



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literary Theory and Criticism*

Silence as resistance and identity formation in Kenyan young adult fiction: A narratological analysis of Muthoni wa Gichuru's *Breaking the Silence* and Anthony Mugo's *Never Say Never*

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ABSTRACT

Kenyan Young Adult Fiction (YAF) has grown as a genre, yet scholarship on it has stayed largely thematic, tracking the poverty, gender-based violence, and institutional failure these texts depict without examining how narrative form constructs those conditions. This article reads two Kenyan YAF novels, Muthoni wa Gichuru's *Breaking the Silence* (2009) and Anthony Mugo's *Never Say Never* (2012), through narratology, treating silence not as absence but as a deliberate mechanism that determines what a young protagonist may say and who they are permitted to become. Drawing on Gérard Genette's concepts of voice and mood and Mieke Bal's concepts of focalization and characterization, the study applies a descriptive-analytical qualitative design to close readings of both texts, selected through purposive sampling for their institutional recognition and their shared focus on young protagonists negotiating identity under pressure. The analysis finds that silence functions as a strategy of resistance in both novels, letting Wanjiku and Daniel preserve agency and negotiate identity within patriarchal and institutional structures, whether through testimony that finally registers or through survival sustained in silence itself. Five representational techniques, focalization, ellipsis, narrative voice, temporal manipulation, and characterization, recur across both texts despite separate authorship and different forms of harm. This consistency indicates that silence operates as resistance and identity formation at the level of the genre, extending narratological method, built mainly on Western fiction, to a Kenyan corpus where poverty and institutional processing function as narrative forces of their own.

KEYWORDS: Silence, resistance, identity formation, narratology, Kenyan Young Adult Fiction, focalization, characterisation

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Introduction

YAF has become one of the most closely watched genres in world literature, valued for how it stages identity, power, and belonging through protagonists who are neither children nor adults (Trites, 2000; Hintz & Tribunella, 2025). Silence, the withholding of a character's voice, interiority, or narrative authority, is one of the primary ways these experiences are represented, turning what a text refuses to say into a story in its own right. Kenyan YAF inherits this same concern. Two of its most institutionally recognized texts, Muthoni wa Gichuru's *Breaking the Silence* (2009) and Anthony Mugo's *Never Say Never* (2012), place young protagonists inside exactly this condition. Wanjiku survives a sexual assault that a customary compensation scheme resolves without her testimony ever entering the record. Daniel is removed from his home and processed through a police cell, a court, and a reception centre without an adult explaining to him what he is accused of. Both novels have been adopted as school readers and recognized in literary prizes, yet their narrative structures, how each text builds silence into its own form, have not been examined with comparable rigour.

This distinction matters because YAF is a literary category, not a developmental stage. Adolescence describes a transition from childhood dependency to adult autonomy (Arnett, 2024; Syed & McLean, 2021), while YAF names a body of texts defined by narrative structure, readership, and thematic concern (Trites, 2000; Stephens, 2022). Reading Wanjiku and Daniel as literary constructions, rather than case studies of adolescence, is what allows their silence to be examined as a narrative choice rather than a symptom of age. Scholarship on YAF converges on a shared premise: identity in the genre is built through narrative choices about whose voice a text authorizes, not simply reflected from a fixed self (Hintz & Tribunella, 2025; Behrens, 2025; Vanhove & De Backer, 2025). When a text withholds a protagonist's voice or interiority, it does not merely describe marginalization, it produces it (Genette, 1980; Bal, 1985).

Existing scholarship on Kenyan YAF has focused on what these texts represent: the poverty, gender-based violence, and institutional failure that shape young protagonists' lives. That scholarship has stopped short of asking how those conditions are constructed at the level of narrative form, through choices about who is permitted to speak, whose perspective the narrative authorizes, and how plot resolves independent of the protagonist's own account. This leaves silence a documented theme rather than an analyzed mechanism. Global narratological research offers the tools this analysis requires. Gérard Genette's (1980) categories of voice and mood identify who narrates and how narrative distance regulates what a reader is permitted to know, while Mieke Bal's (1985) concepts of focalization and characterization explain how a text distributes perspective and constructs identity through what it grants a character to say. These tools were developed and tested mainly against Western fiction, and have rarely been applied to Kenyan YAF, where poverty, patriarchal family structure, and state institutional processing operate as narrative forces distinct from the developmental concerns those frameworks were built to register.

