

SILENCE AS RESISTANCE AND SELF-PRESERVATION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S ZIKORA

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Abstract

This paper examines silence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Zikora* as a rhetorical and psychological practice through which the protagonist responds to relational pressure, maternal expectation and post-childbirth distress. Focusing on Zikora's exchanges with her mother, her relationship with Kwame and her experience after childbirth, the study uses an intersectional feminist framework and qualitative close reading to trace how gender, professional position, transnational location and maternal responsibility shape the meanings attached to speech and withholding speech. The analysis attends to first-person focalisation and internal monologue, which make Zikora's private evaluations available even when she says little aloud. The paper argues that silence in the story cannot be reduced to passivity: it may register imposed exclusion, but it also provides reflective distance, emotional protection and a restrained form of resistance. Adichie therefore presents silence as an unstable practice whose meaning depends on who controls it and under what social conditions it occurs.

Keywords: *Zikora*, Silence, Intersectional Feminism, Motherhood, Gendered Expectations, Resistance, Self-Preservation

Introduction

Silence in Adichie's *Zikora* shapes relationships and the protagonist's response to pressure. The story repeatedly distinguishes between silence imposed on Zikora and silence she uses deliberately. In encounters with her mother, restraint carries inherited judgements about womanhood and pain; in her relationship with Kwame, his withdrawal turns non-response into relational power, while Zikora's own pauses allow her to process betrayal before she speaks; after childbirth, quiet reflection gives form to pain, uncertainty and the distance between cultural scripts of maternal joy and her actual feelings. Reading these moments together makes silence more than an absence of speech. It becomes a pattern through which the story organises power, vulnerability and self-protection.

This study therefore examines how silence functions as resistance and self-preservation across three connected areas: the mother-daughter relationship, Zikora's relationship with Kwame and her post-childbirth transformation. It uses qualitative close reading, with attention to first-person focalisation, internal monologue and shifts between spoken exchange and private thought. The argument is that silence has no single meaning in the story. At times others impose it through

abandonment, dismissal or social expectation; at other moments Zikora turns restraint into reflective space that helps her assess what has happened and preserve a coherent sense of self. An intersectional feminist approach makes it possible to read these silences alongside gender, professional status, transnational location, family position and motherhood rather than attributing them solely to personality.

Theoretical Background

This study adopts an intersectional feminist framework. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced intersectionality to explain how single-axis accounts of discrimination can overlook forms of disadvantage produced at the intersection of categories such as race and gender (139-40). Her formulation cautions against treating women as a socially uniform category and provides a basis for examining how several relations of power can operate at the same time.

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge describe intersectionality as a way of understanding human experience through multiple, mutually influencing factors rather than through a single axis (2). This emphasis on relational analysis is useful for *Zikora* because the protagonist moves through several social positions at once: she is a Nigerian immigrant, a lawyer, a daughter, a partner and, later, a mother. These positions carry different expectations, and their interaction affects how she interprets betrayal, care, pain and responsibility.

Leslie McCall distinguishes anticategorical, intercategory and intracategory approaches to intersectional research (1773-74). The intracategory approach is especially suited to the present close reading because it centres a particular subject whose position unsettles broad social categories. The paper therefore concentrates on Zikora as an individual character while relating her choices to gender, class and professional status, migration, family relations and motherhood. This method keeps the analysis close to the language of the story while allowing social position to remain visible.

Applied to literary analysis, this framework directs attention to the conditions under which speech and silence acquire meaning. A woman may keep quiet because a social hierarchy discourages speech, because another person has closed communication, or because restraint offers time to assess a difficult situation. The distinction matters in *Zikora*, where the same outward condition of quietness can carry different meanings according to who controls communication. The analysis therefore treats silence as relational and context-dependent rather than assuming that every silence is either submission or resistance.

