

## Silence in "refugee literature". An analysis of the unspeakable and the unspoken in *Une chambre en exil* by Omar Youssef Souleimane

Historically, migratory flows have led to the creation of various social labels - and even various socio-legal categories - to distinguish between people on the basis of their experience and state interests. Today, in the press, in political discourse and in literature, we can find terms such as "migrant", "economic migrant", "exile" or "refugee" - a proliferation of terminology that is rather impractical and prone to arbitrariness, especially as the boundaries of the concepts we have just listed are not always clear-cut.

This need for new definitions demonstrates the 'volatility', to use Jokic's term<sup>1</sup>, of the borders of nation states, since the ideal on which they are based has proved to be an illusion, particularly following the most recent humanitarian tragedies in the Mediterranean and on the borders of Europe. As a reminder, according to such an ideal, the different ethnic groups and cultures would be rigidly inserted within the territorial and administrative limits of a single nation.

Exile as an experience of deterritorialisation and uprooting has, in some periods, given rise to remarkable linguistic and literary activity. Recently, a growing number of published stories have brought to life characters forced into exile as a result of persecution; characters who, like their authors, have been granted the socio-legal category of 'refugee'.

However, these stories often fall into silence, as frequently happens with literary texts in which human displacement is the main theme. This literature tends to be "marginalised by them [national philologies] - when it is not undervalued or ignored<sup>2</sup>".

Caught in the straitjacket of a trauma caused by forced displacement, refugee authors often write in an "uncomfortable" language: the writing process is then a series of (re)confrontations with an atrocious experience that has difficulty finding its place in their psyche, making it even more difficult to pass on, as the words to express it tend to slip away.

Some of these writing processes are characterised by attempts to put the unspeakable and the unspoken onto paper: hence the mediation of silence, which hides emotions, feelings and situations that are difficult to express, or traces of an anguished and obsessive past, or, from the new "outside" of the host country, the experience of searching for a new "inside" that can compensate for the one that has been destroyed.

We argue that the writing of these authors remains somehow caught up in the meandering, unspeakable nature of the trauma, to the extent that the reader struggles to decipher the myriad opacities of their writing. Indeed, silence may be a consequence, (in)concretised in the writing, of the trauma caused by exile, reflected in the failure to speak, the impossibility of speaking that strikes the traumatised person.

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<sup>1</sup> Olivera Jokic, "No country, no cry: Literature of women's displacement and the reading of pity", *Journal Of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 54, no. 6, 2018, p. 782.

<sup>2</sup> Luigi Giuliani, "Literatura de la migración y modelos historiográficos de la literatura", in José Javier Martos Ramos (ed. lit.), Leonarda Trapassi (ed. lit.), Isabel García Adánez (ed. lit.), *et al*, *Diálogos interculturales: lenguas, literaturas y sociedad*, Rubí (Barcelona), Anthropos, 2011, p. 196. In the original Spanish: '[...] y es por éstas [las filologías nacionales] marginada - cuando no infravalorada o incluso ignorada'.

However, some of these authors succeed in transforming this silence into legible traces for the reader, who then becomes a springboard for the author's writing, particularly in its function of fragmenting the story.

This alternation between noise and silence deserves to be studied. As a reminder, just as silence plays a fundamental role in music, so silence is not necessarily an absence in writing. It can fulfil a specific function. The silence of the refugee author, of the refugee character, or of both, gives meaning and form to the experience of forced displacement: it helps to symbolise reality, by allowing a spatio-temporal identification of the self, which will then make it easier to pass on a story that is difficult to tell.

What exactly is the situation?

In this article, we will carry out a linguistic and literary analysis of the forms that silence can take in writing, based on some extracts from *Une chambre en exil*, a novel with autobiographical overtones in which the Syrian writer and journalist Omar Youssef Souleimane, a refugee in Paris since 2012, recounts the life of a young Syrian refugee in France and his incessant identity conflicts.

Exile, as an interstitial place in the echo of the "earthquakes" that people have experienced, allows them to "build a bridge between 'home' and 'here'<sup>3</sup>". It is from this in-between place that authors can hope to show their readers the tremors that have shaken their lives.

