



*The
Silence
We Eat*

Oyindamola

THE
SILENCE
WE
EAT

Oyindamola

STRESS WARNING

This book contains material relating to domestic violence, sexual assault, harassment, eating disorders, miscarriage, bullying, and trauma in no particular order, which may be triggering to victims and survivors.

This is a work of fiction.

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Cover art and design by Morenike Olusanya

*For women whose
voices have been
consumed by silence.*

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PROEM

With the rise of social movements like the #MeToo movement, which aims to allow sexual abuse victims to speak their truths, many writers and non-writers hold the specious assumption that women do not have voices. There is another thought: that women have voices but do not have the courage to use them. Therefore, we have activists and advocates who shove themselves in the mouth of female victims and survivors to speak and make commentaries without having a full grasp of what the victims' experiences are, be it domestic abuse, bullying or sexual assault.

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Additionally, we have a society that prioritizes the public perspective of these victims or survivors' lives, rather than giving room for the victims and survivors to express their own individual experiences. In some cases, to satisfy our own eagerness for progress, we are quick to bandage sorrow, pain, silence, and shame with the title: survivor and we impatiently dismiss the needs of women who are victims. *The Silence We Eat* reveals how, it is one thing to sympathize with victims, while it is another to empathize with them.

The Silence We Eat provides a unique and fresh perspective by focusing on the victim's thoughts, silence, and shame. It allows readers to understand and feel the impact of their perceptions, words, and actions on women who have fallen victim of these unfortunate circumstances and survivors who have healed or are in the process of healing.

Many women are presented through stages of an unnamed but constant female character's

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life from childhood through adulthood. *The Silence We Eat* explores the themes of love, mental and psychological health, religion, relationships, and parenthood while simultaneously touching the sensitive topics of bullying, rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, and trauma.

The Silence We Eat is written as a mixture of poetry and prose that impacts even the creatives to realize that art is not a pure and single form. Short stories can be elaborate forms of poetry while poetry can be summarized forms of short stories. In *The Silence We Eat* readers will find a skilled and smooth mixture of quotes, poetry, poetic prose, and short stories, which is rarely found in books with themes focused on women's issues.

Notably, *The Silence We Eat* caters differently to the needs of women in our communities. My goal is not to speak for another woman but to acknowledge her silence, shame, voice, and to be present through her trauma and

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healing process. With this book, I am saying to a young girl or a woman out there that:

I hear you even when you do not speak. I see you even when you choose to hide as a result of fear or shame. I understand you when words fail to express your feelings. I am patient with you when you need me to be. I am open to being vulnerable enough to sympathize and empathize with you in your journey. I am moving with and for you, when you are ready.

The quote on the back cover of *The Silence We Eat* states:

Eating Silence always give the illusion that we are full.

I believe that if we are genuinely breaking the culture of silence, we need to pay attention and listen to the silence, voices, and narratives of, and from, women who are victims and survivors. When we jump to conclusions with limited perceptions of women's experiences and hug their stages, we unconsciously

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contribute to the culture of feeding women's silence with a façade of being full.

While writing *The Silence We Eat*, I read a series of books including *Hunger* by Roxanne Gay, *Rebirth* by Juliana Olayode, and *The Mother of All Questions* by Rebecca Solnit. However, a quote from Rebecca Solnit's book stood out to me the most. In the chapter titled *The History of Silence*, on page 18, she writes:

“Silence is what allows people to suffer without recourse, what allows hypocrisies and lies to grow and flourish, crimes to go unpunished. If our voices are essential aspects of our humanity, to be rendered voiceless is to be dehumanized or excluded from one's humanity. And the history of silence is central to women's history.”

With *The Silence We Eat*, I intend to support the rehumanization of our womanhood, while informing all to do the same.

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*This silence enveloped
invitations to sing
eulogies at her grave.*

THE INVITATION

Since the last time he hit her, her mind has become a battleground of unusual thoughts. One minute, she is admiring everything and the other minute, she is jumping off a bridge, screaming, as the pressure of the air caresses her face. Her clothes are parting ways and her body is plunging into the river beneath the bridge. She never drowns. She swims to the river banks and finds her way to the top of the bridge again.

