

What the Body Withholds: Silence, Gesture, and Embodied Resistance in A Gesture Life and Never Let Me Go

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication in literary narratives functions as a system to convey messages that institutional and cultural structures prevent characters from expressing aloud. This paper examines how it functions in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) through the concept of embodied double-coding, defined here as the process by which characters appear to comply with dominant structures while simultaneously embedding subtle resistance through nonverbal communication, such as silence, gestures, and hesitations, thereby neither fully submitting to nor openly defying dominant structures. Using a qualitative comparative literary method, the study applies two theoretical frameworks: performativity theory and postcolonial subaltern criticism. This research places the frameworks in critical dialogue, especially where Butler's performativity and Spivak's subaltern silence produce interpretive tension, to generate a comprehensive reading of nonverbal communication in both texts. The findings reveal that, in both works, nonverbal communication reflects internal psychological states and serves as a signifier of cultural and historical backgrounds. In Lee's text, the protagonist utilizes his gestures and silence to depict his traumatic experiences within the context of imperial and colonial histories. In Ishiguro's narrative, the clones exhibit resignation to the social norms and expectations imposed on them through their bodily restraint and governed motion. This study argues that integrating nonverbal semiotics into literary analysis allows us to explore how characters express themselves in ways language alone cannot convey. It presents new insights into nonverbal communication across postcolonial and speculative fiction.

1. Introduction

In literary works, it is the dialogue between characters that often creates the narrative. However, just as important is the silence and the parts of the stories that remain unsaid. As Swiss philosopher Max Picard (1952) notes, "Silence contains everything within itself. It is not waiting for anything; it is always wholly present in itself and it completely fills out the space in which it appears.... Silence is not visible, and yet its existence is clearly apparent" (p. 17). Nonverbal communication, including silence and gestures, can also be significant in revealing humans' emotional and social realities in ways that transcend language. Lopez Gutiérrez and Arroyo Paniagua (2024) state that "silence is an integral part of...nonverbal communication and is often central to communication" (p. 2). In other words, silence in literary works highlights characters' feelings and their relationships among each other.

This study examines how Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) present moments of nonverbal communication, particularly through

silence and quiet gestures. In the process, it explores the meaning of those moments for the main characters. The protagonists, Franklin Hata and Kathy H., in both novels suffer from trauma, a sense of displacement, and the effects of institutional power. By tracing their silence, hesitations, and ritualistic behaviors, it is possible to analyze how nonverbal cues reveal deep cultural and psychological human experiences within postcolonial and diasporic contexts.

This paper introduces the concept of embodied double-coding, a term this study defines as the process where characters appear to comply with the social and cultural norms that constrain them through silence and controlled gestures, while simultaneously embedding subtle resistance within those same embodied acts. The concept explains how silence and gestures function simultaneously to express compliance and subtle resistance. It draws on Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity and Gayatri Spivak's (1988) framework of subaltern silence. Butler emphasizes individuals' ability to sustain their identities through repeated actions, whereas Spivak states that structural dominance can prevent individuals from speaking and expressing themselves. Embodied double-coding, here, examines the space between the two theories, as Franklin Hata and Kathy H. neither openly resist nor fully submit.

Many contemporary literary works recently address themes of trauma, identity, and memory. Researchers have sought to uncover the layers of these narratives and how they connect readers to the characters' unspoken experiences. Although these studies are crucial in exploring such themes and the use of silence and bodily gestures in both novels, there is still a critical gap within the literature in exploring the importance of nonverbal communication as an essential means of expression. No study has directly compared these two texts in relation to silence and nonverbal communication, nor have studies placed British speculative fiction and Asian American postcolonial narrative in critical dialogue through the theoretical framework used in this study. Thus, the significance of incorporating a study of nonverbal communication with Butler's performativity and Spivak's postcolonial subaltern theory fills the gap in the existing literature. This paper argues that silence and gesture in both novels function as a complex form of embodied double-coding, where characters appear to submit to dominant forces, while concealing underlying resistance. This argument cannot be adequately understood by analyzing each text separately or by relying on a single theoretical framework.