Although these stories often fall on deaf ears, we will see how some of them have the power to resonate with readers, at a time when the United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that there are 108.4 million forcibly displaced people in the world.<sup>4</sup>

### **Silence: what possibilities does it offer?**

A large number of studies have shown the fundamental nature of writing, of the use of words, in the (re)construction of identity for an individual who has undergone a traumatic experience. As Green explains, in medical language, "the work of writing presupposes a wound and a loss, a wound and a mourning, whose work will be the transformation aimed at covering them up<sup>5</sup>".

For his part, Tellier, a clinical psychologist, places at the heart of his analysis the "curative virtue of writing<sup>6</sup>", drawing on the work of certain authors who have turned to writing after experiencing trauma, such as Primo Levi. In fact, as Tellier explains, putting words to the traumatic experience<sup>7</sup> can help the victim to regain "a status as a subject" that had been denied them because, in the aftermath of the events, "a narrative emerges that can be used to reconstruct personal history, to reappropriate oneself through the other<sup>8</sup>".

However, it should be pointed out that, for some authors, it is not words alone that help to fill in the gaps, to (re)construct their vision of reality or to build bridges with something they have lost. Indeed, the role of silence as a springboard for writing has not been highlighted as much as that of words. Yet, as Salmon explains, silence is still a necessity, for example, for so-called "acoustician" writers, those who "deal with sound phenomena, with

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<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Bergeron, "Exil-non-lieu d'apprentissages-mémoires fractales", in Jacqueline Bergeron (ed.), *Seuil, exil...*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. "Erasmus Expertise", France, 2021, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Refugee Agency, *Statistical Overview*, 2023, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/en-bref/qui-nous-sommes/aperçu-statistique> [consulted on 20/07/2023].

<sup>5</sup> André Green, *La déliaison*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1992, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Arnaud Tellier, *Expériences traumatiques et écriture*, Paris, Anthropos Economica, 1998, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> We use Chiantaretto's definition of "trauma" "based on the Freudian models of rupture and after-cut, redeployed by Ferenczi": "a subject's capacity to psychologically process an event is exceeded".

<sup>8</sup> Arnaud Tellier, *Expériences traumatiques et écriture*, Paris, Anthropos Economica, 1998, p. 64.

the rumour of the world; they are absorbed by the unknown vibrations, the invisible music<sup>9</sup>. In fact, unlike so-called "ambient" authors, "acoustician" authors don't borrow "from beliefs and customs"; they don't try to sell "on the sly stories that people can identify with"<sup>10</sup>. It would seem that the aim of "acoustician" writers is to find a way of telling their story, rather than to write a story that is easy to publish or read.

For her part, Chaput-Lebars also emphasises the capacity of silence "to preserve and delimit a personal space of its own, without which the subject would no longer belong to himself"<sup>11</sup>, making it a crucial tool for guaranteeing the success of a transmission.

For example, Ledwina describes silence as a "source of creative possibilities"<sup>12</sup> in Durasian writing. She states that through silence, which "reveals itself as an intimate need, a singular necessity for expressing ineffable emotions", Marguerite Duras "questions the possibilities of language and calls into question the very principles of representation"<sup>13</sup>.

In Duras's "thin" writing, characterised by a "radical syntactic and stylistic bareness"<sup>14</sup>, silence is conceptualised in the form of "a whole series of graphic devices (blanks, suspension points, hyphens, negation of verbs, poverty of vocabulary)"<sup>15</sup>. Silence proves to be "charged with meaning" and appears "as a novel way of communicating absence, loss and emptiness" through which Duras "seems to reach the unspeakable"<sup>16</sup>.

These various elements show the extent to which silence can play an essential role in the writing practice of certain writers. Just as music is shaped by fabrics charged with meaning, by notes as much as by silences, writing can also be structured in part around silence, which can help to forge a narrative density that words alone would not have the power to engender.

