

## Poetic Silence and Aesthetic Disruption in Clifton Gachagua's *Madman at Kilifi*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how Clifton Gachagua's *Madman at Kilifi* employs poetic silence and fragmented form to represent psychological trauma in postcolonial Kenya. The collection defies conventional lyric coherence, accentuating minimalism, ellipsis, and syntactic rupture to represent the fractured interiority of its speaker. The disjointed structure and sparse language of Gachagua's work mirror the emotional disorientation and epistemic instability that mark postcolonial disillusionment, symptomatic of the emotional and intellectual dislocation of urban alienation, memory loss and unresolved personal and collective histories. Instead of representing trauma as a narratable event, the poems perform trauma as an ongoing state, as a condition that interrupts temporal continuity and emotional presence. This study draws on trauma theory and postcolonial aesthetics to argue that Gachagua's aesthetic disruption is both a means of resisting and a mode of representation. The silence in the poems is not merely the space, but a space of meaning, signifying the end of language on the cusp of internal and societal collapse. *Madman at Kilifi's* poetic minimalism constitutes a unique act of intervention in contemporary Kenyan poetry, foregrounding affective disintegration and epistemological uncertainty. Ultimately, the collection forces the reader to comprehend trauma not through exposition but through the rub of language and form's fragmentation.

*Keywords:* Aesthetic disruption, Clifton Gachagua, poetic silence, postcolonial Kenya, trauma

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### INTRODUCTION

Kenya's post-independence history is a story of unfulfilled promise, upheaval and aspiration. The newly independent nation, heralded as a site of progress and democratic potential, emerged out of the violence of British colonialism

(Nasong'o, 2024). However, complete liberation did not follow upon independence in 1963; decades of authoritarian rule, political repression and uneven socio-economic development followed. Exclusionary politics were perpetuated by successive regimes, which created ethnic divisions and weaponised silence via censorship, detention and intimidation (Gohdes, 2024; Kisiangani, 2021). This history of political repression and enforced quietude through systemic silence produced a culture in which trauma was rarely articulated directly, instead sedimenting itself in fractured memory, affective withdrawal, and silences that continue to shape Kenyan expressive forms. The scope of this legacy propagates collective trauma, not only in the political sphere but also in the lived experience of ordinary Kenyans. However, this trauma is still embedded in memory, identity and language and, generally, arises in fragmented and evasive forms; not least in the country's evolving literary landscape. Contemporary Kenyan poetry has increasingly become a site where this unassimilated trauma is registered not through overt political narration, but through formal disruption, reticence, and affective opacity (Anake, 2024). The tensions are manifested in contemporary Kenyan poetry, which moves away from explicit political commentary toward more introspective, formally innovative utterances of pain and detachment. Clifton Gachagua's *Madman at Kilifi*, an arrestingly brave debut collection, represents one of the most striking illustrations of this trend:

it takes leave of conventional narrative forms in favour of ambiguity, fragmentation and silence. This study takes *Madman at Kilifi* as its primary text to examine how poetic silence, fragmentation, and minimalist form operate as aesthetic strategies for articulating psychological and historical trauma in postcolonial Kenya. The minimalism and erratic syntax in Gachagua's poems are accompanied by a persistent refusal to declare meaning outright (Adelokun, 2021). It is the poetic persona who is psychologically weighed down by the disillusionment of postcolonial history, emotionally numbed, withdrawn, and linguistically constrained. Gachagua resists the grand narrative of progress in the new Kenya by fragmenting that concept and exposing the fractured interiority of the postcolonial subject through these formal and affective strategies (Ifowodo, 2010). This article argues that trauma in *Madman at Kilifi* is not narrated as recoverable content but performed through poetic form. Gachagua's silences, syntactic fractures, and refusal of narrative coherence enact trauma as an ongoing condition rather than a concluded event, positioning aesthetic disruption as both a mode of representation and a form of resistance.

Rather than offering an extended theoretical exposition at the outset, this study foregrounds form as the primary site through which trauma becomes legible in Gachagua's poetry. This disjointed form and sparse diction are not accidental stylistic orientations. It is closely connected with the representation of the unnamed

psychological trauma, which, as today's trauma theorists maintain, is inherently incoherent. Dagleish and Brewin (2007) argue that trauma hardly ever occurs as a single, closed event, but instead comes belatedly in broken-up, involuntary recollections. Trauma disrupts the cognitive and linguistic faculties necessary for linear storytelling, leading to fractured narratives that destabilise form (Jena & Samantray, 2021). Formal construction enacts this disruption in Gachagua's poetry. Instead of explaining trauma, the collection's refusal of narrative progression, its erratic voice shifts, and its fractured imagery reproduce it in the very structure of the poems (Osimen et al, 2025). Aesthetic decisions of such kind thus locate *Madman at Kilifi* within the broader coordinates of postcolonial poetics. Almost by definition, silence is imposed upon many postcolonial contexts, particularly where state violence and cultural erasure have been endemic; nevertheless, it is also a strategic choice. Amateshe (1979) points out that, in the Kenyan literary tradition, poets used literature to openly divide power and side with what was socially correct. Gachagua's retreat to poetic silence trenches the generational and stylistic division. He does not engage in direct protest; his mode of protest is an affective refusal: to provide clarity, to bring closure, or even to be coherent (Nyongesa, 2024).