Accordingly, the study raises the following questions: How does silence in the two novels function as a narrative strategy in constructing the protagonists' identities? In what ways do gestures reveal the characters' cultural and postcolonial experiences? How do Butler's performativity and Spivak's subaltern silence theories generate a productive interpretive tension when applied comparatively across the two texts? Finally, how does the comparative analysis of the texts allow readers to gain a deeper understanding of the role of nonverbal communication in expressing trauma and displacement in different social contexts?

2. Literature Review

Understanding nonverbal communication across diverse psychological and cultural contexts deepens the readers' interpretation of literary works. Nonverbal communication encompasses "a diverse array of behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, body posture, eye movements, and proxemics." Such signals help readers understand characters' emotions and relationships as some "forms of expression are deeply influenced by cultural norms and social identities, leading to substantial variations in how they are interpreted and practiced across different societies" (Alhajjaj, Khairallah, Kandil, & El Awad, et al. 2025, p. 1154). In literary texts, nonverbal communication serves as a critical narrative device that enables authors to explore the complexity of their characters' psychology and cultural background despite the lack of words. Knapp, Hall, and Horgan (2013) argue that nonverbal communication plays a significant role in the communication between individuals and often carries more meaning than the language spoken (p. 1154). Hence, what we know about the characters' emotions and thoughts is conveyed through nonverbal cues. As Birdwhistell (1970)

affirms, "No body movement or expression is without meaning in the context in which it appears.... like other aspects of human behavior, body posture, movement and facial expression are patterned, and, thus, subject to systematic analysis" (p. 49). Silence, gestures, and embodied communication in narratives play a crucial role in delivering the authors' messages about social cues and emotional states of characters, allowing readers to gain insight into the complex identities of individuals and their cultural background in literary works.

Furthermore, literary works that focus on marginalized or traumatized characters often use silence to convey unspoken messages. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), the narrator's silence about her family's past in China reflects both the deep burden of trauma she carries and her deliberate refusal to disclose feelings. Her silence is a quiet form of resistance to the expectations of both Chinese and American cultures, while appearing to conform to them. A similar pattern appears in Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* (2000), where the characters' silence surrounding the loss of their child and homeland to the enemy conveys the weight of political displacement in ways that direct speech cannot express. These works by authors from different periods and cultures use silence as an alternative language allowing marginalized characters to express themselves and find a place among their community. "Silence in the text has a complex meaning. On one hand, silence shows the unspeakable experience that cannot be translated into words. On the other hand, it serves as resistance" (Heriyati, Sarumpaet, & Suprihatin, 2020, p. 168). Hence, authors often embed silence and gestures in narrative fiction to support characterization and theme development. They are a type of language that highlights the cultural background from which characters come and the difficulties they experience in their interactions with others. By recognizing silence as a form of language in these works, readers can analyze characters through their actions rather than their spoken words.

Literary authors theorize silence as a narrative device with structural and ethical functions. Elaine Scarry's influential account, *The Body in Pain* (1985), establishes the theoretical basis for reading bodily silence as a response to experiences that exceed spoken words. More recently, scholars working in the field of narrative unreliability have examined how strategic omission functions as a formal device in first-person fiction. Phelan's (2017) work on unreliable narration is particularly relevant for reading Kathy H.'s narration where her hesitations and omissions constitute what he calls "estranging unreliability" which distances the reader from the narrator's own self-understanding (p. 96). Ishiguro's fiction has attracted substantial scholarship on this narrative mode. Walkowitz (2007) argues that Ishiguro's colonized narrators produce a form of structural irony that operates through what is left unsaid. Similarly, in the context of Asian American literature, Wong (1993) identifies the importance of silence as a recurring formal and thematic strategy in which characters' inability to speak is part of the text's meaning. These literary-critical frameworks support and deepen the nonverbal communication analysis this paper undertakes.