These forms of expression of the unspeakable, weaving together the full (words) and the empty (silence(s)), through a singular style, syntax and lexical choices, allow certain authors to delimit, within their discourse, spaces dedicated to silence(s).

In fact, defining an intimate space for personal 'repair' or 'recuperation', in other words a form of reunion with the former self, becomes crucial in the case of traumatic experiences, especially when these are severe enough to jeopardise the subject's identity (re)construction. This is particularly the case during forced human displacement.

The question is, faced with a traumatic event that remains inaccessible, how can writing capture the elusive, give concrete form to the abstract, give shape to the unspeakable and the unspoken?

As we shall show, the imaginative potential provided by the network of words and silence(s) can enable the author to symbolise and represent his (new) reality, so that he can find his bearings and make sense of it.

## The place of silence in "refugee literature"

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<sup>9</sup> Christian Salmon, *L'Art du Silence*, Paris, Les liens qui libèrent, 2022 p.20.

<sup>10</sup> Christian Salmon, "Savoir écouter les écrivains qui se taisent", online at *Slate* : <https://www.slate.fr/story/235195/bonnes-feuilles-art-du-silence-christian-salmon-les-liens-qui-liberent-litterature-crise>, 25/11/2022 [consulted on 25/07/2023]

<sup>11</sup> Corinne Chaput-Lebars, *Traumatismes de guerre: Du raccomodement par l'écriture*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Ledwina, "Écrire, [...] c'est se taire": du silence durassien", *Thélème. Revista Complutense de Estudios Franceses*, no. 2, 2017, p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 208.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 207.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 203.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 197.

The importance of the subject's bearings in relation to reality takes on its full meaning when he or she undergoes the destruction of his or her "inside" - understood as his or her essence, his or her "inner self", everything that constitutes his or her identity - and finds himself or herself confronted with a new "outside" - understood as his or her external reality. When a process of identity-building is interrupted by a traumatic event, the individual in question will need new tools to make sense of his new reality, a reality in which he needs to find his bearings in order to heal the emotional wound of the trauma. Consequently, the loss of this 'intimate', when correlated with its regaining, marks the beginning of the process of (re)constructing the identity of the uprooted individual. In this sense, the potential of silence as a cathartic tool for expressing the 'intimate' and the unspeakable, enabling a reaffirmation of the self, is crucial.

In June 2023, the United Nations Refugee Agency estimated that there were 108.4 million forcibly displaced people in the world<sup>17</sup>, i.e. people who have been forced to leave their homes and go into exile. Some forcibly displaced persons may be described as "refugees", a legal status that implies that the displaced person is granted legal protection by the host country: a person who, "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country [...]".<sup>18</sup>

It should be noted, however, that this is a complex and ambiguous concept, all the more so because "the instruments drawn up in the fora of international diplomacy remain closely dependent on the interests of States"<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, the concept of "refugee", as set out in the 1951 Geneva Convention, leaves a certain margin for interpretation, allowing states to fulfil their obligations to the full when processing asylum applications. What is "well-founded fear"? At what point can an individual be considered to be persecuted? Why is there a tendency, in political discourse and in the press, to describe people displaced from poor countries as "economic migrants", particularly those who have not obtained "refugee" status<sup>20</sup>, but to regard those from rich countries as "expatriates"<sup>21</sup>? The many existing questions on this subject bear witness to the complexity of this terminology.

The extremely arduous journeys that refugees have to undertake have led some of them to seek an audience with which to communicate, and this has given rise, especially in recent decades, to some remarkable literary creation. By deciding to narrate their own experiences, these refugees, who have become "authors", are trying to break down a whole series of negative exogenous representations and designations and to restore a more accurate perception of themselves.

Yet the ambiguity of terminology is also reflected in the literature. Depending on the time and place, we can find different names for the range of stories written by "displaced" and

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<sup>17</sup> United Nations Refugee Agency, *Statistical Overview*, 2023, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/en-bref/qui-nous-sommes/apercu-statistique> [consulted on 20/07/2023].