However, silence and fragmented installation pervade Gachagua's work, thereby bringing into focus the epistemological crisis, or the question of alternative knowledge, that lies at the heart

of postcolonial experience. According to Gruber (2024), postcolonial experience is characterised by a fractured temporality, in which historical trauma persists unresolved, and the present becomes a prolonged suspension. This temporal disturbance is reflected in Gachagua's poetry. His poems hover in a class of uprooted time and place. They frequently induce feelings of numbness, amnesia, or disembodiment, which seem to imply that the speaker's person is confined within a psychic sphere created by unassimilated history and stagnant emotion. The sparse, opaque language amplifies the atmosphere of suspension, reflecting the experience of living under the weight of collective silence and unacknowledged trauma. One of the features of Gachagua's poetic style is that he does not need narrative logic to make a point. The poems are not plot-driven, nor do they advance an argument; instead, they develop organically through associative imagery and distorted minds. However, instead, they play on the reader's expectations, yet to achieve this, they (the readers) overpower narrative cognition by demanding a different mode of engagement, a different way of working with the text, a way that prioritises affect over appreciation, sensation over meaning. It takes the reader beneath it as an experience rather than leading them through what the poet experienced. This recreation of disorientation is in effect a recreation of someone infested with trauma and of someone living in a world that works in no recognisable way, in a world where there is no air for breath, there is no time, and the

only socially occulted trauma is the tyranny. However, Gachagua's unwillingness to actually speak about his pain may read like a comment on the lack of capacity in Kenyan society to respond to pain.

*Madman at Kilifi* is thus a representational and critical poem. Symbolic of the speaker's emotional fragmentation is the situation itself, which the speaker does not hesitate to critique, as well as the cultural and political systems that led to this fragmentation. The work of Gachagua is so necessary in a country that is wrestling with the long shadow of colonialism, betrayal of the ideals of independence, and is underpinned by state-sanctioned ethnic violence and repression. His silence, expressed through poetic utterance, must not be mistaken for either indifference or detachment. However, it reminds us that there are things that do not find expression in words, things that create scars that last for a while. Furthermore, the study explores how Gachagua's minimalist aesthetics and structural breaks capture the psychological break characterising postcolonial situations. The anthology explores the deployment of poetic form as an encounter with trauma, rather than its description, and asserts that silence is a site of critical engagement. The analysis of fragmentation, indeterminacy, and suicidal narrative closure in *Madman at Kilifi* establishes this work as an archive of emotional dissonance. It rejects dominant models of postcolonial literary representation that apply to this text. Gachagua's voice is not strong, but vulnerable to the gaps that language can leave in his verse.

Trauma theory is employed here not as a universal explanatory model but as a critical lens for understanding how poetic form registers psychological rupture within a specific postcolonial context (Asiedu, 2024). The intersection of psychoanalytic theory and literary trauma studies, especially Freud's initial insights and Caruth's literary elaborations, is woven into the reading of Clifton Gachagua's *Madman at Kilifi*. As a framework for comprehension, trauma theory illuminates how the residues of psychic and historical violence are manifest in language, silence and aesthetic form. The thematisation of trauma in postcolonial Kenya, characterised by political disillusionment and sociohistorical fracture, is structurally enacted in the poetic text. A traumatic experience for Freud is an event that overcomes the psyche and later comes back in compulsive repetitions. Freud defines trauma as any experience that cannot be integrated into the individual's conscious narrative of the self, and trauma is typically expressed in symptoms, dreams or else in silence. Gachagua's voice mirrors the Freudian structure. The expression of the emotional is deferred or withheld, in practice and, in repetition, the speaker is caught in affective dislocation, where speech is possible only in fragments. The same could be said of the deferral here, in its correspondence with Freud's model of trauma as an unassimilated excess that comes back through indirect channels.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Kirmayer (2016), trauma interrupts the linearity of memory and

narrative, making it unequally fragmentary, recursive and often hidden. Literature, then, becomes a crucial site of dealing with trauma, he notes, because it can formally represent the discontinuities and repetitions that characterise traumatic remembrance. However, much trauma theory, including Kermayer's formulation, emerges from Euro-American psychoanalytic traditions that conceptualise trauma primarily as a singular event that later returns in memory. Within this framework, trauma is not merely remembered; it recurs, it makes its way into the present through affective dislocation and narrative fragmentation (Onwuka et al., 2019).