Both works have drawn considerable critical attention from scholars who have examined their themes of trauma, identity, memory, and social marginalization. However, the role of silence and nonverbal communication in these novels remains relatively underexplored despite its importance in previous literary analyses. Most existing studies on *A Gesture Life* focus on the protagonist, Franklin Hata, his complex identity, and his struggle with internal guilt and cultural displacement. Kong (2011) discusses what Franklin endures and how the pressure of racism and postcolonial society impacts his identity. While these studies are valuable, they treat silence as a condition related to trauma, not as a means of communication. Klinké's (2018) study demonstrates how the body becomes a site of nonverbal communication influenced by historical and postcolonial memories, but it does not develop a framework for reading silence and gestures as structured resistance. Other studies of traumatic heteroglossia, such as Motuz's (2013), explore the relationship between silence and the influence of colonialism on Franklin's identity as an Asian American whose cultural and historical influence prevents him from

sharing details of his story. This study focuses on silence as a means of communication between Franklin and others around him since he relies heavily on actions and gestures to tell his story. Thus, his silence toward others is a way of protecting himself from conflicting cultural expectations and deepens his sense of isolation.

Through its calm, quiet narrative style, *Never Let Me Go* presents a storyworld where silence becomes an important part of the cloned protagonists' everyday lives. Many studies, such as Gill (2014), Gong (2021), and Waham (2023), explore how silence between the clones reflects the violence and oppression that exist within their community. Studies by Vichiensing (2017) and Xiao (2021) investigate the influence of the colonial system on the clones, stating that the colonial system disciplines the characters' bodies as well as their emotions, forcing them to comply with established norms. These studies interpret the clones' silence as evidence of their oppression and have not fully examined Kathy H.'s voice as a means of nonverbal communication, which this study argues. Her pauses, omissions, and moments of hesitation are a form of embodied storytelling that resists confession. When the clones whisper to each other and use gestures, they reveal that silence is a source of power for them. This silence in which the clones exist serves to protect them and challenge the authority that controls them.

Despite the significant contribution existing studies provide on silence in *A Gesture Life* and *Never Let Me Go*, no study has directly compared how silence and nonverbal communication function across these two texts. More specifically, no comparative study has examined how nonverbal communication simultaneously functions as a mode of compliance and resistance in both Lee's postcolonial diasporic setting and Ishiguro's bioethical speculative one, while employing Butler's performativity and Spivak's subaltern frameworks. This study examines both frameworks through a critical dialogue while highlighting the productive tensions between them. Butler's theory of performativity suggests that the repeated performance of certain acts, such as silence and gestures, establishes the individual's identity and grants them a degree of power. Spivak, in contrast, argues that subalterns cannot speak due to the structural and colonial elements that work against them and deny them the freedom of speech. The critical tension between these two theories provides a productive framework for understanding the role of silence in both texts and allows for the concept of embodied double-coding to emerge.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body" (p. xv). Thus, identity is produced through the performances of acts and rituals, including silence, rather than emerging from a fixed essence. Butler also discusses in her later work, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), that bodily comportment and performance are also performative practices. This notion is critical for this study, as it not only provides the theoretical basis for understanding the characters' silence, but also their body language, whether its stillness, controlled movement, or hesitation. Butler's theory is examined in relation to Franklin Hata, suggesting that his meticulous gestures and physical discipline are just as important as speech in establishing his identity.

Spivak's framework serves as the second foundational theory in this paper. Within her text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) Spivak argues that in the "context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" because the colonies do not recognize their utterances as meaningful (p. 83). Where Butler's framework grants agency through repetition, Spivak states that silence is not a means of self-expression; it is forced upon subalterns by the structures of their society. This explains why the clones in Ishiguro's narrative do not rebel. Their society does not allow them to voice their thoughts and feelings, so they remain unheard. Spivak's postcolonial framework also provides the historical context necessary to explain Franklin Hata's performative silence, which is shaped by Japanese imperialism, Korean displacement, and racial postwar America.