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Refugee Agency, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 1951, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/media/convention-et-protocole-relatifs-au-statut-des-refugies>, p. 16 [consulted on 20/07/2023]

<sup>19</sup> Danièle Lochak, "Qu'est-ce qu'un réfugié? The political construction of a legal category", *Pouvoirs*, no 144, 2013, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Adrien Francke, "Peut-on vraiment distinguer migrants économiques et réfugiés?", online at *Libération*: [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2017/12/20/peut-on-vraiment-distinguer-migrants-economiques-et-refugies\\_1617534/](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2017/12/20/peut-on-vraiment-distinguer-migrants-economiques-et-refugies_1617534/), 20/12/2017 [accessed 26/07/2023]

<sup>21</sup> Vincent Destouches, "The difference between 'immigrants' and 'expatriates'", online at *L'actualité*: <https://lactualite.com/societe/la-difference-entre-les-immigres-et-les-expatriees/>, 15/06/2015 [accessed 26/07/2023]

"uprooted" people, or about their experiences. Such diversity can be confusing, especially as the determinant of this 'literature', which is used to name the situation of the author or the characters, is in itself an often imprecise term - 'exile', 'asylum', 'migration' or 'refuge' - which, depending on the context, requires an analysis of its historical, legal and even philosophical aspects. Thus we find names as varied as "literature of exile", "literature of migration", "literature of diasporas" or "*refugee literature*", which do not all refer to the same concept, although they are part of a common paradigm.

In this brief study, our intention is to emphasise the forced nature of the displacements that are the subject of these literatures. Indeed, when "displaced persons" have no choice but to leave their "home", the experience they undergo is quite singular, because they are caught between their love for their country and the impossibility of staying there, due to circumstances that could endanger their lives. It is therefore an experience that cannot always be completely equated with other forms of exile. We could say that it is a specific type of exile, and even a specific type of "forced displacement" and "uprooting". It is characterised by violence, persecution and belonging to a specific social group or minority, leading to an often dangerous journey to another country and involving a long and complex asylum application process. A chain of factors that often leads 'displaced' individuals to develop psychological trauma, correlated with depression, anxiety and stress<sup>22</sup>, with risks, as with any particularly critical event, of weakening the construction of identity.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, although these are personal experiences, the individuals concerned often find themselves in a "collective framework", in which their individuality "tends to be erased, interwoven and trivialised by stereotypes in the eyes of the members of the host society", especially as they are often required to "interact with the self-definition that the migrant group is gradually constructing of itself<sup>24</sup>", in a context of economic, political, social and cultural globalisation. As Edward Saïd, one of the precursors of postcolonial studies, points out, "our era, which is characterised by a situation of conflict, an imperialist tendency and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian leaders, is an era of refugees, population displacement and mass immigration<sup>25</sup>". What emerges is that, structurally, at the root of these crises are the power dynamics that, at global level, govern relations between the (richest) states and the (poorest) states, the processes of decolonisation and, in many cases, the consequences of the consolidation of a political model based on the ideal of the nation-state, according to which the various ethnic groups and cultures would ideally be enclosed within the rigid framework of the territorial and administrative borders of a single nation.

What is the situation in the novel on which our analysis is based?

In *Une chambre en exil*, Omar Youssef Souleimane recounts, through the eyes of a fictional character, an experience of forced displacement with autobiographical overtones. In 2011, civil war broke out in Syria, triggering one of the most serious refugee crises in recent history: by 2023, the UN has counted 6.6 million internally displaced persons and 5.4 million refugees

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<sup>22</sup> Patric McGorry, D. Silove, Z. Steel *et al*, "Trauma exposure, postmigration stressors, and symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress", *Tamil asylum-seekers: Comparison with refugees and immigrants. Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, n° 97, p. 175.

<sup>23</sup> Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, "Identities and Social Locations: Who am I? Who are My People?", *Women's Lives, Multicultural Perspectives*. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey eds. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1998, p. 50.

<sup>24</sup> Luigi Giuliani, *op. cit.* p. 199.