These days, she says that as she moves,
her body feels
like heavy steels,

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from loose thin
threads, dangling
making melodious sounds at life's grooves.

She says that her knees have the feeling
of two wooden sticks rubbing
against rough edges
and unsmooth surfaces.

And her hips sway,
alternating the pressure on each side
it feels like their strength has gone to hide,
as her control over them has withered away.

The rosary hanging on her neck with a cross
absent of Christ's body loses itself underneath
her blouse. She prays to it every day just like
the priest does. I refuse to wear mine.

I remember one of the nights that we all
gathered to pray in the living room. It was my
mother's turn to pray and as she did, my father
and I in loud unified voices chorused *Amen!*
She prayed for the protection of our finances
and the new car that our neighbor bought. She

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prayed that *God should take the fishes in father's belly that made him drink all day long.* That was how the devil received an invitation to participate in our prayers.

By the time she completed that sentence, my father, still holding a bottle of beer in his left palm, struck her face with his right palm. I sat still with my eyes firmly shut because the priest always instructs that *no eyes open while praying.*

The next Sunday, after the church service, my mother and I went to the priest's office for a *brief meeting* as she said we would do when we walked out of the auditorium.

The meeting lasted for about 2 hours because she would not stop crying.

He has done it again. She said, with a teary voice and sobs between her syllables. *He-ha-has-done-it-it again.* She fumbled her hands through her bag to find a napkin for her face. Her eyes were a swollen red. The left side of

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her cheek where my father struck was covered with lies and her cascading tears slowly revealed the truth.

She dabbed her eyes and the mascara from her eyelashes scared her cheeks. She blinked to push back her tears and gasped between words to catch her breath.

When the priest spoke, he mentioned how true love prevails, emphasizing that she needs to be patient and *pray more*. His coarse voice with thick Nigerian accent swept through my ears violently.

When the meeting was over, the priest escorted us out of his office and bade us goodbye. He waved and said, *may the Lord's peace be with you*.

The voices from the prayer sessions that Sunday night was louder. I said my prayers and asked for forgiveness so that we could be happier. I dangled my small feet above the ground and occasionally peeped through the

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spaces of my little fingers.

When it was my mother's turn to pray, she became silent. The room was quiet for about two minutes and I could hear the whistling of breaths sneaking in and out of our nostrils.

Then she said, *In Jesus name, we have prayed.* It was the first time she prayed like that. I said a firm *Amen!* My father did not say amen to finish the prayer with me.

Stuttering through his drunkenness, he yelled, *What-what-is that su-su-pposed to mean?*

She did not respond to him. She stood up and lifted me from the dining chair into her arms. She walked to my room, laid me on the bed and drew the blue blanket that was rolled beneath my feet, upward, to cover my shoulders. She kissed my forehead and turned off the light bulbs in my room before going to her room.

In the middle of the night, I heard my mother

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screaming. I gently climbed down from my bed, walked out of my room and proceeded quietly down the hallway.

The closer I got to her room, the louder her screams were. The door to her room was partially open with a blue curtain made from batik covering the entrance. I knelt by the door and peeped through the curtain. I saw my father hovering over her like a hungry lion on a prey. He was swinging his arms all over her body. The movements of their bodies looked like shadow puppetry against the wall. My mother coughed as she continued screaming and begging. I pushed a corner of the curtain very slowly to the left to get a clearer view.

I saw her mouth dripping blood mixed with saliva. Her eyes were swollen and they looked like the size of my small fists. Her black hair strands were scattered all over, on the bed and the floor. She gasped for breath as her hands fumbled in the air while attempting to catch my father's palms.

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Suddenly, he grabbed her shoulders and tossed her on the floor like a bag of trash. The sound of her body slamming against the floor caught me off guard and I gasped.

My father climbed off the bed and slowly moved toward the curtain where I was kneeling.

The shadow of his huge figure slowly built against the blue curtain. I turned away and ran as fast as my feet could move, toward my room. My footsteps sounded like two palms clapping in the church and my heart beat rapidly.

I was out of breath as I jumped on my bed. I pulled the blanket up to my shoulders, just like my mother did before she left for her room that night. I shut my eyes very tightly and tried not to breathe as hard, even though my nostrils failed me.