This article closes that gap. It applies Genette's and Bal's narratological frameworks to *Breaking the Silence* and *Never Say Never* to examine how silence functions as a narrative strategy of resistance and identity formation. This narrows the wider study from which this analysis is drawn to a single focus: not how silence is constructed, nor which specific techniques represent it, but what silence does once it is in place, for a protagonist's capacity to resist institutional and patriarchal definition, and for the identity that protagonist is able to construct within the constraints a text imposes.

The central argument advanced here is that silence in these two novels is not a sign of passivity. Through specific narrative strategies, focalization, delayed revelation, and controlled narrative voice among them, silence becomes a form of resistance that allows Wanjiku and Daniel to negotiate identity within social and institutional environments that would otherwise define them entirely on other terms. Wanjiku's resistance depends on an institution eventually willing to hear her account; Daniel's resistance requires no audience at all, since his silence itself functions as the only self-protection available to him. Both forms of resistance leave identity unresolved rather than settled: Wanjiku's vindication in court is complicated by guilt she cannot voice, and Daniel constructs a version of himself from inference rather than knowledge. That neither protagonist's identity is neatly resolved is itself evidence that silence in these texts does structural work; it does not simply describe a condition these characters endure, it produces the terms on which they come to understand themselves.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. It situates the argument within existing scholarship on silence, resistance, and identity formation in YAF and African literary studies, identifying the specific gap the study

addresses. It sets out the narratological framework, explaining how Genette's and Bal's concepts apply to the analytical task. It describes the qualitative, descriptive-analytical design used to select and read the two novels. It then presents the findings, examining resistance in each novel in turn before comparing how the two texts converge and diverge in how they construct silence as a resource for identity formation. The consistency of these patterns across two independently written texts, addressing different forms of harm, indicates that silence functions as resistance and identity formation not as an idiosyncrasy of either author, but as a pattern available to Kenyan YAF as a genre.

Literature Review

Narratological research treats silence as a structural feature of narrative rather than mere absence. Jahn (2025) argues that silence operates at three levels, in the events of a story, in how the story is told, and in the act of narrating itself. Kapadia *et al.* (2026) extend this into linguistic form, showing that when characters speak in broken or incomplete language, they are not simply reflecting trauma but resisting institutional attempts to define them through complete, coherent discourse. Mukherjee (2025) locates a comparable resistance in temporal structure, showing that postcolonial narratives deploy non-linear chronology to fragment the coherent timeline that would otherwise be imposed on a character's lived experience. Zeidanin *et al.* (2025) identify a further site, showing that child characters in trauma narratives use embedded storytelling to reclaim control over their own frame. These studies differ in analytical focus but converge on a single finding: silence is active, not passive. Their shared limitation is scope. None examines Kenyan YAF, and none asks whether these patterns hold when the institutional pressures at work are poverty, patriarchal family structure, and state processing rather than the developmental concerns these scholars study.

A parallel debate concerns identity rather than structure. Trites (2000) argues that institutional and adult authority constrains a young protagonist's capacity for self-expression, making voice distribution both a formal mechanism and a site of constraint. Hintz and Tribunella (2025) argue instead that identity in YAF is constructed through the choices a protagonist makes rather than imposed by surrounding structures. Behrens (2025) reconciles the two positions, showing that identity is negotiated at specific structural sites rather than being either fully constrained or fully chosen. Vanhove and De Backer (2025) argue that YAF constructs identity through the testing ground the narrative environment provides, making context the operative category. What holds these positions together is a shared premise: identity in this age group is constructed through negotiation with surrounding narrative and cultural structures, not simply discovered.

That premise strains once the corpus shifts away from Western fiction. Serpell (1993) shows that African childhood socialization is organized around relational and communal identity, where selfhood is defined through responsibility to the group rather than individual autonomy, a pattern Naudé and van Damme (2024) confirm still holds among South African adolescents. Nieuwenhuys (1994) adds that the protected, school-based childhood Western YAF assumes rarely describes African childhoods, where children work and carry social responsibility from an early age. Read against Trites, and against Hintz and Tribunella, this means the power relations and choices those scholars theorize may function differently once poverty, family survival, and institutional processing replace the developmental concerns their models assume.