<sup>25</sup> Edward W. Saïd, *Réflexions sur l'exil et autres essais*, translated by Charlotte Woillez, Arles, Actes Sud, 2008, p. 242.

who have crossed the country's borders<sup>26</sup>. Souleimane was born in 1987 near Damascus, where he took part in peaceful demonstrations in 2011. After being sought by the Syrian intelligence services, he left his country and, in 2012, went to France, where he was granted refugee status.<sup>27</sup>

So, since the author we are studying had an experience similar to that of "forced" displacement, for the purposes of this analysis we will use the term "refugee literature" to define the "genre" of his novel.

The experiences or feelings addressed by this 'literary genre' can lead us to imagine a person - an author or a character - who has crossed or is about to cross various thresholds. The passage "from the known to the unknown", "from the real to the unreal" or "from knowledge to ignorance" are some of the thresholds Bergeron<sup>28</sup> uses to illustrate the "complex journey of exile". For our part, we maintain that there is also a threshold that we imagine as an in-between, a kind of interstitial place located between the traumatic reality (which the person has been forced to leave) and the new reality (into which they are supposed to integrate).

Taking this threshold into account is extremely important: it allows us to envisage the idea of a temporal moratorium, a time suspended between the noise and tremors of the earthquakes that the refugee has experienced (or is experiencing) and the transition to writing. Indeed, as Lani-Bayle states, in order to guarantee the success of a transmission, the latter must "deal with a necessary period of silence before being able to transfer and reduce an extreme and therefore unreachable experience, entrenched in sensations that annihilate any hope of thought in words<sup>29</sup>". In this sense, Labeille also stresses the importance of "suspension in the dialectic", of a "pause" that "involves a spatio-temporal awareness<sup>30</sup>", which can prove crucial in enabling the symbolisation and representation of reality.

Silence can have two distinct faces. On the one hand, it can be seen as a consequence, (in)concretised in writing, of the trauma caused by exile; it represents the failure of the traumatised person to speak, thus referring to the unspeakable, the impossibility of speaking. On the other hand, it can be seen as a springboard for writing, acting as a means of fragmentation and a vector for rejecting the linearity and continuity generally associated with the order of writing and the world. In this sense, silence helps to fragment the experience in question and to transform each fragment into a symbol of reality.

### **The transition from silence to writing in *Une chambre en exil***

How is silence transformed into legible traces for the reader? We propose to analyse three extracts from *Une chambre en exil* in order to identify the particularities and forms in which silence is 'materialised' in Souleimane's writing.

We began by identifying two different types of device that give concrete form to the unspeakable and the unspoken in the text: on the one hand, 'graphic' devices, i.e. those present at the level of discourse, such as words, expressions or verb negations. On the other, we have also identified a number of 'rhetorical' devices through which the author attempts

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<sup>26</sup> European Commission, "Syria: Factsheet", available on *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations*: [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northern-africa/syria\\_fr#faits--chiffres2023](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northern-africa/syria_fr#faits--chiffres2023), [consulted on 20/07/2023]

<sup>27</sup> Omar Youssef Souleimane, "Biography", online at: <https://omaryoussef.org/biographie-2/>, s. d., [consulted on 01/08/2023]

<sup>28</sup> Jacqueline Bergeron, *op. cit.* p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> Martine Lani-Bayle, "Des limites du dicible ou de l'écrit", *Le sociographe*, no. 46, 2014, p. 68.

<sup>30</sup> Véronique Labeille, "Le silence dans le roman : un élément de monstration", *Loxias*, no. 18, 2007, p. 130.

to convey the unspeakable to the reader, in a more allusive way. In any case, that is our hypothesis.

By way of example, we'll look at the first extract, which contains both "rhetorical devices" and "graphic devices":

The smell of earth after rain, the same as in Syria, wafts up to my bed. When I was a child, at the end of the Eid day, the house was asleep. I'd go out into the courtyard. The song of the canary brought life. The gold of the sky dipped behind the mountain. This colour, which I see now, was the word of the elders who built this little town next to Damascus before moving away.