Review of Related Scholarship and Justification of Study

Although Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has attracted extensive scholarly attention, *Zikora* has a smaller but growing critical record. Saroj G.C.'s 2023 article examines female subjectivity and body politics, placing Zikora's pregnancy, abandonment, immigrant status, sexuality, romance and generational relations in the social meanings attached to the pregnant body (31). G.C. reads pain as a route through which Zikora reassesses relationships and gendered assumptions. That focus is valuable for understanding corporeal suffering, but it treats silence mainly as part of the broader field of pain and subject formation. The present study shifts attention to withholding speech and non-response as recurring relational practices.

Yakut Akbay's 2024 study reads *Zikora* through African feminism and a postcolonial account of femininity and motherhood, emphasising single motherhood, polygamy, sexism, male-child preference and generational change (56). Akbay also gives sustained attention to the mother-daughter relationship and women's solidarity. The article clarifies the cultural pressures surrounding Zikora's maternal identity, but its main concern lies with changing ideas of womanhood and motherhood rather than silence as a sustained communicative practice.

Kelechi Chioma Osigwe's review of *Zikora* places labour pain, abandonment and adjustment to motherhood at the centre of the story. Osigwe also identifies the autodiegetic narrative voice as an appropriate means of communicating Zikora's emotional and physical anguish (82, 84). This account is useful to the present study because it connects narrative perspective with maternal transition, though it does not develop the contrast between imposed non-response and Zikora's own deliberate restraint.

Samuel Kwesi Nkansah and Emmanuel Mensah Bonsu approach the story from corpus stylistics, examining verbal processes and the dominance of first-person narration (155-72). Their findings show that Adichie's patterns of saying, asking and reporting help organise gendered relations and attribute speech to different characters. The present study complements that emphasis on verbal process by examining what happens when expected speech is delayed, withheld or denied. Silence, in this sense, gains meaning from its relation to the story's dense field of speech rather than from the simple absence of words.

Sreya Mukherjee's 2023 essay in *Café Dissensus* interprets *Zikora* through contemporary motherhood and the strained relationship between Zikora and her mother. Mukherjee draws particular attention to the mother's ideal of self-restraint during labour and to the way childbirth changes Zikora's understanding of her mother. The essay therefore brings maternal quietness close to the present topic, but it treats restraint chiefly as a generational code of womanhood. This paper extends that discussion by comparing maternal restraint with Kwame's withdrawal and Zikora's private post-childbirth reflection.

These studies establish several important lines of criticism on *Zikora*: body politics and pain, generational motherhood, maternal transition, narrative perspective, verbal process and contemporary maternal culture. None places silence at the centre of an analysis that follows the mother-daughter relationship, intimate abandonment and post-childbirth reflection together. This study addresses that gap by distinguishing silence imposed through unequal relations from silence used as reflective distance and self-preservation, while keeping the analysis grounded in Adichie's first-person narrative form.

SILENCE AS RESISTANCE AND SELF-PRESERVATION

Silence in the Mother-Daughter Relationship

The mother-daughter relationship reveals two forms of silence: the mother's disciplined restraint during pain and Zikora's withholding of speech when she interprets her mother's behaviour through inherited assumptions about marriage and womanhood. Because the narration remains with Zikora, readers encounter both spoken exchange and private judgement, making silence a relational practice rather than an empty pause. The contrast between the two women also shows how generation, family position and social expectation shape the meaning of restraint.

During labour, Zikora recalls that her mother wanted her to endure pain with a "mute grinding of teeth" (*Zikora* 7). The mother's preference for quiet endurance reflects a gendered script in which composure validates womanhood. Her restraint therefore carries the weight of cultural training. It protects dignity in one sense, but it also passes a demanding model of femininity from mother to daughter. An intersectional reading links gender to generation, family role and cultural expectation: the mother's habits developed under conditions different from Zikora's professional and diasporic life, but they still shape how Zikora judges her own response to pain.

Zikora also remembers a period after her father moved out when she "spoke to my mother only in sullen monosyllables" (*Zikora* 25). Here silence belongs to Zikora rather than her mother. As a child, she withholds fuller speech because she has accepted the idea that her mother could have

prevented the separation. Pregnancy and childbirth later alter this interpretation. The retrospective first-person narration allows the adult Zikora to recognise how her earlier quietness participated in blame while also showing how silence can postpone understanding until later experience makes reassessment possible.

