

The Silent Finally Talk in Mike Bartlett's, *Not Talking*

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Mike Bartlett discusses many important social issues that touch people's lives. He has noticed that the twenty-first century is engrossed in silence as a contemporary problem between even close relationships. Therefore, he identifies and engages in this social phenomenon and engages to explore its complex nature, as well as its effects on human life in, *Not Talking* (2013; first published 2011). Drawing on the theories of silence and through the analysis of the play, the study exposes the plight of the silent characters, their endeavours to talk, as well as the differences between keeping silent and taking an action. It focuses on answering two questions: 1. What will life be when people abstain from talking? 2. Can the silent talk? Through the characters' four monologues, which overlapped with each other to deliver four messages, the study concludes the possibility of talking.

Key words: *silence, talk, theories of silence, Mike Bartlett, Not Talking..*

Introduction

In an interview by Thompson, Mike Bartlett stated: "I'm happy expressing my views on the world in my work" (2018, p. 3). Since the twenty-first century is occupied with silence despite globalisation, as well as social and intercultural communication — as he has seen — Bartlett pinpoints the dilemma of muted persons in his play, *Not Talking*. He embarks on investigating the question of silence and talk, and how it is problematic when a person abstains from talking, and the necessity of trying to break silence and initiate talk.

Not Talking (2013; first published 2011) was broadcast on BBC Radio in 2007 as a radio play and won the Imison and Tinniswood Awards (Lawson, 2018, p.1). It narrates the story of two couples: the old one, Lucy and James, and the young one, Amanda and Mike, who abstain from talking to each other and instead they talk directly to the audience. The old couple are unable to find a way to talk about three important matters that disturb them: their lost child,

James' decision to be a conscientious objector, and his love affair. The young couple are soldiers in a barracks whom, being subalterns, cannot speak about Amanda's rape by their superior soldiers.

In the play, Bartlett deliberately employs monologues instead of dialogues to emphasize the culture of silence in the play. According to Paulo Freire, monologues lead to silence. Contrary to the monologue, is the dialogue which is a form of communication: "[w]ithout dialogue there is no communication" (Freire, 1972, p. 65). Through monologues — which are interlocked and interweaved neatly — the characters uncover their memories and fears on the one hand, and test experiment with their ability to break silence and do action, on the other.

Literature Review

Various approaches and theories have emerged to define silence, its reasons, its positive and negative aspects, as well as its functions. It is no longer interpreted as just an absence of speech without meaning. Foucault (1978, p. 27) defined silence as "an element that functions alongside the things said". Dauenhauer (1980) explained that silence does not mean the absence of meaning; on the contrary, it is a positive notion. Further, Ephratt (2008, p. 1909) stated that (eloquent) silence is a way of talking because it does not refer to the speaker's silence or the listener's silence:

(Eloquent) silence, as a linguistic sign, conveys information in the referential function (zero-sign and passive constructions); it is an iconic affective way of expressing emotions (e.g., emptiness, intimacy) in the emotive function. In respect of the conative function, (eloquent) silence performs direct and indirect speech acts. . . . Silence is a means of maintaining contact and alliance in the phatic function. The various roles of silence in the metalinguistic function range from its being a discourse marker to reflecting the 'right to silence'.

There is a second wave of theorists who opine that silence has a negative function. Gould (2008) argued that when speakers use long meaningless pause, this would create awkwardness and tension. Sifianou (1997) also clarified that silence has negative connotations because talking about social matters is more desirable than keeping silent. Walker (1985) asserted that silence creates doubts. So, he is against the notion of thinking before speaking, because this leads to silence.

Whether positive or negative, different approaches have tackled silence. One of them is the social-psychological approach which connects silence with social and psychological features including personality, age, gender and class. It is shown that silence among middle-class people is more prevalent than among working class people (Scollon, 1985).