I don't miss the good things of the past, but exile goes deeper than nostalgia .<sup>31</sup>

This is a portrait of the protagonist's childhood, which he compares with his present life as a refugee. At the end of the extract - which is also the end of a chapter - the narrator claims not to feel nostalgia - "Exile is deeper" - even though his poetic description of his past makes this claim hard to believe. Although he denies it, the extract hints at a regret and melancholy that he is unable to express directly and transparently, a mixture of ineffable emotions. Indeed, the transmission of his childhood memories and the comparison with his current situation is not transparent. As we can see, it is through allusions and detours, reflected most of the time in metaphors, that the author tries to convey to the reader the misty shards of his past that are floating in his thoughts.

The author's comparison between the golden colour of the sky and the 'word' of the elders who built his city serves to illustrate this argument. This comparison, through a double sensory and metaphorical shift, perfectly illustrates the writing of silence that we are trying to grasp. The senses are summoned by the reference to 'speech', which refers to the mouth and, by extension, to taste, while the metaphor of the mouth as an 'oral testament' refers not, as is often the case, to a volatile heritage, but to an oral transmission that endures, even when cities and written archives are destroyed. This second, metaphorical shift takes on its full meaning in the vital context of the protagonist, whose hometown - and, by extension, his "private life" - has been bombed. Although the spoken word, unlike the written word, sets nothing in stone, what he says survives the physical destruction.

Since allusions are "expressions that arouse an idea without clearly designating"<sup>32</sup>, we hypothesise that the protagonist - and, in this case, the author - as witness, is obliged to rely on them because he is unable to express in a direct or "natural" way what he wants to talk about; it is therefore up to the reader to "decipher it"<sup>33</sup>. This generates a silence in the writing, an "opacity"<sup>34</sup>, to use Chaput-Lebars' term, which nonetheless constitutes a "'full' void, made up of doubts, uncertainties, frustration, fears, anxieties and sometimes suffering"<sup>35</sup>.

Finally, in addition to these rhetorical devices, the negation of the verb "manquer" (to miss) at the end of this extract is a graphic device that concretises the silence in the discourse; it contributes to the construction of an antiphrase, since this negation is placed just after the statement that these were "good sides of the past".

In a second extract, we also find rhetorical devices based on references to the senses, as well as other allusions reflecting different fears experienced by the protagonist:

I'm ready to give it my all, to graze her half-naked back with my breath, to bury myself in her forever, my new refuge. But I stay as I am, in this position. I have the feeling that if I make a move, I'll destroy everything.

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<sup>31</sup> Omar Youssef Souleimane, *Une chambre en exil*, Paris, Flammarion, 2022, p. 208.

<sup>32</sup> Corinne Chaput-Lebars, *op. cit.* p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

The leaves of a tree in the neighbour's garden draw their shadows on my bookshelf, surrounded by the honey-coloured rays of sunset. A lady in heels climbs the stairs. The sound of her footsteps echoes through the building, but where does it go? What happens to it? Perhaps lurking in the darkness, part of tomorrow?<sup>36</sup>

In the first paragraph, the author expresses his fear that his "new refuge", his new "intimate" place, might be destroyed by his own actions. It is instructive to examine the author's use of the metaphor of 'refuge', and its significance: the fact that he considers the woman for whom he has amorous feelings to be a 'refuge', and that he is afraid of 'destroying everything', shows that his fear refers to his trauma, since the possibility of destroying this new intimacy implicitly evokes the destruction of his home town, and therefore the rupture with what had previously been his 'intimate'.

Moreover, the fact that he is "ready to give everything" for his "new refuge" shows that the concept of "refuge" decisively defines his daily life; his new reality. This shows that he is not yet fully integrated into his new "outside"; he considers it a "refuge", but he doesn't use the expression "home" or other synonyms to describe it that would imply a real sense of rootedness. At this point in the story, he finds himself in the in-between, the threshold, that is this moment of his exile.