Gikandi (1987) supplies the first sustained account of how resistance through silence operates in African fiction, showing, through Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*, *A Grain of Wheat*, and *Petals of Blood*, that the withholding of narrative voice is formal architecture through which colonial and postcolonial power inscribe themselves into a text, and that characters also choose silence to protect themselves from systems that would use their words against them. Osei-Nyame (1999) extends this along gendered lines, showing that African fiction consistently denies women characters the position of knowing, narrating subjects, and that female characters answer this by choosing silence as a refusal of imposed identity. Sackeyfio (2024) confirms the pattern persists across generations of African writing. All three examine adult protagonists, who carry an institutional authority young adults do not; an adult's refusal to speak proceeds from a position of already authorized subjectivity, while a young adult's silence proceeds from a position where that subjectivity is still being negotiated.

Kenyan studies confirms the same pattern closer to home. Mutie and Rutere (2023) show that silence in Kenyan life writing is strategically deployed to protect identity from institutional and patriarchal definition. Njeru (2013) establishes that Daniel's loss of voice in *Never Say Never* is structured into the text rather than

incidental, tying his silence directly to his loss of identity, but stops short of asking through which narrative choices that effect is built. Wakarindi (2023) adds that Kenyan YAF's own marginalization as a genre mirrors the narrative silencing of its protagonists, so that genre and character voicelessness reinforce each other. Wakota (2024) shows that Tanzanian YAF places protagonists in structural in-between spaces where voice is neither fully authorized nor fully silenced, a condition that maps onto Genette's category of mood without using his vocabulary to name it.

Taken together, this scholarship agrees that silence in Kenyan literary texts is deliberate and politically weighted, but stops at documenting that it matters rather than examining how it functions as a strategy of resistance and identity formation, or what recurs across texts by different authors. Global scholars built the analytical tools but applied them to Western texts. African scholars confirmed that silence is agentive but stopped at adult fiction. Kenyan scholars established that silence matters without asking what it does for a protagonist's resistance and sense of self. This article closes that gap by reading *Breaking the Silence* and *Never Say Never* through Genette's and Bal's frameworks, asking not whether silence exists in these texts, but what work it performs for the two protagonists who live inside it.

Theoretical Framework

This study reads silence through narratology, the study of how narrative structure produces meaning, drawing on Gérard Genette's (1980) concepts of voice and mood and Mieke Bal's (1985) concepts of focalization and characterization. Voice examines who speaks in a narrative and from what position; mood examines the narrative distance and perspective from which events are told, regulating what a reader is permitted to know and when. Genette's framework gives this analysis a precise vocabulary for locating specific narrative choices. Where impressionistic reading might observe that a character seems silent, Genette's categories identify the exact mechanism, an ellipsis, a restriction in mood, or a suppression of voice.

Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985) extends this framework by distinguishing between the focalizer, the agent whose perspective shapes the narrative, and the focalized, the object of that perspective. This distinction matters because silence is often imposed on characters who become objects of other perspectives rather than subjects of their own. When a young adult protagonist is focalized by institutional or patriarchal authority rather than functioning as a focalizer, the text constructs that protagonist's silence as a condition of being seen but not seeing, known but not knowing. Bal's concept of characterization examines what a text gives a character to say, what it gives others to say about them, and what it withholds. When a text denies a protagonist access to their own speech or thought, characterization becomes the mechanism through which silence is built into the formal representation of identity.

These two frameworks share three commitments relevant to this analysis. Narrative structure is not neutral; it produces meaning through formal choices. Identity in narrative is constructed through what a text permits or denies a character, not simply reflected from a stable self. Silence is not absence but a structural effect, produced deliberately rather than left as accident. The frameworks complement each other at precise points. Genette's voice and mood identify the mechanisms of narrative control, while Bal's focalization explains the power relationships those mechanisms create. Where Genette names the restriction, Bal reveals its consequences. Applied together, they let this analysis trace how silence is constructed and how, once constructed, it becomes available to a protagonist as a resource for resistance and identity formation, rather than remaining only a condition imposed from outside.