The psycholinguistic approach is the second approach according to which silence during speech mirrors the individual's decision-making processes and word choice. In other words, silence precedes words when they are difficult and unpredictable. Moreover, this approach is limited to spontaneous speeches that embed in narration and monologues (Zuo, 2002).

The third approach is the cross-cultural approach which has two views: the relativist and the universalist. While the first view emphasises that in using silence there are no universals, the second view asserts that there are certain common uses in silence despite differences (Jaworski, 1997).

In addition, there are other theorists and researchers who have recognised the significant value of silence and therefore, they have examined it in their works. One of the most important theories of silence is Baker's Theory of Silence (1955) which suggests that the process of communication can be completed only with the presence of two elements: speakers and hearers, and that there must be commonalities between the two. Therefore, for him, communication is a "reciprocal relationship between speaker and hearer" (p. 157). He highlighted that silence occurs when talking breaks down or when words are irrelevant. This theory divides silence into two types, and both are related with psychics: "one characterized by acute psychic disequilibrium and lack of reciprocal identification with a situational partner, the other marked by psychic ease and tranquillity, and involving close identification between speech partners" (p. 161).

International Relations Theory (IR) is another significant theory that defines silence as "a phenomenon associated with violence, and thus disempowerment and disenfranchisement" (Dingli, 2015, p. 3). It is also associated with corporeal and epistemic violence and women are classified within the groups affected by silence (Dingli, 2015, p. 1). IR theorists determine that silence is a phenomenon with two aspects which are both connected with violence: a structural and cultural violence which is "the act of silencing a group's voice in practice or in discourse; and an indication of their presence (the exclusion of the voice of a group from the political process or from discourse" (Dingli, 2015, p. 4).

Dąmbska remarked that silence is brilliantly used in literature through two ways: direct and indirect. In the direct way, she means that the writer uses silence as a behaviour or a way of expression, whereas in the indirect way, silence takes different forms; understatement, pause or omission. In drama, silence is uniquely used as a way of artistic expression (2016, p.317).

Mike Bartlett

Mike Bartlett (born in 1980) is a prolific contemporary British playwright and screenwriter who has swiftly become a multi-award winning writer. His obsession with the view that "[i]f there's any world and art form that should be fully open and reflect all society, it's theatre" (Bartlett, 2018, p. 6) made him found the Apathists, a group of five friends. They used to meet monthly to write short plays at Battersea's Theatre 503 after graduating from Leeds University (Hoby, 2009, p. 2).

Like many of his generation, Bartlett has been affected by the social, economic and political conflicts in contemporary life which are reflected in his dramatic works. His plays for radio and theatre and his adaptations of ancient works are concerned with finding opportunities to reform community. Morgan (2018, p. 2) lists the merits of Bartlett's writing that it comprises: "[s]killful, subtle dialogue. Fully realised characters. Fathoms-deep emotional intelligence. Difficult topics [which are] handled deftly". His drama is a masterful texture of interrelated narratives; *Not Talking* is no exception.

The Question of Silence and Talk

Williams (2018, p. 1) described Bartlett's *Not Talking* as "a powerful look at the culture of silence". It is skilfully and prettily weaved about how silence constrains the life of two sets of partners — Lucy and James, and Amanda and Mark — whose voices, desires, needs, and rights are muted. Therefore, they fail to communicate with each other and instead they talk directly to the audience. In Freire's term, dialogue is "a requirement of human nature" (2000, p. 92). So, dialogue is a central constitution of preserving human life. According to Bakhtin, the dialogue is no less important than life itself: "[l]ife by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth" (1984, p. 293). The nature of human relationships can be understood only through dialogue. The four characters in the play reveal their lifestyles, attitudes, memories and past, through the four monologues overlapping with one another to deliver four messages.

