

RESEARCH ESSAY

The Eloquence of Omission: Translating Silence in Postcolonial Memoir

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Silence in a memoir is never a blank equivalent in two languages. It may be a withheld name, an abrupt paragraph break, an unglossed word, or a family event approached through indirection. How can a translator carry omission across languages without filling it with explanation or making it exotic? The ethical translation of silence requires reproducing its pressure on the narrative, even when the formal device that creates that pressure must change. The apparent object is only the entrance to the problem. Following draft variants, punctuation, code-switching, paratexts, and testimony about family censorship shifts analysis toward the relation between what is unsaid and who is permitted to understand and away from claims based on appearance alone.

To investigate the question, comparative reading of source and target texts alongside translators' commitment logs offers a better route than treating finished works as self-explanatory. The evidence base consists of draft variants, punctuation, code-switching, paratexts, and testimony about family censorship. These sources answer unlike questions and should not be collapsed into a single archive. Their force depends on whether the translated gap creates comparable narrative aftereffects rather than identical typography, a test that ties inference to observable consequence.

In a memoir shaped by colonial schooling, an untranslated kinship term can mark intimacy and linguistic hierarchy at once. A footnote may clarify denotation yet dissolve the reader's experience of partial access. The example should not be generalized by resemblance alone. Its value lies in exposing a chain of determinations that would disappear in a summary of the final outcome. Within that chain, the association between what is unsaid and who is permitted to understand becomes visible as something

enacted, and the analyst can identify the point at which a divergent choice would have changed the inference.

Elsewhere, a sentence abandoned before its verb may sound artful in the source but merely ungrammatical in translation. Shifting the break to the following paragraph can restore the social risk carried by the interruption. Placed beside the first instance, this case alters the case's scale. The relevant difference is not medium alone but the distribution of choice. It demonstrates that the relation between what is unsaid and who is permitted to understand cannot be inferred from appearance; it must be traced through the implications of participation and the limits placed on revision.

A counterfactual sharpens the reading: if one choice about draft variants, punctuation, code-switching, paratexts, and testimony about family censorship were reversed, would the association between what is unsaid and who is permitted to understand also change? Asking that question separates causal features from details that merely accompany the outcome. It also turns whether the translated gap creates comparable narrative aftereffects rather than identical typography into a genuine test, because the reading names what would weaken it rather than collecting only confirming observations.

Together, the cases distinguish category from operation. Two examples can share a medium yet organize the dynamic between what is unsaid and who is permitted to understand differently because control, duration, and access have changed. Comparative reading of source and target texts alongside translators' choice logs makes that difference legible. The concept remains useful only when it identifies a mechanism and when whether the translated gap creates comparable narrative outcomes rather than identical typography can be evaluated rather than

assumed.

Any attempt to interpret a silence risks converting uncertainty into a confident story about trauma, resistance, or cultural difference. The challenge matters because the language of innovation can conceal older inequalities. A responsible answer begins by asking who carries the cost when the preferred construction succeeds. It then returns to whether the translated gap creates comparable narrative effects rather than identical typography, treating that criterion as a limit on praise rather than as an item in a procedural checklist.

The evidence base must also account for survival. Records of draft variants, punctuation, code-switching, paratexts, and testimony about family censorship are more likely to remain when an institution recognizes their value, yet absence from an archive does not prove absence from practice. A balanced corpus should therefore combine preserved materials with prospective documentation and should state how collection determinations shaped the apparent distribution of the association between what is unsaid and who is permitted to understand.

Translators can mark their degree of inference, retain strategically opaque terms, and explain only those choices whose invisibility would falsely naturalize the target text. The practical proposal matters because values enter through routine operations. Budget lines, schedules, interfaces, contracts, and rehearsal habits determine whose knowledge can affect the outcome. Recording those interventions also lets future scholars distinguish an accidental success from a repeatable and governable activity.

Uncertainty enters at several points: provenance may be incomplete, remembered motives may conflict, and the analyst's presence may alter the work being observed. The test of whether the translated gap creates comparable narrative

aftereffects rather than identical typography reduces but does not remove those difficulties. Conclusions should therefore distinguish what the record demonstrates, what it strongly suggests, and what remains a plausible question for further study.

The next stage should be activity-led. A project can implement the proposed recommendation, record decisions through draft variants, punctuation, code-switching, paratexts, and testimony about family censorship, and invite par-

ticipants to define what successful the association between what is unsaid and who is permitted to understand would mean from their positions. Following the work after public presentation would show whether the intervention creates durable capacity or only a temporary appearance of responsiveness.

The stakes extend beyond this topic. Cultural work often gains authority by hiding the labor that organizes encounter. Making that labor legible does not dissolve expertise; it shows how expertise

can become answerable to people who meet its effects from distinct positions.

The paired analysis replaces a broad celebration of the form with a testable account of its operations. Omission then remains active evidence without being treated as a container whose hidden content belongs to the interpreter. A faithful silence is not mute; it reorganizes proximity, knowledge, and responsibility in the new language.