Silence in the mother-daughter relationship therefore carries memory as well as power. The mother's restraint represents an inherited discipline; Zikora's monosyllabic withdrawal records hurt and misrecognition. By returning to these earlier silences during childbirth, Zikora does more than remember them. She re-reads them, and this retrospective movement turns quietness into a means of understanding the pressures that shaped both women.

Silence in Zikora's Relationship with Kwame

Silence in Zikora's relationship with Kwame develops through the breakdown of communication. Their exchanges move from intimacy to evasion, delayed replies and absence, so quietness becomes inseparable from relational power. The first-person narration keeps Zikora's reasoning visible while Kwame becomes increasingly inaccessible, allowing the story to contrast the person who bears the physical consequences of pregnancy with the partner who can withdraw from immediate responsibility.

When Zikora tells Kwame that she may be pregnant, his language changes abruptly:

He looked confused. "I might be pregnant." I was so certain of his delight that I made my tone playful, almost singsong. But his face didn't relax, instead it went still, as though all his features had paused, and suddenly this communicative man retreated into the cryptic. He said, "We're at different places in our lives." He said, "I'll take care of everything," in a voice that belonged to someone else, in words that he had heard somewhere else. Take care of everything. How absurd; we were both lawyers, and I earned a little more than he did. He said, "It's a shock." I said, "You came inside me." He said, "I thought you let me because you had protection." I said, "What are you talking about? You know I stopped taking the pill because it made me fat, and I assumed you knew what it meant, what it could mean." He said, "There was miscommunication."
(*Zikora* 11)

Kwame's shift from communicative to "cryptic" speech marks the beginning of asymmetrical communication. Zikora initially answers him directly, but his language transforms a shared reproductive risk into "miscommunication." Her restraint after the exchange reflects shock rather than consent. She must absorb the sudden separation between the relationship she believed she had and the position Kwame now adopts. An intersectional reading draws attention to the tension between her professional standing as a lawyer and the gendered expectation that she will carry the physical and emotional consequences of pregnancy. The first-person narration holds legal reasoning, hurt and disbelief together, showing why silence can provide temporary distance before response.

Kwame's later absence turns non-response into a more explicit form of relational control:

He ignored my calls and texts, and sent back my apartment key in an envelope, the lone metal key wrapped in plain paper. Some days I was fine and some days I was underwater, barely breathing. At my twenty-week checkup, I smiled at the moving grainy gray image on the ultrasound screen, flush with well-being, and I waved at the front-desk women as I left, but in the elevator, I burst into tears, a sudden sense of dissolving all around me. I sent Kwame a text: I'm 20 weeks today. He replied three days later: It's manipulative to send me this. You know you made a decision that excluded me. I didn't want things to end this way. I'm hurting too. I read it over and over; it felt like something

written by somebody who was not Kwame, like an exercise from law school, an argument about case law, hard and elegant and empty. To my Can we please at least talk? Kwame did not respond. Ours was an ancient story, the woman wants the baby and the man doesn't want the baby and a middle ground does not exist. (*Zikora* 13)

Kwame's later non-response gives silence a different function because he controls it. Calls, texts and requests for conversation receive delay or no answer. This imposed silence restricts Zikora's ability to negotiate the relationship, while pregnancy continues regardless of his withdrawal. Her own quieter moments do not equal his conduct: she uses them to read, reconsider and contain emotion, whereas his absence shifts responsibility to her. The contrast matters because the story presents silence as dependent on power and circumstance, not as a fixed sign of either weakness or resistance.

Across these scenes, silence names both exclusion and self-preservation. Kwame uses distance to close conversation; Zikora uses reflection to survive the consequences of that closure. The distinction prevents the analysis from romanticising every silence as resistance. Instead, resistance appears when Zikora converts an imposed communicative absence into space for judgement, boundary-making and emotional endurance.