In the second paragraph, the unspoken, this "full void" of meaning, is made concrete in the writing through certain elements that refer to a sensory shift (the "sound of footsteps" that "produces an echo" refers, in fact, to hearing) onto which is grafted a metaphorical shift articulated around the verb "to lurk" - used to designate the fact of "hiding, concealing oneself in a propitious place, gathering one's body"<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, the metaphor of noise "lurking in the dark" conveys to the reader the sensation that "lurking" noises "haunt" the protagonist from the darkness of the bedroom, and that these noises will also be "part of [his] tomorrow". In other words, the noise, however hidden or lurking, is part of the future, which remains forever a prisoner of the noise of before, just as the "refugee" remains somewhat at the mercy of his past, sometimes noisy, memories. In this way, the fear of the future is metaphorically likened to the fear of never being able to get rid of the noisy echoes of the past that like to resurface in the dark.

We now turn to a final extract, in which the author finds himself at a party and unwittingly begins to reflect on what distinguishes his life as a refugee from the lives of the other guests:

These guests know nothing of the ruins in my memory [...] I can't tell them that this hand holding a beer held young men just before they died. It was in the most abandoned neighbourhoods in the world, besieged by the Assad regime's militias, where people lived without hospitals, without medicine, with many dead and very little humanity.

No, I'm not going to tell them, or anyone else. No amount of evocation will ever make up for the loss.<sup>38</sup>

We can see that the graphic process of verb negation abounds. Negation is "a universal cognitive, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic category, specific to all human languages"<sup>39</sup>, and its linguistic definition is subject to different interpretations. For the purposes of our analysis, however, we maintain that the negations in this extract, as linguistic tools, fulfil at least three functions that contribute to concretising the unspoken and the unspeakable in writing.

First of all, we detected an expressive or emotive function highlighted by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson - aimed at "a direct expression of the subject's attitude towards

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<sup>36</sup> Omar Youssef Souleimane, *op. cit.* p. 150.

<sup>37</sup> Larousse. "Se tapir", online *dictionary*: [https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/se\\_tapir/76664](https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/se_tapir/76664) [consulted on 25/07/2023]

<sup>38</sup> Omar Youssef Souleimane, *op. cit.* p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> Laurence R. Horn and Yasuhiko Kato, *Negation and polarity. Syntactic and semantic perspectives*, Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, in Charlotte Meisner, Aurélie Robert-Tissot and Elisabeth Stark, "L'absence et la présence du NE de négation", in *Encyclopédie Grammaticale du Français*, 2015, p. 1.



what he is talking about" and which "tends to give the impression of a certain emotion, real or feigned"<sup>40</sup> - through the decision not to tell others about his discomfort: "These guests know nothing about the ruins lodged in my memory". In this sentence, the guests' lack of knowledge refers to the pain that the protagonist is keeping from them.

Secondly, negation acts as a check on language, which runs counter to Jakobson's referential and expressive functions: "No evocation will ever compensate for loss". Language cannot fill the gaps.

The referential function "targets the referent, the context"<sup>41</sup>, i.e. describes what the sender is talking about, which makes it an extremely widely used function. Here, the protagonist questions the effectiveness, indeed the usefulness, of communication by saying that, even if he were to talk about what's causing him pain, it would be useless: talking about his traumatic experience won't give him back the "inside" he's lost.

Finally, in this extract, the negation also has a preterite function - "to pretend not to want to say what is nevertheless being said very clearly"<sup>42</sup> - in the expressions "I can't tell them" and "no, I'm not going to tell them". The protagonist doesn't say anything, he remains unspoken, silent, but suggests the importance of what he doesn't say. This function of preterition is thus linked to the expressive or emotional function mentioned earlier. Our hypothesis is that the protagonist prefers not to say anything in order to convey the intensity of the emotion behind what is left unsaid. In this way, he lets the reader know that he is alluding to a traumatic experience.

In addition to these graphic devices, the presence of a metaphor is just as interesting. In the first paragraph, the protagonist refers to the "ruins in my memory". These "ruins" symbolise the destruction of the "intimate" in his memories, a reference to the trauma he has suffered.

In any case, such allusions to memory, whether expressed through a metaphorical slip or more directly, are probably not random. Bergeron asserts that memory "makes it possible to fight against geographical, physical and mental deterritorialisation"<sup>43</sup>; the researcher presents memory as the only link (or one of the only links) that keeps the subject attached to his or her identity, to the lost 'intimate'.