The critical tension between Butler and Spivak forms the foundation for this paper's argument. Butler's theory of performativity provides the means of understanding silence as an

act through which individuals construct their identities while negotiating their way in their society. In contrast, Spivak's framework views individuals' silence as the result of structural demands that force them to be silent. The combination of Butler and Spivak has analytical limits, which this study acknowledges. Butler may overemphasize individual agency within constrained conditions, while Spivak may understate the possibility of agency within oppressive systems. Embodied double-coding addresses this limit by suggesting that the silence of the protagonists is neither a choice nor an imposed condition, but somewhere in between. Consequently, neither novel fits within one theoretical framework; it is the comparison of the two theories that helps to define the extent of embodied double-coding, which is the theoretical and methodological contribution of this paper.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology to explore silence and nonverbal communication in the selected narratives. As a qualitative literary analysis this research is necessarily interpretive. Its validity is reinforced through the systematic application of Butler's and Spivak's frameworks to both texts, and through careful analysis of points where the frameworks produce contradictory interpretations rather than resolve into a single conclusion. As silence reveals much about the protagonists, the study combines careful readings of the novels with insights from performativity and postcolonial theory to analyze the psychological and social aspects of characters' silence and gestures.

A vital part of the methodology is the comparative analysis of the two novels. Through analyzing parallel examples, it will be possible to highlight shared and distinctive features of silence in two different cultures and existential situations. The comparative method in this study is not merely a parallel description but involves a contrastive analysis. It focuses on essential differences between the texts. It is methodologically justified to pair Lee's postcolonial work and Ishiguro's speculative fiction because placing these different genres in dialogue, rather than comparing two works within the same genre, allows this study to examine whether embodied double-coding can be applied to different modes of literary representation.

The primary data sources for this study are Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). They provide rich textual evidence of silence and nonverbal communication embedded within character interactions, narrative structure, and thematic development. Secondary sources include theoretical texts on communication and literary analysis, as well as essential works on Butler's performativity theory and Spivak's postcolonial subaltern theory. By employing these two frameworks in productive contradiction, the research analyzes passages from the two novels, focusing on exploring the significance of silence in people's lives. Franklin's silence is read primarily through Butler's performativity, while the clones' silence is read primarily through Spivak's subaltern criticism. Through close reading, the study focuses on the narrative voice, the words spoken, and symbolic acts. However, a primary limitation of this methodology is that the close reading of the selected passages from both texts does not present all moments of nonverbal communication; the passages selected are representative rather than comprehensive, and future studies could extend the analysis to other textual moments.

4. Discussion

The silence that Franklin Hata maintains in *A Gesture Life* (1999) stems from his mysterious role as a medic in World War II. During the war, Hata suffered from traumatic incidents that he could not share with others. "I learned to keep my face still, my hands careful and calm, even when inside I felt otherwise" (Lee, 1999, p. 92). His nervous manner, restrained gestures, and silence reveal what is too painful to say aloud. As a result of these traumatic experiences, he exhibits nervous behaviors and silence. This silence represents the unresolved

and unprocessed trauma of his role in the war. Hata's controlled gestures not only reflect his psychological struggle, but also create his social identity. Although he hides deep pain, his repeated actions and self-control make him appear as a respectable figure. Butler (1993), in *Bodies That Matter*, argues that the body is produced through repeated actions; consequently, Hata's silence and body gestures are not only an expression of his identity, but a practice to construct, maintain, and protect it as well.