The study departs from a purely event-based understanding of trauma by situating it within the prolonged historical and political condition of postcolonial Kenya. Gachagua's *Madman at Kilifi* exemplifies a rejection of linear, page-turning narrative progression, which refuses to embrace minimal, cryptic, and fragmentary utterances as a turning process of coherent narrative progression. Trauma is not narrated as an event in the poems. Instead, it is an atmosphere where the reader is invited into the affective and linguistic disruptions of the traumatised subject. In psychoanalysis and trauma studies, silence is more than just an absence of speech (Ilogho et al., 2020). However, such a formulation risks oversimplifying silence when applied to African postcolonial texts, where silence may function not only as psychic absence but also as historical inheritance and political condition. It usually means repression, a psychic mechanism by which what is an unbearable truth is

ousted from the consciousness. Silence is not quite the right word in *Madman at Kilifi*. There are poems consisting of sparsely placed lines with long white spaces between. Some are begun or ended suddenly, as if they are the breaking off of one line of thought or have left language behind. However, these poetic silences point not only towards trauma repression, but towards the unutterable nature of this experience within conventional language. In other words, the speaker not only refuses to speak, but also refuses to speak. He stands in silence, at the threshold between speech and truth, which is, truth.

Exceptionally, when constrained by the postcolonial condition, the dynamic becomes even more charged. In postcolonial theory, the subject is usually distinguished in terms of fracture, hybridity and historical dislocation. Forms of knowledge, speech and representation were imposed on the colonial experience, which still haunt postcolonial identities. A crisis of subjectivity arises from the silencing of indigenous languages, the distortion of memory and the imposition of foreign cultural scripts. Karkaba (2010) explains that this postcolonial self-inhabits a splintered space defined by fragmentation, hybridity, contradiction, and dislocation, in which identity is constantly negotiated rather than fixed. Gachagua's poetic persona personifies this condition. It not only alienates the speaker from the nation but also from himself. He drifts on stage, passing through sensations, memories, and images that refuse synthesis, enacting what might be called postcolonial melancholia.

The silence in this instance has political and aesthetic meaning. It becomes at once a symptom of repression and a strategy of resistance (Mezzalana et al, 2023). Gachagua's refusal to offer narrative closure, his parenthetical suspension of grammar, and his diction that borders on minimalism work to destabilise the reader's expectations and reflect the displacement of his readers' experience of living with an unspoken historical pain. Silence here explicitly resists the normative pressures to articulate trauma, to intelligible language or to translate pain into a legible form. Through this process of speech, they do not casually disseminate the experience, but rather preserve the integrity of fragmentation, indicating that specific experiences, usually manifestations of political betrayal or historical violence, cannot be fully spoken.

Gachagua's work reveals how aesthetic disruption not only comes as a formal innovation but also as a psychological and political gesture, hence the convergence of psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory. Not only are the fractured lines, disordered syntax and elliptical structure a representation of a distressed mind. As a poetics of rupture, they make silence a place for memory, resistance and ethical concern. Instead, *Madman at Kilifi* shows trauma in this way. Trauma thus felt, structurally and affectively, through the choking reader's desire for clarity and resolution. Trauma in *Madman at Kilifi* is therefore neither explained nor resolved; it is structurally and affectively felt through the reader's encounter with absence, disruption, and silence.

This study contributes to scholarship by bridging trauma theory and postcolonial literary analysis in a way that highlights the formal enactment of historical and psychological rupture. While much existing research applies trauma theory to individual or event-based experiences, this study demonstrates how postcolonial poetry, exemplified by Gachagua's *Madman at Kilifi*, mobilises form itself to embody collective and historical trauma. It extends the scope of trauma studies beyond Euro-American psychoanalytic paradigms, showing how structural and aesthetic choices can carry political, ethical, and mnemonic significance. By situating trauma within the prolonged postcolonial condition of Kenya, the research illuminates how poetic form becomes both a medium of memory and a site of resistance, offering a methodological and theoretical framework for analysing the intersection of aesthetics, history, and affect in African literature.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive-critical design, using close reading as its primary method. Close reading is particularly suited to examining silence, fragmentation, and minimalism, which operate at the level of form and require careful attention to microtextual features. The analysis focuses on a purposively selected set of sixteen poems from *Madman at Kilifi*, chosen to represent a range of formal disruption, psychological rupture,

and postcolonial disillusionment, ensuring that each text provides material relevant to trauma and memory. The study applies trauma theory and postcolonial aesthetics to analyse formal and linguistic features such as enjambment, ellipsis, white space, and fractured syntax. Trauma theory offers a framework for understanding psychic rupture, belatedness, and the non-integration of experience, while postcolonial aesthetics situates these disruptions within historical conditions of colonial violence and post-independence disillusionment. Formal features are examined as enactments of psychological and historical disturbance rather than as stylistic ornamentation. Analysis emphasises how poems enact trauma through structural disruption rather than represent it through linear narration.