The play opens with a piece of music played by Lucy, introducing the first example of silence. Bahr (1925, pp. 78-79) regards a person who plays music as one "who does not hear the world, he hears himself, his soul sounds within himself". When she wants to talk, Lucy uses music and lets the tunes speak in her stead. Music, in her case, leads to silence and isolation. Instead of talking directly to her husband, Lucy talks to the audience about her agonies. Her silence dates back to the death of her baby many years before, whose loss still etches deep in her mind because she could not speak to James about it and neither could he:

LUCY: I try not to remember the day when it happened. When we sat, stunned and still, his hand on mine, both of us cry. Not speaking.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 22)

No one dares to speak about this event so as not to hurt their feelings. In this case, silence is their means to protect their love and marriage.

Similarly, Mark and Amanda prefer silence to talk. They are soldiers in the barracks and all the soldiers are talking with each other except Mark, who is too shy by nature, as revealed by Amanda when she narrates the story of her relationship with Mark to the audience. Shyness is another basic reason for silence:

AMANDA. I see him looking at me. He was really shy. Like he wanted to come and talk to me but didn't know how . . .

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 27)

Whatever the reasons are, Bartlett displays that the two pairs are mistaken, and that silence does not bridge the gap between them as evidenced in this monologue:

JAMES: Not being able to speak.

LUCY: Not talking. Just looking into the distance.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 23)

The gap between James and Lucy is getting wider when Lucy refuses to talk with James about his decision to be a conscientious objector:

JAMES: When I told Lucy what I was going to do, she made it quite clear she didn't want to talk about it.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 31)

To avoid talking about this topic, she asks if he wants a cup of tea. Lucy gives him an indirect hint to express her rejection of his decision, but James could not take the hint. Instead of repeating the same question, he asks if she still loves him. He is afraid that his decision may affect her passion towards him and then damage their relationship. Though she affirms her devotion to him, he sees the opposite:

JAMES: Her eyes flickered for a moment. But there was no passion.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 32)

Baker (1955, p. 157) stipulates that unless there should be identification between the speaker and the hearer, the communication will not be effective:

Unless the hearer can find some basis for identifying himself with what the speaker is saying, the speaker is saying, the speaker will be able to communicate little, whether he is trying to influence the hearer emotionally or cognitively or both.

There is a lack of identification between Lucy and James that leads to silence. The result of silence is that not only are love and passion fading little by little, but the distance between the couple is also increasing. Liversedge (2018, p. 1) affirms that silence "drives worlds apart, even if the two people are standing inches from each other"; a case that applies to the relationship between Lucy and James.

Not only does Lucy abstain from talking with James, but so does Susan, James's mistress who does not tell James that she is pregnant. She had the opportunity to save her relationship with him, but her silence destroys everything:

LUCY: Because she was pregnant. James didn't know, yet.
(Bartlett, 2013, p. 41)

Picard (1988, p. 6) points to the destructive nature of silence when he defines it as a force beyond the limit and control of humans. Silence cannot simply mean to stop talking. It is "like a death, for we are left on our own, faced with a new beginning and so we are afraid". Susan could not help being silent. It does not only separate her from James, but it also deprives James of his daughter Beatrice, his granddaughter Sarah, and his great grandchildren Mark, Lily and Steven. The whole family is a victim of Susan's silence.

This spiritual separation is felt by Mark and Amanda when Amanda is raped by the Sergeant. Through this event, Bartlett depicts the nature of life in the barracks and the relations between superiors and soldiers. Gramsci uses the term 'subaltern' to describe the state of those who are under the command of the dominant classes (1999, p. 207) and Spivak's argument that "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988, p. 308) applies perfectly well to the situation of Mark and Amanda:

AMANDA: Someone spat in my ear and said. He said 'You're not going to talk about this . . . Who are you going to tell? . . . You going to tell an officer? . . . I'm an officer. So who are you going to tell? Be brave. Shut up.'

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 39)

Baker (1955, pp. 157-158) considered fear, rage, acute tensions or anxiety and hatred among the basic elements of silence because in such situations, a person cannot identify or acclimate himself/herself to the situation to be able to express what s/he feels and so s/he keeps silent. Consequently, due to fear and shame, Amanda does not speak about her rape:

AMANDA: If I don't want to tell anyone, it's up to me, right?
(Bartlett, 2013, p. 36)

Not only Amanda, but even Mark who witnesses everything, is also forced to keep silent because he is a powerless subaltern who must obey the Sergeant's order.