The frameworks carry an acknowledged limitation for this corpus. Both were developed primarily through analysis of European prose fiction, and postcolonial and feminist narratologists have argued that the taxonomic ambitions of classical narratology can produce culturally thin readings when applied outside that tradition (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009). Lanser (1992) argues specifically that treating narrative voice as a purely formal category risks obscuring the gendered dimensions of who is permitted to speak and whose speech a narrative authorizes as reliable, a concern that bears directly on this study's reading of *Breaking the Silence*. This study addresses that limitation by applying Genette's and Bal's categories as analytical instruments rather than as interpretive conclusions in themselves, examining each mechanism in relation to the social conditions the text reflects and the conventions of Kenyan YAF, including how gender, poverty, and institutional pressure shape a character's opportunity to speak.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical literary research design within a qualitative approach, appropriate for identifying the narratological mechanisms through which silence is constructed and examining how those mechanisms function as a strategy of resistance and identity formation. The qualitative approach situates the design within a concern for interpretation and meaning-making in textual and cultural context rather than measurement or statistical generalization, allowing the analysis to work with the full complexity of literary language while applying a consistent analytical framework across both texts.

The analytical corpus comprises two Kenyan YAF novels, Muthoni wa Gichuru's *Breaking the Silence* (2009) and Anthony Mugo's *Never Say Never* (2012), selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability technique in which texts are selected for characteristics relevant to the research objectives rather than for statistical representativeness (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Three criteria guided this selection. Both novels are identifiable as Kenyan YAF, written for a young adult readership and set within recognizable Kenyan social and institutional contexts. Both have received institutional recognition through school adoption. And a two-text sample allows the close, systematic, theoretically grounded reading the study's narratological aims require, rather than a broad survey that would trade depth for coverage.

Data collection proceeded through systematic textual extraction and close reading, the principal instrument of data collection in literary narratology (Bowen, 2009). Close reading here was directed rather than impressionistic, focused on specific formal features defined by the study's framework: instances where a character's voice is suppressed or absent, where focalization shifts away from the young adult protagonist, where narrative mood restricts a reader's access to a protagonist's interiority, and where characterization withholds from a protagonist the status of a narrating subject. The procedure moved through three stages: an initial structural mapping of each novel to identify key segments where the protagonist's voice is absent, suppressed, or transferred to another narrative agent; targeted extraction of specific narrative units, scenes, dialogue, and internal monologue, displaying restricted focalization, ellipsis, or voice suppression; and systematic documentation, in which each extracted unit was recorded with its narrative mechanism and the protagonist to whom it belonged.

Analysis applied a deductive approach, in which Genette's (1980) and Bal's (1985) categories served as the analytical lenses through which extracted data were examined, since the categories of voice, mood, focalization, and characterization were established in advance by the theoretical framework rather than generated inductively from the data. Drawing on the thematic analysis principles of Braun and Clarke (2006), adapted to this deductive literary context, the analysis proceeded through familiarization with both texts in full, categorization of extracted units into positions of narrative silence and narrative speech, interrogation of how shifts in focalization functioned as resistance and identity formation, and synthesis, comparing patterns across both novels to assess whether they constituted a recognizable feature of the genre rather than an idiosyncrasy of either author. Validity was supported by grounding all analytical claims in specific textual evidence and by using two independently authored texts, so that patterns confirmed across both carry stronger evidential weight than a single-text reading would allow.

Findings and Discussion

Silence as Resistance in *Breaking the Silence*

In *Breaking the Silence*, silence begins as a condition imposed on Wanjiku and ends as an act she names herself. The assault itself is narrated through withheld information rather than direct disclosure: ordinary classroom detail precedes any sign of intent, so the reader's uncertainty mirrors Wanjiku's own. What the narrative withholds is not incidental detail but the fact the scene depends on. Genette's (1980) account of mood as the text's regulation of what a reader is permitted to know describes the device; the novel uses it to make Wanjiku's delayed understanding legible as narrative structure rather than as a failing of the girl herself.