This study extends existing scholarship by grounding the analysis in trauma studies, subaltern studies, and African literary criticism. It demonstrates how Kenyan postcolonial poetry mobilises form as a site of trauma, memory, and resistance, and positions poetic silence and syntactic disruption as systematic tools for reading the psychological and sociohistorical residues of postcolonial experience. The contribution of this study lies in showing how Gachagua's poetry makes form itself a medium for registering trauma, memory, and resistance, establishing poetic silence and syntactic disruption as analytical tools for interpreting both the psychological and political dimensions of postcolonial experience.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Fragmentation, Absences, and the Unspeakable

Clifton Gachagua's *Madman at Kilifi* constructs trauma through an architecture of gaps and silences that render suffering not as narrative disclosure but as affective atmosphere, textual rupture, and formal disturbance. Rather than offering trauma as something that can be recounted or resolved, the collection repeatedly situates it in moments of suspension—where syntax breaks down, images refuse completion, and meaning stalls. Fragmentation thus operates not merely as a thematic concern but as a governing poetic logic. Lines are pared down to their barest elements, images appear briefly and then vanish, and the poems resist narrative continuity or explanatory progression. Trauma emerges not in what the speaker explains but in what the poems structurally withhold.

This aesthetic is especially visible in Gachagua's reliance on white space and truncated syntax. Across the collection, the speaker frequently halts mid-thought or presents only partial utterances, producing poems that feel interrupted or unfinished. These breaks are not accidental. They enact moments of cognitive or emotional collapse, where language proves insufficient to carry experience forward. Absence, in this context, does not function as a simple lack of content but as a marker of what cannot be articulated. As trauma theorists note, psychic rupture often resurfaces through fragmentation, repetition, and temporal disturbance rather

than through linear recall (De Bruyn, 2014). Gachagua's poems formally perform this condition by denying narrative sequence and emotional exposition, allowing rupture itself to organise the reader's encounter with the text.

The poem "Reunion" offers a particularly clear example of how this fragmentation operates at the level of lineation and imagery rather than theme alone. The sequence "my mother's face. / a field. / a hand that does not return" is composed entirely of isolated noun phrases, each terminated by a full stop. The absence of verbs eliminates action, causality, or temporal movement, leaving only static fragments of perception. These phrases read less like memories consciously recalled than like mnemonic shards that surface without context or explanation. The maternal figure, the landscape, and the absent hand never converge into a unified scene or narrative moment. Instead, they remain suspended, refusing synthesis.

Line breaks in "Reunion" function as cognitive interruptions. Each break forces a pause precisely where meaning might otherwise cohere, compelling the reader to linger in uncertainty. The white space between the lines visually intensifies this disjunction, enacting the emotional distance between memory and comprehension. What emerges is not a recollection shaped by reflective consciousness but a series of arrested impressions, suggestive of trauma's resistance to narrative integration. The poem thus produces a temporal dislocation in which past and present collapse into isolated moments that cannot be ordered or resolved.

This strategy recurs throughout *Madman at Kilifi*. In several poems, Gachagua allows silence to function as a mode of expression in its own right. Statements trail off, images are presented without context, and emotional cues are deliberately withheld. These silences are not empty; they are charged with affective weight. The reader is made to feel the pressure of what remains unspoken rather than being guided toward interpretation. In this way, Gachagua reclaims poetic silence as a legitimate register of testimony, aligning with trauma theorists who argue that silence itself can bear witness to suffering that exceeds the limits of language (Tercero, 2024).

Importantly, this poetics of fragmentation does not only register personal or psychological pain. It also gestures toward a broader socio-political condition. The refusal of closure and coherence mirrors a national context in which historical violence and political betrayal remain unresolved. The broken syntax and suspended imagery echo a cultural landscape shaped by suppressed memory and deferred justice in post-independence Kenya (Mati, 2020). Just as individual trauma resists narrative completion, so too does the postcolonial nation remain marked by unfinished histories and unacknowledged wounds. Gachagua's aesthetic, then, becomes a reflection of this condition. His poems do not seek to repair fragmentation or fill in silence. Instead, they insist on inhabiting rupture as a formal and ethical stance. By foregrounding absence, disjunction, and incompleteness at the level

of line, syntax, and white space, *Madman at Kilifi* positions trauma not as something that can be narrated into coherence but as something that must be formally endured.

### **The Figure of the Madman as Metaphor of Disrupted National Psyche**

The title *Madman at Kilifi* introduces madness not merely as a clinical diagnosis but as a figurative framework through which both personal and national disorder are apprehended. The madman is not a singular figure of private suffering nor a mere symbolic abstraction; rather, he emerges as a fragmented consciousness shaped by systemic instability and historical disillusionment. This portrayal allows Gachagua to bridge the spaces between communal and personal trauma, suggesting that madness need not be seen solely as an individual affliction, but as a response to larger societal breakdowns. Throughout African literature, madness has often functioned as a metaphor to depict the psychological and ethical consequences of colonialism and its failures, from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critiques of postcolonial governance to Ayi Kwei Armah's portrayal of a fragmented post-independence Ghana. In Gachagua's work, however, madness deviates from prophetic or revolutionary roles; instead, it becomes a fragmented mode of perception that reflects a broken, unstable reality.