To conclude our analysis of this third extract, we feel it is relevant to consider the literal meaning of the term "glissement", in addition to its figurative meaning, which we have already analysed on several occasions. In this case, we're talking about 'slippage' as a 'vibration'.

Fromilhague highlights three functions of figures of speech: an emotive function, a conative function aimed at "arousing the receiver's pathos" and a phatic function aimed at "(re)establishing contact with him"<sup>44</sup>. Consequently, since the authors' main aim in using figures of speech is to influence the reader, we hypothesise that their role is to ensure that the reader experiences, however briefly, the trauma of the narrator, who is also the refugee character. This is why we use the term "slippage" in the sense of "vibration": the figures of speech, by reflecting the life of the refugee character, could find an echo, have a resonance in the reader's reality.

We should point out that, in Souleimane's novel, these three extracts are found before a break. The first two are at the end of a scene, while the last appears at the end of a chapter.

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<sup>40</sup> Roman Jakobson, *Essais en linguistique générale*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1963, p. 191.

<sup>41</sup> Roman Jakobson, *op. cit.* p. 191.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977, p. 143.

<sup>43</sup> Jacqueline Bergeron, *op. cit.* p. 105.

<sup>44</sup> Catherine Fromilhague, *Les Figures de style*, Paris, 1995, p. 107.

In the case of the first two extracts, these cuts suddenly break the narration of these intimate moments of the protagonist's life to move on to the telling of another moment in his life. The cut at the end of the last extract, on the other hand, involves a change of point of view: whereas the protagonist refused to recount his experience to the guests at the party, in the following scene he decides to turn to the reader to recount these intimate memories that he had been keeping to himself.

These breaks between scenes or chapters also constitute a silence; a silence that both divides the narrator's experience into fragments and structures his story. In this case, silence is a means of writing for the author: it fulfils a function of fragmentation that challenges the linearity and continuity generally associated with the order of writing. In each of these fragments, various processes give form to the unspeakable through the representation of certain crucial moments in the narrator's life that have a special or particular meaning, transforming them into symbols of his past. Breaking down his past into symbols could help the narrator to better integrate his traumatic experience into his psyche, which in turn could allow him to consolidate and reconstruct his story.

The purpose of this study was to analyse three extracts from a novel, *Une chambre en exil*, which we believe falls under the heading of 'refugee literature': a collection of stories in which forced displacement is the main theme. Often, like the author, the protagonist-narrator of these stories has been granted the socio-legal status of 'refugee', symbolising an exile initiated by a persecuted person who has been 'forced' to settle in a new 'outside'.

This is the case of the protagonist of *Une chambre en exil* who, like Omar Youssef Souleimane, the author, was forced to leave his country, Syria, at the start of the civil war, because his ideology ran counter to that of the government.

Writing about the experience of forced exile constitutes an in-between, a threshold that lies between the perception of a person's destroyed 'inside' and his or her projection towards a new 'outside', an interstitial place of (re)construction and memory that allows the subject to confront a whole series of feelings buried deep within him or her: nostalgia, desire, the need for refuge, fear of destruction, fear of the future, distrust of others - or even of language.

Given the ineffable nature of these emotions, we postulate that the writing experience of forced displacement - for some authors, at least - cannot be understood without silence. Indeed, in *Une chambre en exil*, silence is not always an absence, a failure, but can be endowed with a specific expressive function, resonating with the words. This is what we have tried to show.

Through this 'curative' writing, combining words and silence, the author seeks to (re)construct and (re)appropriate her being by trying to integrate her traumatic experience with all her other human experiences, in order to 'rationalise' it.

What's more, the reader can accompany the narrator into the interstices of the earthquakes he has experienced. In Souleimane's work, the writing of silence is exercised through sensory and metaphorical shifts that can serve as triggers for the emergence, in the reader, of another form of shift that we have chosen to understand as 'vibration', in a shared space where the suffering of one (the narrator) awakens in the other (the reader) a quivering, a trembling.

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