Franklin struggles to find the right words to express his thoughts and feelings. This results from his "unmistakable sense of not fitting in" with his community (Lee, 1999, p. 19). While others around him are expressive in their interactions, he remains friendly, quiet, and serious to exhibit a favorable public image of himself while concealing his pain and loneliness. The pain he endures is so profound that he is repeatedly at a loss for words when interacting with his community, which indicates his weak sense of belonging. Franklin uses silence to preserve social boundaries and his own identity. In other words, his silence is one element of a series of acts that he performs to shape his persona. He plays a role to hide his past and uses silence to avoid uncomfortable social interactions with others and to maintain his relationships with them. Franklin's interpersonal relationships with others also reveal more about the powerful role of silence in his life. His adopted daughter, Sunny, often expresses her frustration with him and his silence, accusing him of making "a whole life out of gestures and politeness.... always having to be the ideal partner and colleague" (Lee, 1999, p. 94). Thus, silence and gestures between them manifest their pain and their inability to express their feelings to each other. Lee emphasizes that silence and restricted movements in trauma narratives symbolize the essence of suffering, which language alone cannot express. Saggese (2023) emphasizes that the movements and gestures that individuals make when interacting with others "are the silent language that permeates our daily interactions, shaping the nuances of our relationships and the dynamics of our communities" (p. 17). Thus, silence allows individuals to maintain boundaries and peace with others, but also serves to increase loneliness. Keeping some topics unspoken helps people connect, yet it strangely leads to more detachment.

According to Klieber (2021), silence within a conversation can reveal aspects of the participants, such as their consent, discomfort, and avoidance (p. 24). Franklin remains silent throughout his interactions with others and rarely initiates conversations. This strategic use of silence allows readers to draw their own conclusions. When reflecting on his past, he admits that it is "no secret that the past proves a most unstable mirror, typically too severe and flattering all at once, and never as truth-reflecting as people would like to believe" (Lee, 1999, p. 5). The fact that those around him accept his silence and do not mention his past indicates their silent acceptance to preserve peace. Unfortunately, this silence also prevents him from being close to others. As Bao (2023) explains, some individuals "choose to remain silent out of concern for their safety or to avoid potential risks in their interactions with others" (p. 6). Franklin reinforces his silence with his nonverbal gestures that carry several layers of meaning. His posture, gestures, and expressions demonstrate his self-restraint, his integration of two cultures, and his internal struggles. Mittelberg and Hinnell (2023) state that gestures are a basic and natural human communicative resource that can reveal to others the aspects of "how we experience our inner and outer world, express ourselves and understand others" (p. 204). Franklin's nonverbal communication is an alternative he depends on in his struggle in a world dominated by fragments of himself.

Applying Butler's framework of performativity here reveals that Franklin's silence is an active way of constructing the identity that he presents to others to be accepted. Butler's argument allows an extension of the analysis beyond Franklin's words to the meanings of his body signals, whereby Franklin's identity is shaped by his words, silence, and body composure. According to Spivak's framework, Franklin's performed identity is limited by cultural and racial structures. Hence, his silence is his choice as Butler's theory suggests, and the result of historical and social constraints as Spivak explains. This combination of interpretation is what embodied double-coding names.

Franklin feels alienated from both his place of origin and his current place of residence. Lee places Franklin's silence alongside the silence that society exhibits regarding the horrors of war crimes and their effects on victims. Because of society's silence and its expectations of others, Franklin becomes more isolated. All that he has ever wished for is "to be a part... of the massing, and that he passes through with something more than a life of gestures" (Lee, 1999, p. 299). In Lee's narrative, silence is a means of protection from the harsh reality and a force that magnifies feelings of loneliness. It obscures parts of life, yet it makes other aspects of existence more understandable, while affecting individuals in ways that transcend words. Through Franklin's silence and gestures, Lee urges readers to have a deeper understanding of the role of silence and nonverbal communication in the novel as it reflects on psychological, historical, and cultural forces that shape identities.