This instability is most evident in Gachagua's formal choices. In poems such as "*A Slow Boat to China*," madness is registered through abrupt shifts in tone and form. For

example, Gachagua writes, "The trip begins in a landlocked country with a navy / and old sea captains" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 2). The language starts with a grounded, almost absurd specificity—placing the speaker in a geographically ambiguous world. Yet as the poem continues, it becomes clear that the speaker's perception is fractured, shifting between images of a "slow boat to China" and disjointed references to "Brutus" and "henna" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 3). These shifts—from calm reflection to erratic agitation—construct a consciousness incapable of coherence. The madman in Gachagua's work does not merely represent an individual breakdown, but a mode of perception, one that distorts and makes unreliable the very fabric of everyday experience.

This disjunction becomes even clearer in "*Reunion*," where fragmentation operates at the level of both syntax and imagery. The poem's structure, "my mother's face. / a field. / a hand that does not return" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 44), invokes a series of incomplete, isolated images that refuse to cohere. The noun phrases, devoid of verbs, deny temporal progression or emotional resolution, mirroring the speaker's fragmented psyche. These are not memories in the conventional sense; they are fragmented flashes, frozen moments that never coalesce into a full recollection. Each pause between the phrases further isolates the images, creating an emotional and temporal dislocation. This formal fragmentation enacts the madman's fractured perception, one that lacks continuity or logical sequence.

Gachagua's departure from the prophetic use of madness further deepens the tension between individual and national fragmentation. His madman does not speak truth to power. Instead, his incoherence stands as a mark of fractured witnessing. The madman inhabits a position of fractured perception, and in this role, his instability reflects not only personal disarray but the broader disintegration of societal structures. In "*The Lights in Zanzibar*," the imagery of "the reef is an imaginable wall of resistance" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 6), the suggestion of bodies floating aimlessly in the sea, and the reference to "drowned men clutching their wives' clutch bags" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 6) speaks to a national disillusionment, where historical violence and political failures go unresolved. These images are not merely symbolic; they capture a psychic landscape, wherein madness functions as a survival strategy in a world that resists coherence or closure.

Kilifi, where the madman resides, is not merely a physical space but a symbolic margin that reflects the speaker's psychic displacement. The peripheral location of Kilifi mirrors the exclusion experienced by the madman, whose wandering is both spatial and psychological. By positioning his madman in Kilifi, Gachagua underscores how definitions of sanity, belonging, and progress are produced from the centre, while marginal lives remain unreadable, their experiences fragmented. This marginality speaks to a broader postcolonial condition in which national and personal narratives remain incomplete.

The madman's wandering, as evidenced in poems like "*Madman at Kilifi*," where the speaker contemplates "the Indian Ocean / is a small estuary under our green exuberant toes" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 44), becomes both a literal and figurative journey of disconnection, exclusion, and disillusionment.

This fragmentation of experience points to the deeper crisis within postcolonial Kenya. Gachagua's aesthetic doesn't portray the madman as a tragic figure but as a revelatory one. His madness, his incoherent speech, and his disjointed existence reflect not only personal suffering but also the affective cost of silence, fragmentation, and historical denial that mark the postcolonial landscape. Madness, in this light, functions as a coping mechanism, a strategy of survival in a world that offers neither clarity nor resolution. In "*Lost Stones*," Gachagua writes, "Follow me to lost stones; / all this I beg you" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 27), suggesting that the search for meaning is both hopeless and necessary, an effort to navigate a terrain marked by brokenness and abandonment. The "lost stones" become a metaphor for the fractured reality the madman inhabits, where past and future are both unreachable and irreconcilable. Through this poetics of disjunction, Gachagua mirrors a national condition in which the promises of progress and stability remain unfulfilled. The fragmented worldview of the madman thus becomes a metaphor for a society caught between its founding ideals and its unresolved historical wounds.

### Poetic Language and Syntax

In *Madman at Kilifi*, minimalist form operates less through visual austerity than through sustained syntactic breakdown. Across the collection, Gachagua repeatedly disrupts sentence structure, withholding grammatical completion and semantic closure (Gachagua, 2014). This disruption resists narrative coherence and emotional transparency, compelling the reader to encounter trauma as a destabilising experience rather than as a recoverable meaning. Language does not transmit trauma in these poems; instead, it falters under its pressure. The skeletal verbal economy of the collection suggests an exhaustion with language itself, foregrounding the limits of articulation under conditions of historical violence and affective distress.