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*We teach women that
their silence is godly,
shows humility and
that it connotes
respect while we teach
men that the absence
of their voices is
disrespect and
weakness.*

*There is no respect in
stripping women of
their humanization
and voices.*

THINGS I HEAR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

(An Excerpt From *To Bee A Honey*)

Unlike other nights there were no clashing, no breaking, or screaming. This night was solemn and brave. He did not come home drunk and she knew well that he had his strength.

Last Sunday at midnight, he returned home staggering through the entrance door, whistling a church hymn. She silently watched him walk to the bedroom, then sink in their bed like a piece of wood.

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When he woke up on Monday morning, all hell broke loose. It was almost 10:00 am and he was late for work. He jumped right off the bed. Rubbing his aching head stung by alcohol, he walked toward the kitchen. She was always there.

At her sight, his speech started slow, blaming her for his lateness but when she paid him no mind, he found a balance to mutter straight words. He moved closer to her and with his teeth clenched like his tight fist he muttered, *Did you not hear me?*

She stood still and as she opened her mouth to reply, he grabbed her by the neck. The steel utensil she was using to cook slipped from her right hand. Its clashing sound got lost in the noise from him hitting her body against the wall again.

Once satisfied, like he would let a glass cup slip from his drunk fingers at midnight, he made her body slip from his hands. Blood spilled from her mouth, her lower lip,

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quivering, was split open. I would have rescued her even if I hadn't the power to, but the last time I intervened while he was beating her, she yelled at me. She said,

Go away and stay in your room or daddy could hit you too.

This Sunday night, he didn't come home drunk. He was sober from losing his job because he had too many queries about being late. Mommy had packed our luggage and as soon as he entered the house, she started speaking. She did not wait for him to apologize or kiss her like he always did when he was sober. His kisses made her change her mind the other six times she had packed our luggage.

Her grip of my palms got stronger as she spoke. In some way, I felt as though I gave her the courage I was too little to have.

She said,

I spent so much time in loving you and trying to fix you that I almost missed out on myself. All the rooms I should have filled in my mind

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have your name hung on their doors. My body looks like the rainbow, my eye, purple from your blows, my healing wrists, blue from iodine and my heart, still red and fresh because you lack the intuition to love it. I grew and broke myself for you. Lost too many pieces, some between your fingers that hit me, some stuck between your teeth that kissed me and your voice that says "but baby I am sorry" as much as the times your hands lashed me. You say sorry and you treat me as though love needs curing too. If love is supposed to be a pinch of how you treat me, I'll rather let your love for me be the night and I; the day.

That was the last time I ever saw him.

A TABLE BEFORE ME

As a woman, I did not prepare myself
for this long to not serve me first.

I will not present myself on a table
for your hungry ego while I feed on
the crumbs of what you think of me.

I deserve myself and I am filled
with all the satisfaction
I can get from loving and having myself first.

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*A little plucking here
and there is what
makes a tree naked of
its fruits.*

FOR SOME OF US

For some of us, the school meant more than education. It meant escaping home and being away from the burdens that our young minds could not bear at home.

For some of us, it was the other way round. Going home meant escaping from the realities that we were too afraid to face at school. It meant not having to see the bully's face the next morning, not having to look at the classmates we were not friends with, and not having to walk in hallways and passages with our knees feeling like two magnets trying to connect.

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Some of us did not even think about these transitions because either way, they made no meaning to us. Neither home nor school was a savior, so all we did was hide. We got smaller and smaller until we were not so visible enough to be teased. Where we hid may not have been clean, safe, or appropriate but it accepted us more than everywhere or everyone else did. Where we hid got called names a lot: attention seeking, stupid, depressed, lonely, attached, meaningless, sad, angry, and weak. It was hard to determine if these names were right or if we just wanted meaning so bad that we accepted anything that came our way.

Some of us searched for alternatives to provide belonging. Sometimes, it was finding love or what we thought to be love that may not have been right. It was sitting behind in classrooms when school was over; palms weaved together with our lover's.

