities which have finally come into view, asserting their existence and demanding acknowledgement.

What Remains

Looking ahead, this study has prompted further thought into how future work could examine how silence and memory manifest themselves in other literary traditions outside of the Caribbean, or how digital spaces and new media could influence the way we collect memory and how testimony is formed today. Interestingly, this project revealed that there is still more room to explore the function of silence using a postmodern approach. Silence, within the postmodern lens, operates both within and against systems of signification. This means that it is the unsaid which shapes what is said and hence destabilises meaning. A postmodern interpretive study could also interrogate the ethics of reading and representing silence,

questioning whether any interpretation risks imposing new forms of control or appropriation over the Other's unspeakable experiences.

This project began by evaluating how the traumatic relationship between Chandin and Mala may be read as a metaphor for colonial violence, both in the form of systematic racism and sexism. Through this analysis, I was able to better demonstrate how Mala's abuse created deep psychological trauma that affected her identity. Finally, this dissertation attempted to investigate how both memory and silence could be viewed differently in the context of a postcolonial identity, away from the previous perceptions of them as solely a response to trauma. Novels like *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) demonstrate that remembering is rarely linear or complete but remains essential for reclaiming identity and agency. Through this project, the limitations of language were presented, proving how literature and discourse can both reveal and hide historical, communal and personal narratives.

While this was a literary study, it has real-world implications and encourages ongoing dialogue about how we witness and how we remember. Perhaps more importantly, we are urged to strongly reconsider how we narrate the stories we have inherited and to remember that every story is shaped by what is spoken and what is unsaid. *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) does not ask that we interrogate the unsaid, bending it into submission under our growing and incessant need to understand everything unknown, but rather that we gather together whatever bravery we have left to acknowledge that it even existed in the first place.

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