Syntactic incompleteness emerges as the dominant stylistic strategy through which trauma is formally enacted. In poems such as "Lost Stones," meaning is carried almost entirely through fragmentary imperatives and isolated phrases, "Follow me to lost stones; / all this I beg you" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 27), without narrative framing or explanatory context. Clauses remain unresolved, and sentences rarely reach grammatical closure. Similarly, in "Travel Guide," the poem offers only fleeting perceptual moments; "Termites float on the leaves waiting to descend" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 28) without syntactic markers that would anchor the image to a narrative or emotional trajectory. These fragments appear as suspended impressions rather than communicative statements, mirroring the

instability of traumatic consciousness. As Robinett (2007) observes, trauma frequently obstructs linear narration, producing disoriented and discontinuous modes of expression. Gachagua's syntax performs this condition rather than describing it, forcing the reader into hesitation, rereading, and interpretive uncertainty.

Minimalism in *Madman at Kilifi* is therefore not a stylistic reduction for its own sake but a critique of the adequacy of conventional language. By dismantling grammatical expectation, Gachagua exposes the insufficiency of dominant linguistic structures to contain experiences shaped by psychic rupture and historical suppression. Meaning remains provisional, deferred, or incomplete, particularly in poems that gesture toward memory or loss without narrativising them, such as "September" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 16) and "Unclaimed" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 35). Trauma is not rendered intelligible within familiar narrative logic but remains resistant and unresolved.

At the same time, this syntactic minimalism constitutes a pointed intervention into postcolonial literary expectations. Given the longstanding association of African poetry with political clarity or nationalist affirmation, Gachagua's refusal of coherence and message-driven lyricism is a deliberate departure. Poems such as "A Genre of Isolation" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 52) and "Treason" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 54) resist declarative political speech, offering instead compressed, opaque utterances that refuse interpretive mastery.

This aesthetic position rejects the assumption that the postcolonial subject must be fully legible or narratively stable. By withholding clarity, Gachagua asserts opacity as a valid mode of poetic knowing. As Lionnet (2018) argues, postcolonial identity emerges within tensions between visibility and erasure, fragmentation and coherence. Gachagua's pared-down syntax inhabits precisely this unstable terrain.

Temporal dislocation in the poems likewise emerges through syntactic ambiguity rather than explicit shifts in tense or chronology. In "September," the repetition of the present collapses temporal progression into stasis, while the absence of narrative markers prevents past and future from being clearly distinguished (Gachagua, 2014, p.16). This grammatical indeterminacy enacts trauma's resistance to temporal ordering, forcing the reader to inhabit a suspended present that neither advances nor resolves. The near absence of punctuation further intensifies this instability. In poems such as "Lost Stones" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 27) and "Travel Guide" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 28), lines bleed into one another without syntactic signals to organise thought, compelling the reader to negotiate meaning tentatively. This disrupted reading process mirrors trauma's intrusion into consciousness, where experience arrives abruptly, and coherence cannot be sustained. Gachagua's poetry embodies this state by denying the reader a fixed interpretive grid.

The political force of *Madman at Kilifi* thus lies not in explicit commentary but in its syntactic refusal of legibility.

By denying grammatical completion and interpretive closure, Gachagua resists inherited expectations that African poetry must instruct, resolve, or console. Syntax becomes a site of disobedience, where the poetic voice speaks only in fragments, exposing the affective cost of historical denial and silenced violence. Trauma is not offered as a theme to be understood but as an experience to be endured through reading. In this way, the collection advances a reconfigured African poetic voice—one that locates political and emotional intensity not in declarative clarity but in disjunction, ellipsis, and silence. Gachagua demonstrates how minimal, fractured language can carry as much political force as overt ideological articulation. His poetics refuses to simplify pain; instead, it insists on its complexity by interrupting, withholding, and breaking apart speech. This formal inventiveness situates *Madman at Kilifi* as a significant contribution to contemporary Kenyan poetry and to broader debates on how language can register psychological and historical trauma when coherence itself is under strain.

### **Political and Psychological Intersections**

In *Madman at Kilifi*, political disturbance is registered through fractured voice rather than explicit commentary. Disrupted syntax, fragmented imagery, and tonal instability render psychological displacement as a lived condition rather than an abstract critique. Political disillusionment emerges indirectly, filtered through a voice that cannot sustain coherence or emotional clarity. Across the collection, the poems articulate the psychic

cost of betrayal and repression not through accusation but through linguistic exhaustion. It is from this muted, splintered voice that state failure is most acutely felt, and the psychic price of political abandonment most insistently charged (Gachagua, 2014).

The poems rarely refer to specific political events, institutions, or figures. Instead, they convey disillusionment through affective states such as estrangement, fatigue, and uncertainty. These moods are realised through incomplete utterances, suspended images, and unresolved syntax, signalling a crisis of meaning rather than a programmatic critique. In "September," the speaker listens to "uninterrupted sirens" and admits, "I'm not invited into my own body" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 16), a line that collapses civic emergency and personal alienation into a single affective register. Political failure is thus internalised and experienced as psychic fragmentation rather than narrated as historical fact. As Kisiangani (2021) observes, post-independence Kenya has remained structured by elite continuity and inherited colonial logics despite nationalist rhetoric. Gachagua's poetry internalises this political history, transmuting structural violence and systemic betrayal into lived psychic disorientation.