A similar role of silence and nonverbal communication exists within Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Through silence and nonverbal communication, the novel explores themes of identity, morality, and social control. Silence becomes a means of exhibiting the emotional isolation of the clones. Unlike Franklin's silence, which he employs as a means of protection, Kathy H.'s silence is the result of the constructed power of Hailsham, an institutional school, and thereby can be understood through the lens of Spivak's subaltern theory. The clones are raised as organ donors and are forced to silence their voices, thoughts, and feelings, giving more meaning to their silence than their speech. Kathy states: "our models were an irrelevance, a technical necessity for bringing us into the world" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 107). Their silence echoes their acceptance of their fate and their connection to each other, as they share a silent understanding of the life forced upon them. Spivak's framework allows for an understanding of the clones' silence and their willingness to endure their fate. It is the result of an institutional structure that forces them into complete submission with no hope of rebellion. Kathy's frequent silence and omission of critical parts of her story indicate the difficulty she and other clones face. "I began instead, more and more, to ask questions, if not out loud, at least within myself" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 62). Through such reflections, Ishiguro illustrates how silence is not only a sign of oppression but also a subtle form of communication among the clones.

Crucially, the narrative voice that Kathy employs in her story is itself a form of embodied storytelling. The pauses and hesitations in her narrative reflect the emotional and physical repression she faces. Statements like "I don't know" and "I'm not sure" deliberately withhold information, creating meaning through absence. Walkowitz (2007) notes Ishiguro often employs narrators who fail to recognize the significance of their own story, producing meaning through what they cannot say (p. 224). Consequently, Kathy's unreliable narrator reflects the structural silencing described in Spivak's framework. While Franklin controls his emotions and gestures in public, Kathy controls what to say and when through her first-person narration. This difference can be analyzed through the Butler–Spivak contradiction. Franklin's restraint is a performative control whereas Kathy's is a restrained control within a system that establishes her limits. However, through her narration of the events, she challenges Spivak's framework, as the act of telling constitutes a form of voice which Butler's performativity theory helps to register. In this way, both characters exhibit a form of embodied double-coding where characters comply with systems that demand silence, while simultaneously enacting covert resistance through nonverbal communication.

Silence also has a significant impact on the relationships among the clones themselves. Tommy, another student at Hailsham, has an interest in music that sets him apart from others, indicating that feeling strongly about something stands against the requirements of submission. While the clones fulfill their institutional expectations through their silence, their eye movements and touches convey their feelings of love, jealousy, regret, and hope. Ibrahim et al. (2022) emphasize that such nonverbal signs constitute a critical form of communication that sustains relationships when verbal expression is insufficient (p. 1845). Through Butler's

performativity framework, these interactions function as repeated acts that allow them to maintain and express their identities. Silence in Ishiguro's novel is an intentional means of survival within their society, influencing their relationships. As Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero (2023) note: "Language fails and silence acts as a force... when one confronts inexplicable events, emotional crises and traumas, the fallibility of memory, ambivalent feelings, paralyzing fears or the mysteries of the unknown" (p. 6). The silence between the clones has a meaningful presence in the story, influencing how the characters understand themselves and relate to others. By focusing on the silence among the clones and its meaning, Ishiguro allows readers to understand the experiences of the clones as they avoid discussing them.

Because of their strict regime, the clones cannot speak of their past or think of their future, and so they form mental images of their role and the world around them with clarity and sadness. Their silence and gestures are tools to convey their identities since their society dehumanizes them. Lopez Gutiérrez and Arroyo Paniagua (2024) point that many of the nonverbal communications of the clones form a rich semiotic system, which exhibits emotional and social cues that words alone cannot express. "These cues provide important insights into the speakers, their messages, and their intentions" (p. 3). In this way, silence sustains relationships and directs emotions into the body instead of erasing them. Hence, silence and gestures in *Never Let Me Go* are essential elements of the story, which serve to highlight the emotions and behaviors of the protagonist.

Both *A Gesture Life* and *Never Let Me Go* employ silence and nonverbal communication as tools of narrating the stories of the protagonists in both texts. Regardless of the time separating the settings of the two novels, whether during World War II or within an alternative future, the authors use silence and nonverbal communication to reflect characters' thoughts and feelings. Franklin in Lee's story uses silence repeatedly as a means of shaping his identity and determining how others perceive him. Ishiguro depicts Kathy's and the clones' silence as the result of an institutional structure that denies them a voice. The difference between silence within these texts reflects the contradiction between the frameworks of Butler and Spivak. Franklin's silence and repeated gestures align with Butler's performativity. His actions are constrained but not totally determined by social structures. Part of his silence is a personal decision as a form of self-preservation. Nevertheless, Kathy's narration, with its moments of silence and omissions, is a way of challenging the system, a resistance that Butler's theory explains. Therefore, neither novel fits completely within one separate framework. The comparison between them reveals this paper's contribution, which is to develop a comprehensive understanding of embodied double-coding.