Everybody in the barrack notices that Amanda is distracted, and she is becoming more like a body without a soul, but no one can help her because she is silent all the time. Her change of disposition is a mystery to all except Mark, who cannot speak either because his voice is muted too:

MARK: I could've told someone. I watched it all happen too. I was proof.
But I had orders. Not to speak about it.
(Bartlett, 2013, p. 46)

Bartlett points out how subalternity is a massive element of silence that separates Mark and Amanda. For Amanda, life is a mere piece of music:

AMANDA: I had orders not to talk. So I wasn't talking. To anyone. I just
Played piano.
(Bartlett, 2013, p. 45)

Similar to Lucy's adoration of the piano, Amanda also finds her voice in music that screams and cries out her pains. Music plays a crucial part in reflecting the passive force of silence. It becomes a contemporary means of communication in the twenty-first century. Lucy escapes into music and makes sure she is playing music every day at seven o'clock until James becomes aware of the meanings of the songs she plays:

LUCY: I made sure that every day, when he came home at seven o'clock, I
was playing. And because I never used to play before, and because I did it
every day now, he became aware that I knew exactly what he was up to,
he knew what it meant.
(Bartlett, 2013, p. 38)

In this case, Lucy's music enables James to understand that the sounds he hears do not come from the piano but from Lucy. Jorgensen (2008, p. 135) extends the definition of music "to include imagined as well as heard sounds and silences"; James is conscious of what Lucy's music means.

Bartlett reveals that the absence of the right person to whom one can talk is another effective reason for silence. Amanda cannot talk to Mark about her rape, but she could have opened up to his mother, if the latter had only asked her:

AMANDA: But I wanted her to take me aside from Mark and ask really why was I so quiet. . . . You can tell me. I won't tell anyone. It's alright. Come here. Tell me all about it. What happened?

Who did?

When?

But she didn't. She couldn't, so I just played instead.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 37)

Amanda's desire to speak about her calamity — despite fear, shame and risk, which is demonstrated through her wish to reveal everything to Mark's mother — is a sign that even those who are silent do not necessarily like silence and may want to speak. She finds in the mother, the appropriate person who can understand her, as well as feel her agonies. Unfortunately, the mother does not ask, and Amanda does not speak:

AMANDA: I still hadn't told anyone.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 37)

The culture of silence does not only ruin the relationships of the four characters, but also eliminates their existence. Fanon, (1986, p. 17) makes a connection between existence and talking: "to speak is to exist"; and this is the first message Bartlett delivers in this play. Silence crushes people's ability to communicate and to exist. Adaway (n.d., p. 2) also emphasised this negative function of silence: "[s]ilence kills. It kills our ideas. It kills our energy. It kills our relationships. It kills our communities. It kills our connections and it kills our humanity".

The Need for Talking

Lawrence remarks that *Not Talking* is "about the dangers of being in a silencing environment and then the liberating feeling of escaping it" (2018, p. 2). Lucy is the first character who frees herself from the bounds of silence when she readily speaks to Susan, the moment she

feels that Susan is the suitable person. In so doing, Lucy breaks her silence and puts an end to her suffering:

LUCY: She said she would leave us alone if that was what I wanted. I said yes. Please do. Never contact either of us again.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 42)

It is the first sign of changing the culture of silence. Lucy cannot tell her husband who is supposed to be closer to her than anyone in the world but tells Susan to leave him alone. For Lucy, Susan is the right type of person that she can talk to. Because Susan is a woman, she can sense how Lucy feels more than James. Hansen attributes women's desire to speak with women to the feeling of security (Dingli, p. 9). She makes a connection between silence and lack of security. As a matter of compensation, Lucy gives the music to Susan:

LUCY: I want to give you this, I said. And I gave her the music. The music I had played.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 42)

This piece of music is played by Lucy and now it is given to Susan. The music was passed on from one generation to another until it reached Amanda through Sarah, Mark's mother. Bartlett conveniently connects the three women who suffer from the same feelings of separation and silence with this music just as he connects the two couples together through the relationship between Mark, James's great grandson, and Amanda.