The absence of a coherent narrative voice is therefore not a stylistic omission but a formal necessity. The reader is repeatedly disoriented, unable to stabilise identity, chronology, or perspective. In this sense, the poetic form replicates the experience of living under a political order that is opaque, inconsistent, and unaccountable.

Just as state institutions conceal truth through bureaucracy, censorship, and the manipulation of historical memory, Gachagua's poetry withholds meaning through syntactic disruption and deliberate silence. In poems such as "Desertion," where a friend in a psychiatric ward is described through fragmented observation, "Silly drugs go up and down / her capillaries" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 22), language itself appears constrained, speaking only in partial disclosures. The poetic voice, trapped within this system, registers the cost of moving through a political terrain in which coherence is unsafe and clarity invites punishment.

Madness in *Madman at Kilifi* is articulated through broken speech, hesitation, and emotional flattening rather than through diagnostic markers. These features do not individualise pathology; instead, they suggest a shared condition of psychic strain. The speaker's instability reflects an environment in which coherence is difficult to sustain and emotional survival requires withdrawal. In the title poem, the madman is described not through clinical labels but through observation and proximity—"He means no harm" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 44)—a phrase that underscores vulnerability rather than danger. Madness here cannot be reduced to personal illness; it functions as an index of a national order whose logic has been inverted, leaving ordinary subjects to bear the psychic consequences. Mbembe (2006) characterises the postcolonial state as a space of excess and contradiction, where

violence and absurdity coexist within the everyday. Gachagua's poetry inhabits this terrain precisely. The speaker in "Madman at Kilifi" does not deliver testimony or political exposition; instead, he moves through moments of sensory disjunction and unreal calm—"At night. / My God, at night" (Gachagua, 2014, p. 44)—where language falters and perception slips. In broken sentences and abrupt silences, the poems enact a continuous sense of unreality that mirrors the contradictions of postcolonial governance.

Mental health emerges as a crucial dimension of this political poetics. By foregrounding psychological vulnerability, Gachagua challenges the silences surrounding mental illness in Kenyan public discourse, where distress is often framed as moral weakness or spiritual failure. His poetry neither diagnoses nor resolves mental suffering. Instead, it presents psychic fragility as a politically charged condition. In "Desertion," the friend's institutionalisation is framed not as individual failure but as the culmination of accumulated familial, social, and historical pressures (Gachagua, 2014, p. 22). The speaker's vulnerability is not a personal inadequacy but a response to a world that has failed to provide stability, care, or coherence. By placing emotional fragility at the centre of the collection, Gachagua insists that psychological suffering belongs within national literature and political analysis.

This integration of psychological and political dimensions expands the boundaries of Kenyan literary tradition. Where earlier

generations often foregrounded heroic resistance or revolutionary clarity, *Madman at Kilifi* attends to the residue of unprocessed history. The poems suggest that even in moments of apparent calm, historical wounds persist in the rhythms of daily life and the textures of thought. The poetic voice becomes a witness to a slow, internalised form of violence—one that does not erupt but corrodes. Through broken syntax, withheld meaning, and vocal restraint, Gachagua articulates a poetics of quiet devastation, in which political failure is mirrored by language's inability to contain emotion. In *Madman at Kilifi*, the political and the psychological are inseparable because both are inscribed at the level of form. Fragmentation, silence, and syntactic instability expose how external structures leave internal scars. The collection asks the reader to encounter trauma not as explanation but as experience, enacted through the act of reading itself. Gachagua's refusal to separate the personal from the political marks a significant intervention in African literary discourse, demanding attention to how neocolonial power operates not only through governance and economics but through the shaping of consciousness.

## CONCLUSION

Clifton Gachagua's *Madman at Kilifi* is a collection where silence and poetic reticence are transformed into aesthetic and political power. The book does not rely on the declarative or the explicit as tools for conveying meaning. Instead, it clings to absence, minimalism, and

fragmentation as forms of poetic resistance that challenge received expectations of language, narrative, and political expression. By its very inability to explain, resolve, or stabilise, then, the anthology brings to the fore the inarticulability of trauma and the affective intensity of postcolonial disillusionment. In this way, it resists the normative call for clarity that typically prefaces stories of suffering, particularly in African literature, where poetry has traditionally been called upon to teach, redeem, or condemn in more straightforward terms. The silence that moves through Gachagua's poetry is not passive. Instead, it is a resistance to hegemonic structures of knowledge and representation. Within the neocolonial Kenyan state, characterised by the historical suppression of dissidence, enforced forgetting, and performative reconciliation, the poet's refusal to issue a direct political statement disrupts the expectation that expression must be overt to be legitimate. By inhabiting the interstices of intelligibility, Gachagua's poetry performs the "interstitial space" where other modes of meaning become feasible. The poems do not present themselves as transparent windows into trauma. Rather, they beckon the reader into the disorientation and opacity that characterise the lived experience of those traversing the psychic remains of historical violence and social abandonment. Silence is a mode respectful of the incompleteness of memory, the illegibility of suffering, and the impossibility of complete linguistic recovery.