That withholding continues once the assault has occurred. Wanjiku's disclosure to her mother arrives before her mother, or the reader, can process it, and the scene stretches a single moment of recognition into an extended sequence in which Wanjiku waits for a response that does not come. Once institutions become involved, the case moves through complaint, confession, and compensation to settlement without Wanjiku's testimony ever entering the proceeding. The village elder recharacterizes the case in a single word, *kinyumbani*,

a domestic matter, and the chief redirects it toward customary settlement without addressing Wanjiku's disbelief directly. Trites (2000) reads this kind of institutional authority as constraining a protagonist's self-expression; what happens here goes further, since resolution proceeds identically whether or not Wanjiku's account is heard, meaning her voice was never a structural requirement for the case's outcome, only for the reader's understanding of what that outcome cost.

Resistance in the novel arrives only once an institution becomes willing to register Wanjiku's account. The courtroom scene reverses her earlier silencing, converting her testimony into formal acknowledgment of harm, and Wanjiku's own framing names the achievement directly as breaking the village's unwritten rule of silence. This is resistance that depends on an audience. Genette's (1980) account of voice as a structural, not merely personal, property clarifies what changes between the earlier scenes and this one: not Wanjiku's capacity to speak, which was present throughout, but the narrative's willingness to let that voice register as consequential. Focalization tracks this shift precisely. Earlier in the novel, the headmaster and a church elder each focalize Wanjiku's assault as reputational hazard or sin rather than crime, competing interpretations the narrative allows to stand alongside her own. As the novel progresses, Wanjiku moves from a suppressed to an authorized focalizer, so the reader's trust in her interpretation grows with the plot, a movement Bal's (1985) distinction between focalizer and focalized names directly. Yet the novel does not let resistance settle into resolution. Wanjiku's guilt over her attacker's death after the trial destabilizes an identity the verdict might otherwise have closed. Osei-Nyame's (1999) account of African fiction's tendency to withhold female interiority takes an unexpected form here: Wanjiku's own narrating voice performs that same withholding on her own experience, retreating from sustained interiority toward procedural notation even in a text she narrates herself, and toward shame rather than injury once the assault is behind her. Resistance, in *Breaking the Silence*, is real but incomplete. It restores Wanjiku's voice to institutional record without resolving what that voice cost her to use.

Silence as Resistance in *Never Say Never*

Never Say Never stages resistance on different terms. Daniel's removal from his mother's house is narrated through institutional misdirection rather than direct disclosure. He expects the District Children's Services Office, and only the recognition of a police station supplies him, and the reader, with the fact that reorganizes the scene. The novel compounds this withholding through delay before explanation: abduction, screaming, a forced door, and only then his mother's reframing line that they had come for him so he could get an education. Mukherjee's (2025) point that postcolonial narratives withhold a coherent timeline from readers applies directly here; the institutional frame arrives only after the reader has already processed the scene as violence, reversing the burden of interpretation the institutions themselves impose on Daniel.

Where Wanjiku's case proceeds through customary settlement, Daniel's proceeds through a parallel institutional chain, removal, processing, an order to hold him overnight, each stage a precondition for the next, with no point soliciting Daniel's account. As in *Breaking the Silence*, this is a stronger claim than institutional silencing alone. Resolution would proceed identically whether Daniel spoke or stayed silent, since his account is not a variable the plot requires.

Resistance for Daniel does not take the form of testimony finally heard, since no institution in the novel becomes willing to hear him the way Wanjiku's courtroom eventually hears her. Instead, resistance takes the form of survival maintained through silence itself. Watching his cellmate, Daniel observes a hardened defiance he has not yet adopted. Gikandi's (1987) reading of withheld speech in African fiction as protection against systems that would use a character's words against them applies precisely to Daniel's silence in this scene: it is chosen self-protection, not enforced absence, even though it produces no courtroom reversal comparable to Wanjiku's. Where Wanjiku's resistance requires an institution willing to hear her, Daniel's requires no audience at all, which suggests that resistance in these two novels depends less on a protagonist's will to resist than on whether an institution exists that can register it.