Silence in Zikora's Post-Childbirth Transformation

After childbirth, silence moves away from direct relational conflict and towards the gap between expected maternal feeling and Zikora's physical and emotional state. The story places cultural images of motherhood beside pain, exhaustion and uncertainty, while first-person focalisation records thoughts that Zikora does not necessarily voice. Quietness in these scenes therefore marks an inward interval in which she tests inherited expectations against what she can actually feel.

The immediate aftermath of childbirth presents that interval with particular force:

I was suspended in a place of no feeling, waiting to feel. I could not separate this moment from the stories of this moment—years of stories and films and books about this scene, mother and child, mother meeting child, child in mother's arms. I knew how I was supposed to feel, but I did not know how I felt. It was not transcendental. There was a festering red pain between my legs. Somewhere in my consciousness, a mild triumph hovered, because it was over, finally it was over, and I had pushed out the baby. So animalistic, so violent—the push and pressure, the blood, the doctor urging me, the cranking and stretching of flesh and organ and bone. (*Zikora* 17)

After delivery, Zikora waits to feel the transcendence that stories about motherhood have taught her to expect, but pain and disorientation dominate. Her silence marks a suspension of ready-made language: she does not immediately perform joy simply because culture says a mother should. The internal monologue gives the reader access to this pause and exposes a discrepancy between maternal ideals and her actual response. From an intersectional perspective, gender and motherhood combine with medical vulnerability and family expectation, making quiet reflection a form of protection from an emotional script she cannot truthfully inhabit at that moment.

The pressure continues during early postnatal care:

I was constipated, and on the toilet, I tried not to strain while straining still, tentative, panic in my throat, afraid I might tear my stitches. A geyser of anxiety had erupted deep inside me and I was spurting fear. I sat in the warm sitz bath, worried that I hadn't sat for long enough, even though I set my timer for fifteen minutes. What if I got an infection? I would need medication, which would taint my breast milk and affect my son. My son. My son could not latch on to my breasts properly, always my nipple slipped out

of his little hungry mouth. He wailed and wailed. His cries seared into my head and made me so jittery I wanted to smash things. (*Zikora* 26)

The second passage intensifies this private struggle. Anxiety about stitches, infection, breastfeeding and the baby's crying fills Zikora's thoughts even when she says little aloud. First-person focalisation places the pressure of maternal responsibility next to physical recovery, so silence cannot be read as calmness. It contains fear and anger that social expectations of competent motherhood leave little room to express. Restraint helps her move through immediate demands, but the narration ensures that readers still hear what public speech omits.

Post-childbirth silence therefore changes the paper's earlier pattern. It does not primarily answer Kwame or her mother; it marks an inward interval in which Zikora tests inherited images of motherhood against pain, exhaustion and care. The story turns quiet into a narrative contrast between what women are expected to feel and what the protagonist can actually name.

Conclusion

Silence in *Zikora* functions through changing relations of power rather than carrying one stable meaning. In the mother-daughter relationship, it moves between inherited discipline and delayed understanding. Zikora's mother's restraint encodes a model of feminine endurance, while Zikora's own monosyllabic withdrawal reveals how silence can preserve resentment until later experience permits reinterpretation. With Kwame, silence becomes more coercive because his withdrawal limits dialogue during a pregnancy whose physical consequences fall on Zikora. Her reflective pauses after this abandonment differ from his non-response: they help her process betrayal without surrendering her judgement. After childbirth, quietness turns inward as she confronts pain, anxiety and the expectation that motherhood should produce immediate joy.

The intersectional feminist framework clarifies why these silences cannot be explained by gender alone. Zikora's professional status, migration, family position, intimate relationship and maternal role alter what silence can do in each scene. The story's first-person focalisation and internal monologue preserve speech at the level of thought even when spoken language narrows or disappears. Thus, Adichie uses silence both to represent unequal relations and to create reflective distance from them. The paper's contribution lies in distinguishing silence imposed by others from silence used for self-preservation. That distinction shows why quietness in *Zikora* may signal harm, endurance, reassessment or resistance according to who controls communication and what is at stake.

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