Bartlett makes it clear that it is not only Lucy who finally dares to speak with Susan to save her relationship with James, but also James. Only sixty years later, when James finds Susan's photograph accidentally, he decides to break his silence and reveal his love affair:

JAMES: Sixty years later, finding the photograph of Susan in my study, I wanted to see her again. So I went downstairs. Lucy was standing looking out the window at next door took a moment, and finally told her the truth. That I had an affair before I went to Finland.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 42)

As James breaks his silence and speaks frankly, Lucy also decides to speak with him as she did with Susan. She tells him that she already knew everything, but she kept quiet to save her marriage. Here, silence is utilised as a means of survival. Dingli observes that for some people, silence may be interpreted and understood as one of "the different conceptions of the Good Life" (14); Lucy has set an example in this play. Now Lucy reveals everything,

including even Susan's pregnancy, which leaves James in a state of a shock. Between fantasy and reality, James hurries to Susan's house not only speaking, but also taking action.

At Susan's house, James discovers that Susan died in 1994 and that she has a daughter who also died in 1996, leaving a daughter Sarah who is married and has a daughter Lily, and two sons Steve and Mark. James is convinced that talking is better than silence and therefore, he decides to not be silent anymore. His next step is to go to Mark in the barracks, hoping to reunite with his family.

The meeting between James and Mark is a turning point in the latter's life that makes him no longer unwilling to talk and communicate. At first, James urges Mark to break his silence and speak, but Mark is still afraid of speaking. James points out the necessity of talking in comparison with silence which separates people:

JAMES: I wanted to make him realise that there is nothing worse than not talking. That by not talking you lose someone. You drift.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 53)

James, who has recently realised that silence can provide an escape from problems or hardships and that talking can solve problems and settle matters, intends to deliver this message to Mark; and this is the second message noted in this play. This point is asserted by Adaway (n.d., p. 3): "Giving voice to problems save us. They save our businesses, our institutions and they save our lives".

In the middle of this vortex, Mark realizes "the horror of his silence in the face of Amanda's rape" (Williams, 2018, p. 2) and so he decides to break his silence and to talk to James:

MARK: 'She was raped by someone I know. And a Sergeant was watching, and holding her down' . . . I just know. Everyone does. These things get around.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 54)

Marks talks bitterly about his inability to help Amanda. He wishes he could have stopped the rapists, but he is a subaltern:

JAMES: What do you wish you had done when you saw them raping her?

MARK: Beat them, shot them in the head, stopped them doing it to her. I could have, if I'd . . . if I'd. I'd kill them. I'd kill them to stop them.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 54)

This is the first time Mark speaks honestly and fearlessly. Bartlett clarified that talking paves the way for actions. Mark finally realises that he must offer support to Amanda, instead of keeping silent:

MARK: I remember realising that maybe he was right. All I needed to do was to sit with her. Just be a friend for a bit.

(Bartlett, 2013, pp. 55-56)

Mark takes a challenge step as he leaves fears and silence behind to go to the court complaining against Amanda's rapists. By this, he frees himself from subalternity.