This alternative had consequences. It meant losing ourselves and having pieces of ourselves shed in classrooms, stuck on the lips of those

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who gossiped about us, and coating the canes that whipped us when we were found guilty of loving at a wrong age.

For some of us, it was all about surviving the moments because we were told that school was not forever. But is that true?

For some of us, these moments cut through our skins too deep and no matter how far we went, the blood trails marked our footsteps. Our nightmares, insomnia, therapy sessions, and regrets make it easy for us to drown again and feel what we hope to survive.

We wish surviving means wiping these unwanted memories. We wish surviving means not having to write this someday.

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*This silence is a
shapeshifter.*

*One day it is the prey
seeking safety and
another day it is the
jungle aiding the
predator's evil.*

I POUR

My skin like dirt caught up in your nails,
I scream, yell, fret as my strength fails.

My body like wine drunk to your groans,
you twist, swirl, twine, call God with moans.

My waist and silk, no longer feel like mine,
the clock and my head tick,
tock, is it too dark for God to see?

Silence dawns upon me and my tears cry.
You pour, gasp, and sleep.

In strength, I try but my spirit is now dry
and everything tastes sour.

My body, stiff, struck,
I feel like a living
soul in a dead body stuck,
like clouds in the sky's coffin.

My body looks like war's mist
and I am defeat.
It looks like a feast
that I have been excluded from eating.

SHAME

Because of shame, I became skinny
mourning a soul that was not dead.

I stuffed all the filthy words that I knew
down my throat and waited
for my voice to choke on it.

I danced rhythmically to silence.
I hit my head against the wall
and waited for the pain
to prove that I was alive.

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*You created
circumstances that
made me overstay my
welcome in my mind.*

*At some point, all I
wanted to do was get
out of all the places
that were supposed to
be home for my sanity.*

*I wanted to get out of
my body, my heart,
and my head. I wanted
to get out of all the
places you touched
even if it would cost
my life.*

THE FALL

This body moves around me
like a paper wrapping to a gift.
It sways to the calling of the wind.
I lean forward, sideways,
and with a little staggering to the back.
I find my balance.

My shoulder draped
with thick clothing
absorbs the season.

It is the fall.
There are plenty leaves on the ground.
They cover the pavement,
and it is almost invisible.
I am almost invisible.

The man that I once fell in love with
tells me that if this world
were a game of hide and seek,
I would win.
He said that I have become so good at hiding
that even I can't find myself.

It is the fall.
It is the withering of my love
from the tree of my body.

THE AUTOPSY

What will they find when they do an autopsy
on my mind?

The names of the men whom my shame won't
reveal?

Silence? Or emptiness?

Or the coffins of pain and anger in which I
have already been buried?

One or many of these things I have written?

Tell me, what will they find?

How deep will they need to dig?

How will they stitch me up?

A hush here or there?

Incisions of curses and names through my ears
so that their words can pierce through easily?

As if I already didn't say that to myself...

Why don't you try something else?

A shame or two, to add to tons I already have?

Check my neck, I already adorned them there.

A touch or two like my body's never known?

This body matured by hands of strangers in
the ways that my mind was never prepared for.

THE MUSE

This is how I bee while disguised as honey,
this is my voice clothed in silence
finding ways to undress,
and to unravel,
but I have known and seen
that in this world,
except a woman is a thing for muse,
no one wants to see her nakedness.

THE BODY

I drink water and somehow,
the coldness of water running
down my throat
and sinking into my empty stomach
satisfies me more than this life itself.
...or is it the death of it?

I hear my stomach ministering its hunger
to the congregation of my body
but today, god is not here.

My wrists are draped with the name tags of my
illnesses. These thin strips of papers are joined at each
other's ends in a circular motion. They make my body
look like rooms and I am becoming a place where
sane people do not visit, let alone live in.

My mouth with little flesh on it holds tight to my jaws.
My thin and dry lips expose my yellow teeth.
My teeth look big now.
Everything looks big now.

This world now translates
itself differently to me.