Daniel's focalization confirms this asymmetry. Wakota (2024) identifies ambiguous focalization, neither fully authorized nor fully suppressed, as recurring in East African YAF. Daniel's positioning matches this exactly, and unlike Wanjiku, he never moves from focalized to focalizer across the narrative. His attempt to formulate a defence takes place without the reliable information such a defence would require, and his identity after this encounter is constructed through inference, misreading a cellmate's smile as evidence the judge's mood has

shifted, rather than through knowledge the narrative supplies. Bal's (1985) focalization through the perceiving rather than acting subject fits this condition. Daniel's identity is not resolved by plot outcome but stays contested against what that outcome never explained to him. The administration's silence following Daniel's later academic success confirms rather than reverses this pattern, since it is the absence of institutional voice, not its hostility, that finally establishes Daniel's voicelessness as durable rather than momentary.

Silence and Identity Formation

Read together, the two novels use institutional confrontation to unsettle identity rather than resolve it. Hintz and Tribunella (2025) argue that identity in YAF is produced through a protagonist's choices rather than imposed by surrounding structures. Both novels narrow that claim, since the choices available to Wanjiku and Daniel at their most consequential moments are constrained past the point where choice does the work their framework assumes. Wanjiku's guilt over her attacker's death arrives unsolicited, without a choice preceding it. Daniel constructs a defence with no reliable information to build it from. What both novels show is that the institutions surrounding these protagonists never intended identity formation to be a fair contest. Guilt and confusion are what the encounter leaves behind, not raw material a protagonist gets to shape freely.

Characterization does comparable work in both texts, though it withholds different things. Both novels withhold access to a protagonist's pain even while narrating that the pain occurred. *Never Say Never's* adult narrator converts the six-year-old Daniel's fear into retrospective comic irony, a perspective the child did not possess at the time. *Breaking the Silence* performs a related withdrawal at a moment of greater violence: the narrating voice announces vivid memory, then retreats into procedural notation rather than sustained interiority. Osei-Nyame's (1999) account of withheld female interiority as a standing feature of African fiction takes on a sharper edge here, since Wanjiku's own first-person narrating voice performs that same denial on her own experience, showing the mechanism working from inside a woman's self-authored account rather than only from outside it. The consequence for identity differs by protagonist in ways that matter for how each text uses silence. Wanjiku's shame displaces her own injury from the record even in a text she narrates herself, so the silence Osei-Nyame locates in patriarchal structures survives inside an account that is, on its surface, self-authored. Daniel's comic retrospection does different work. It protects the adult narrator from the child's remembered terror rather than protecting an institution from Daniel's account. Both are instances of what Bal (1985) distinguishes as perceived versus expressed experience. Each novel shows suffering as an event the narrative records without granting the reader access to what the child felt while it happened.

This is why neither novel lets identity formation conclude in resolution. Wanjiku's courtroom vindication and Daniel's academic success both function as moments where an outside observer might expect identity to settle, since something has, on the surface, been achieved. Instead, both novels use these moments to open a further round of unsettlement, Wanjiku's guilt, Daniel's inferred defence, rather than to close the identity question the earlier institutional silencing raised. Silence, in both texts, therefore does more than withhold information from an institution. It becomes the medium in which identity itself remains permanently under negotiation, formed in the gap between what institutional and patriarchal structures demand of Wanjiku and Daniel and what each protagonist's narrating voice, or the narrative voice speaking for them, refuses to fully reveal.

Comparative Discussion

Breaking the Silence and *Never Say Never* were written independently, by different authors, addressing different forms of harm, sexual violence in one case, institutional displacement in the other. Despite this, five representational techniques recur across both: focalization, ellipsis and omission, narrative voice, temporal manipulation, and characterization. Focalization and characterization do the most explanatory work in both texts, since both operate at the level of who is permitted to know and to be known, the register Genette (1980) and Bal (1985) treat as foundational. Ellipsis and temporal manipulation function as narrower, local tools nested inside those broader choices: the village elder's one-word recharacterization of Wanjiku's case and Daniel's nine years of institutional life compressed into a single line each reshape a specific passage rather than the novel's whole structure. Narrative voice sits between these groups, producing silence only when paired with a shift in focalization, as when Daniel's cellmate briefly narrates his own trauma in his own words.