In this respect, poetic restraint is not merely resistance but documentation. It records the contours of trauma that traditional narrative forms cannot. The decision to break up thought, pause syntax, and isolate images is an awareness of trauma as a fragmentation of temporal, affective, and linguistic continuity. Instead of offering a narrative of trauma, Gachagua's poems enact trauma in the formal and syntactic design. The poems bear witness by embodying rupture. They document not the facts of political betrayal or psychological suffering, but the affective rhythms of life under these conditions. This is a subtle yet potent form of documentation. It allows poetry to work as an archive of feeling, where the unspeakable is documented without being resolved.

Additionally, reticence in Gachagua's poetry resists the commodification of pain common in international literary markets. The refusal to aestheticise trauma into consumable images or cathartic endings foils the anticipation of African writings to commodify pain into palatable political messages. The poems, instead, demand ambiguity, unease, and suspension of emotion. This obscuring is in keeping with the trauma writing ethics that believe nothing in pain can or should be fully readable. Elhillo and other modern African poets have also used the politics of opacity to safeguard the dignity of pain. Silence here does not annihilate experience. It preserves it from reductionism, voyeurism, and theft. Additionally, poetic silence in *Madman at Kilifi* marks the failure of postcolonial

institutions to make room for speech and healing. The figure of the madman, traditionally figured as marginal, unstable, or mute, is a metaphor for the politically disempowered and psychologically erased citizen. His silence is not simply a sign of madness. It is a structural silencing, one that situates the place of many in post-independence Kenya. Gachagua enables the madman's incoherence to say much about the nation-state's incoherence. Poetic silence, therefore, is not only a personal but national articulation, writing in the failures of national imaginaries and the exhaustion of emancipatory rhetoric.

### **Implications of the Study**

The paper provides valuable insights into how poetic form can embody and communicate trauma, particularly within postcolonial African contexts. By analysing *Madman at Kilifi* through the lenses of trauma theory and postcolonial aesthetics, the study highlights the significance of poetic silence, fragmentation, and minimalism as deliberate strategies for representing psychological rupture and collective historical disappointment. The analysis demonstrates that disjuncture in Gachagua's poetry is not a deficiency or a lack of literary skill, but a formal choice that mirrors the fractured consciousness of the postcolonial subject and the residue of historical violence. In this way, Gachagua's work expands the expressive possibilities of African poetry, moving beyond overtly rhetorical or political statements toward a more intimate articulation of trauma, where

affect, silence, and formal constraint convey what cannot be fully narrated.

These findings have specific implications for both trauma studies and literary pedagogy. They suggest that readers, critics, and educators should approach structurally minimal or semantically opaque texts not as incomplete or inaccessible, but as carefully constructed sites where form itself conveys ethical, psychological, and historical meaning. For teaching African poetry, this means emphasising attention to line breaks, white space, ellipsis, and syntax as integral to understanding trauma and memory, rather than focusing solely on thematic content. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how formal analysis can bridge local postcolonial experience with global discussions of trauma, memory, and aesthetic disruption, while still retaining attention to the specific historical and cultural contexts of post-independence Kenya. Gachagua's poetry thus models a poetics in which trauma is communicated through both what is said and what is deliberately withheld, offering a framework for interpreting African poetry that foregrounds structural and affective strategies alongside narrative content (Ehibor, et al, 2025).

### **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study is limited to one poetry collection, which may limit its generalisability to other African literary texts. Though *Madman at Kilifi* offers a dense setting for pursuing

poetic silence and trauma, the stylistic and contextual peculiarities of the Gachagua text preclude a straightforward application of its implications to other poets and traditions without additional comparative study. Moreover, the research does not claim to involve the voices of readers, mental healthcare experts, and/or cultural practitioners who could offer divergent interpretations of the poems' emotional and psychological aspects. This restricts the interpretation to a solely textual structure.

The research could be developed in the future by comparing *Madman at Kilifi* with other modern African poetry collections focusing on trauma, silence, and postcolonial dislocation. These studies could consider whether similar aesthetic strategies are employed across various regional or linguistic traditions in African literature. Moreover, interdisciplinary methodologies integrating literature with psychology, ethnography, or reception studies might enhance knowledge of how different listeners/readers perceive and respond to poetic depictions of trauma. It is also possible to explore how poetic silence works in crafted poetry and recited verse poems in present-day Kenya, where emotional expression meets new media and oral performance.

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