It is strange that Bartlett employs music to bring Amanda and James together and become a reason to free her as well from her subalternity. James is stopped by Amanda's music which sounds like that which Lucy plays. He wants to know what that music means and learn how Lucy feels while playing it. At this point, Amanda observes that she is not the only one who is suffering from hardship and silence:

AMANDA: It's not a protest.
I just didn't speak.
To anyone. Played piano instead.
This music Mark's mum gave me.
It's . . . bitter, gloomy, beautiful
sometimes.
Heartbreaking.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 48)

Music is an element the three silent women have in common. Holly Williams (2018, p. 1) demonstrated that "the women use music – so often an emotional outlet . . . – when they struggle to express shame, or fear, or hurt". It is their means of communication as well as of expressing depression and disappointment. When they find that there is no one to talk to, they resort to music to speak on their behalf. Bartlett asserts that music plays a massive part in spreading silence among the desperate people. In this play, it has a peculiar function; as it is a means of communication in certain situations, it is also a means of silence in others. When Lucy and Amanda find their solace in music, they abstain from talking. Talking about music enables Amanda to take a bold step:

JAMES: Then come and get tea somewhere else. Maybe we could leave the barracks. Maybe you can tell me what's the matter. Mark said you might want to talk.

AMANDA: Thank you. But I can't leave. It's not allowed.

JAMES: I drove in here. You don't have to stay. It might be better if you just left. Maybe you could hide in the back of the car.

AMANDA: I don't know why I trusted him. But we started to walk towards his car.

(Bartlett, 2013, pp. 62-63)

Her desire to talk is stronger than that of silence which overcomes her fears and shyness. Amanda violates military orders and leaves the barracks with James, simply because she wants to talk. Contrary to Spivak's "the subaltern can't speak", Mark and Amanda as subalterns finally speak. Bartlett confirms peoples' need for talking to each other despite hard circumstances because some matters cannot be settled with silence. Leaving the barracks symbolises Amanda's taking action to break silence, as well as her freedom from subalternity:

AMANDA: The night he got me out of the barracks, we drove for two hours before we stopped, just to be careful. We then had tea in a motorway service station, and after a while, I told him everything. It was suddenly easy to speak.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 65)

Eventually, Amanda talks to James about her rape to find out that talking is better than silence; and this is the third message Bartlett intends to convey. In this regard, Morgan (2018, p. 1) points out that the playwright revealed that *Not Talking* promoted the notion that "it is always better to discuss trauma than keep it to ourselves". In the same vein, James also talks about his private life, the nature of his life with Lucy, his relationship with Susan, and even about war:

AMANDA: In return, he told me all about his wife, and Susan, and the war. By the end of that night, when the police arrived, it was like we'd known each other for ages. We drank tea. We listened to his music in the car.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 65)

Music haunts the atmosphere of the play from the beginning to its end, but when it stops, Bartlett announces the end of silence and the beginning of talking:

FX: the piano music fades to silent.

We talked.

(Bartlett, 2013, p. 65)

Adaway (n.d., p. 3) advocates that the "[c]ulture of silence can be changed. We can change it . . . by creating brave spaces for folks to speak a whole lot of truth". By the end of the play, as the music stops and the silent characters talk, Bartlett proves how it is easy to change the



culture of silence which dominates the atmosphere of the twenty first century; and this is his fourth message.

Conclusion

In light of analysing Bartlett's *Not talking*, it is evidently clear that the characters seek to speak. They rebel against silence and endeavour to acquire the power to talk. James, Lucy, Mike and Amanda are preys to silence, but they eventually break their silence and hence they provide a fundamental counter to the silencing real people.

James and Lucy are victims of their memories and live in the past. Whenever they want to talk, they cannot, thinking that they rescue their relationships. They do not know that abstaining from talking may distance them from each other. Mike and Amanda embody the subaltern identity which is defined by quiet. They are not allowed to speak and if they speak against all odds, they would face tragic consequences. At last, they all realise that their desire to speak defeats silence. Their affairs are amended only after they break their silence and start to communicate.

Bartlett makes a genuine endeavour to reshape the way in which twenty-first century people view the complex nature of silence by affirming that the impossible can be converted into the possible. Silence is harmful and it is possible to escape from an environment of silence and understand that matters can be settled by silence. The belief that abstaining from talking saves relations and establishes "Good Life" has been proved to be wrong in this play. Therefore, *Not talking* ends with the four characters breaking their silence to finally talk.



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