Silence and nonverbal communication in both novels appear as a psychological response to the protagonists' trauma and internal conflict. In *A Gesture Life*, Franklin's silence indicates his experiences of guilt and detachment from his surroundings. His strict daily routine throughout the story suggests his attempts to avoid memories concerning his involvement in the abuse of Korean women during World War II. Furthermore, his avoidance of emotional interactions with others, especially his adopted daughter, indicates his reluctance to acknowledge his past. He states, "the idea entreats me once more, to wonder if something like love is forever victorious, truly conquering all, or if there are those who, like me, remain somehow whole and sovereign, still live unvanquished" (Lee, 1999, p. 215). The body functions as a site where cultural expectations are performed and painful memories are suppressed. His politeness, controlled movements, and formal gestures are all performative acts that, according to Butler's theory, shape his identity and make him socially acceptable. These same acts, according to Spivak's postcolonial framework, illustrate that his silence and body movements are not by choice but are survival mechanisms shaped by the effects of war and racial postwar America. Hence, silence and gestures become performances to avoid pain and confrontation. Ike, de Boer, Buwalda, and Kas (2020) explain that "avoidance of adverse and stressful situations can be considered an effective adaptive response, as further harm is

avoided" (p. 259). Because of the traumatic experiences that the protagonist remembers, he is unable to develop a solid sense of his own identity.

Similarly, in *Never Let Me Go*, the clones' silence becomes their way to communicate with others while suppressing their own emotions. They know the system will consume them once they fulfill their role as organ donors; thereby, Kathy's silence and pauses in her narration are indications of their deep sorrow. The silence of the clones results from the control of science, which disregards their identities as individual humans. Thus, "people did their best not to think about them" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 203). Harumi (2024) explains, "this self-directed use of silence also includes the facilitative use of non-verbal, non-vocal interactional resources to express their authentic inner voices" (p. 271). The nonverbal communication of the students at Hailsham exhibits repetitive and careful behaviors. It is understandable through Spivak's framework that Kathy and the rest of the students' inability to challenge the system and gain freedom reflects the structural silencing imposed by Hailsham, which made resistance impossible. Yet Kathy's first-person narration partly challenges Spivak's pessimism. By narrating her story, she expresses her feelings and thoughts within the system that controls her. This explains Butler's theory that resistance can emerge within dominant structures.

Franklin's silence in *A Gesture Life* is performative according to Butler's theory. He conceals his identity by remaining silent and carefully controlling his movements to adhere to postwar America's expectations. In contrast, the clones' silence in *Never Let Me Go* is imposed upon them as Spivak's framework illustrates. It is the product of a repressive regime that takes away their freedom of speech. At the same time, their silence and gestures are forms of resistance that allow them to face their harsh reality. Therefore, their silence is a symbol of survival, not submission. According to Drujon d'Astros and Morales (2024), "people in key positions can use silence, not as a form of oppressive power, but to protect a valued identity" (p. 14). Through their silence, the clones are making a statement instead of completely yielding to their institution. Both novels discuss the use of silence as a tool of creating and shaping the identities of their protagonists while dealing with a domineering authority.

In literary works, silence is a communicative tool that highlights loss, restraint, and survival despite the lack of words. As Elaine Scarry (1985) explains, body and emotional pain possess "language destroying capacity... to deconstruct the person's voice" (pp. 19–20). Silence connects characters' painful memories to their present while attempting to modify their identities. "Even when individuals do not speak, they can convey a great deal to others; sometimes a pause, the rhythm of a breath, or the absence of eye contact can represent significant cognitive and emotional processes" (Eylasov, 2026, para. 1). Hence, the characters' grief, fear, and aspiration surpass words. "According to theorists of autobiographical memory, the way we compose our life stories is closely related to the way we understand ourselves.... Thus, if a trauma memory is seen as a central turning point in our life story, it would also most likely be regarded as a central component of our personal identity" (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006, p. 221). The pain in both novels, which is left unspoken, is part of the protagonists' identity.

5. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of *A Gesture Life* and *Never Let Me Go* demonstrates that the protagonists' silence in the texts is not unintentional, but instead works as a form of language that emphasizes their experiences of trauma, identity, and resistance. In both novels, silence is the language through which the characters' experiences are narrated. Hence, silence and nonverbal communication give more meaning to the self and the world and express what language often cannot convey. The study highlights the necessity of reading beyond words in literary texts to understand characters' behavior and the social norms that govern them.

More specifically, the silence within these novels works as a form of embodied double-coding, which is defined earlier in the study as a process by which characters perform apparent compliance through silence and controlled gestures while simultaneously embedding subtle

resistance. The protagonists appear to comply with the systems that silence them, but simultaneously express resistance through silence itself. Interpreting the novels through Butler's frameworks of performativity and Spivak's subaltern silence, it becomes possible to argue that silence within the novels expresses both submission and resistance, whether it is performed or foreclosed. This theoretical interpretation and its critical analysis are the contributions of this paper.

Silence in both novels functions to shape identity and control feelings and thoughts in different circumstances. However, the novels incorporate silence in two different ways. Franklin's embodied double-coding is performative, reflecting Butler's theory as he repeats acts to practice self-restraint within a postcolonial structure, which Spivak's framework explains. In contrast, the clones' embodied double-coding is structural, referring to Spivak's theory, as the regime's system forces them into submission and silence. Still, Kathy's narration demonstrates a subtle form of resistance that can be explained through Butler's framework. This distinction deepens our understanding of the novels and highlights how silence functions across postcolonial and speculative fiction. Furthermore, by comparing the novels and interpreting silence within the frameworks of Butler's performativity and Spivak's subaltern silence, it becomes possible to fully understand the experiences of the protagonists and the role silence plays in shaping their identity.

Beyond these two novels, embodied double-coding has broader significance for literary critical studies. It allows for an understanding of silence beyond the assumption that it is either compliance or resistance. Instead of examining whether a character's silence is intentional or forced, embodied double-coding shows how silence in literature can embody both meanings simultaneously. This is especially applicable to literary trauma narratives, as silence, pauses, and hesitation are often used to convey experiences that cannot be expressed directly. Thus, silence here is not merely an absence; rather, embodied double-coding examines it as a form of expression. It also extends postcolonial criticism's engagement with Spivak's subaltern by suggesting that even those who are denied a voice can express meaning through nonverbal communication without relying on the power of words. Moreover, embodied double-coding can be applied to current debates about the function of silence and gestures, emphasizing that these embodied communication forms are not only signs of victimhood or resistance. Rather, they occupy a space in between, reflecting the different ways individuals negotiate social, cultural, and political constraints.

Future research can apply embodied double-coding to examine a wider range of literary texts and media to assess its usefulness for analysis. By comparing literary works from different genres and cultures, especially postcolonial, transitional, and speculative texts, it will be possible to determine whether embodied double-coding is specific to the historical settings of Lee and Ishiguro, or if it is a general form that can be applied to other literary backgrounds. Critical studies that examine different forms of oppression can also reveal how silence constitutes both compliance and resistance across different cultural and political conditions. Furthermore, future studies can examine whether embodied double-coding remains effective in films and visual adaptations that present nonverbal communication through gestures, facial expressions, and visual composition. Studies could also explore how digital forms of silence, such as ignoring messages or withholding reactions, reflect the forms of silent resistance discussed in this study. Ultimately, nonverbal communication should not be seen as secondary to language but rather as essential for creating and expressing deeper meanings.

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