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*I stuffed all my
insecurities and shame
in silent prayers and
hoped that your amen
would not be a trigger.*

14 COMMANDMENTS

¹Because I am a woman, who is supposed to be strong for everyone else. ²Because I am a child that hasn't lived enough to experience real pain. ³Because there are people, who don't even have the chance to live. ⁴Because I am a Nigerian and depression is a white man's spell. ⁵Because things are smaller than my mind makes them seem. ⁶Because there are people, who will pay to have what I have. ⁷Because it could have been worse and this is not that bad. ⁸Because I am an ingrate for being depressed. ⁹Because I look too happy to be depressed. ¹⁰Because I am too pretty to be depressed. ¹¹Because we all go through things. ¹²Because depression is not real. ¹³Because it is the devil's work. ¹⁴Because it is a sin.

I want to make this a poem.
I want to make a muse out of my pain.

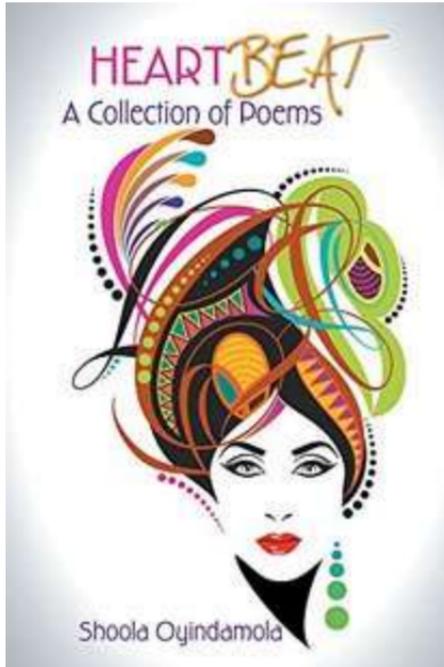
I want to make this beautiful
but it feels like another grave
adorned with fresh flowers.

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Thank you for coming.

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PRAISE FOR HEARTBEAT



In this intriguing debut, Oyin has mirrored the horror and beauty of life. She is one who is not afraid to express her genuine feelings, no matter how unconventional. She has captured the pain, sadness, pleasure, joy, nostalgia, depression and love which fills the common human heart.

- **Kanyinsola Olorunnisola**
Author of
In My Country We're All Crossdressers

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PRAISE FOR TO BEE A HONEY



This collection proves how poetry's scope isn't limited to heart or soul but can interest aesthetics, mind, and critical conscience as well. Yes, you'll find feelings and even doubts, frailties, and pains, inevitable in any honest soul digging. But the Author's poetry is imbued with such a deep, lucid, untamable analysis of the mechanisms behind our way to be, whether as individuals or as elements of bonds and society, to provide a challenging and thought-provoking reading experience on many levels.

- Daniele Bergamini
Author of
Chants for Love

PRAISE FOR THE SILENCE WE EAT

The Silence We Eat is a poetic-prose that is not subtle in its telling. **Oyindamola Shoola** has once again skillfully and effortlessly given a voice to the silent stories of many women; the story of places we have walked and our body has survived; the trajectory of silence and how it leads us home – finding our voices. She has shown us that often silence is deafening, detaching, choking, empty, and fading but then, it becomes finding, rediscovering, healing and wholeness. **Oyindamola Shoola**, with this one, has proved she is not about to stop being loud with her writings anytime soon. Overall, *The Silence We Eat* is a book I wouldn't have had written in any other way. It's a celebration of our body, strength, survival, and growth as women. For me, it says *silence is how we learn to become loud and loud is how we become free. Silence is how we transition to becoming.*

- **Ebukun Gbemisola Ogunyemi**
(Ibukunwrites)

THE AUTHOR



Oyindamola Shoola is a writer, book reviewer, feminist, and blogger. She is also the Co-founder of Spring Literary Movement, a non-profit organization dedicated to curating, revitalizing, and transforming the New Nigerian Generation in writing and literature. She is the author of *Heartbeat* and *To Bee a Honey*.

In 2017, she was named one of Nigerian Writers Award (NWA) most influential writer under the age of 40.

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Purchase Details

The Silence We Eat is currently available for pre-order on amazon kindle only.

On October 1, 2018, it will officially be released through the following platforms:

Okadabooks - E-Book

Amazon – Kindle & Paperback

Createspace - Paperback

Roving Heights (Nigeria) – Paperback

Comments/Inquiries

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