This ranking clarifies why the same underlying condition, institutional processing without protagonist testimony, produces different effects in the two novels. *Breaking the Silence* relies more heavily on characterization to keep Wanjiku legible as a moral subject even while institutions silence her formally. *Never Say Never* relies more heavily on focalization withheld outright, which is why Daniel's silence reads as more total than Wanjiku's despite both protagonists facing comparable institutional indifference. The consistency of these five techniques across two independently authored texts indicates that they are not incidental features of two unrelated novels but a recognizable narrative approach available to Kenyan YAF as a genre, rather than a habit specific to either writer.

These findings extend existing studies in two directions. They confirm Gikandi's (1987) account of silence as chosen resistance as well as imposed constraint, while supplying the narratological specificity, named mechanisms of voice, mood, focalization, and characterization, that the global silence scholarship reviewed above does not provide for a Kenyan corpus. They also complicate Osei-Nyame's (1999) gendered framework, since a structurally comparable pattern of withheld interiority operates on a male protagonist in *Never Say Never*, suggesting that withheld interiority in this literary tradition may be a broader narrative strategy rather than one specific to how texts characterise women.

The findings carry practical implications. For curriculum designers and educators who already use these two novels in Kenyan classrooms, the analysis indicates that both texts reward close formal reading, not only thematic discussion, and that lessons built around them might attend explicitly to how narrative structure produces silence rather than treating silence only as plot content. Students who have experienced comparable institutional silencing may recognize their own situations in the gap the novels stage between what a character says and what surrounding institutions permit that speech to accomplish.

Two limitations qualify these findings. Genette's and Bal's frameworks were developed primarily through engagement with Western literary traditions, and carry assumptions about narrative form apart from the oral storytelling conventions and customary institutions, the village elder, the chief, the extended family, that shape how silence operates in these two texts. The findings should be read as an application of narratological categories to Kenyan YAF rather than evidence that those categories are fully adequate to this cultural context. A two-text qualitative design also cannot establish that the patterns identified generalize to Kenyan YAF as a genre without further comparative research across a larger corpus.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how silence functions as a strategy of resistance and identity formation in two Kenyan YAF novels, *Breaking the Silence* and *Never Say Never*. The analysis shows that silence in both texts is not a sign of passivity. Wanjiku's resistance depends on an institution eventually willing to register her account. Daniel's resistance requires no institutional audience at all, since his silence is itself the only self-protection available to him. Both forms of resistance leave identity unresolved rather than settled, and that lack of resolution is itself evidence that silence in these texts performs structural work rather than simply describing a condition the two protagonists endure.

The study contributes to scholarship on Kenyan YAF in two specific ways. First, it demonstrates that silence functions as resistance and identity formation through identifiable narrative mechanisms, voice, mood, focalization, and characterization, rather than as an undifferentiated thematic concern. This moves existing Kenyan scholarship, which has established that silence matters in these texts, toward an account of what silence does and how it is built to do it. Second, it extends Genette's and Bal's narratological frameworks, developed and tested mainly against Western young adult fiction, to a Kenyan corpus where poverty, patriarchal control, and institutional processing operate as narrative forces distinct from the developmental concerns those frameworks were built to register. Why this matters extends past these two novels specifically. Both texts have been adopted as school readers and recognized through literary prizes, which means their formal construction of silence already reaches the young readers whose own encounters with institutional and patriarchal authority these novels dramatize. Reading silence as a deliberate narrative achievement, not incidental content, gives curriculum designers, teachers, and future scholars a basis for treating Kenyan YAF as a genre that rewards the same structural analysis long applied to adult fiction and to Western young adult fiction, rather than a body of texts whose value begins and ends with the social conditions it depicts.

Future research should test whether the mechanisms and techniques identified here recur across a wider corpus of Kenyan YAF, since a two-text design can establish a pattern but not its prevalence across the genre. Comparative work with Young Adult Fiction from other East African countries would help establish whether the narratological construction of silence documented here is a national or a regional literary phenomenon. Further work might also apply additional narratological concepts, narrative frequency, narrative distance, unreliable narration, to dimensions of silence this study did not examine, and integrate African-centered literary theories with narratological method to address the cultural specificity these frameworks do not fully capture on their own.

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