

Between Speech and Silence: Exile, Bilingualism, and Diasporic Loss in Julia Alvarez's *Something to Declare*

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Abstract

This paper examines silence in *Something to Declare* as a deliberate aesthetic and ethical strategy through which Julia Alvarez negotiates exile, bilingual displacement, and the limits of narration. Rather than approaching silence as absence or narrative deficiency, Alvarez transforms it into a meaningful site where memory, grief, cultural unease, and the untranslatable textures of migrant experience reside. Through close readings of key essays, the paper demonstrates how pauses, untranslated Spanish phrases, withheld contexts, and narrative ellipses relocate meaning into what is not fully articulated, allowing silence to function as a mode of witness that preserves intimate knowledge from reductive consumption. Drawing on scholarship in Latina representation, bilingual poetics, and diasporic memory, the analysis contends that Alvarez's silences perform a dual movement: they register the irrecoverable fractures produced by migration while enacting an authorial restraint that respects the inarticulable and resists flattening complex lives into transparent cultural narratives. By cultivating a readerly attentiveness to absence and partial understanding, *Something to Declare* models a diasporic literacy grounded in ethical listening, ultimately positioning silence not as failure but as a practised method for representing displacement with nuance and integrity.

Keywords: silence, Diaspora, bilingualism, memory, ethics

Introduction

In contemporary diasporic writing, silence often functions as a deliberate narrative strategy rather than a mere absence of voice. For writers shaped by migration, exile, and bilingual dislocation, silence becomes a means of negotiating loss, memory, and the ethical limits of representation. Julia Alvarez's essay collection *Something to Declare* offers a compelling exploration of this dynamic, situating silence at the intersection of language, identity, and displacement. Written from the position of a Dominican-American writer navigating between Spanish and English, homeland and host nation, the collection repeatedly foregrounds what cannot be fully spoken, translated, or explained. Unlike Alvarez's more widely studied novels, *Something to Declare* adopts a reflective, essayistic form that allows for pauses, hesitations, and narrative restraint. The text resists the pressure placed upon

immigrant writers to act as transparent cultural informants. Instead of offering exhaustive explanations of Dominican history or immigrant experience, Alvarez often gestures toward memories and emotions that remain partially withheld. This refusal to fully declare everything promised by the title becomes central to the book's meaning. Silence, here, is not a failure of articulation but an acknowledgement of the complexity and fragility of diasporic memory.

The condition of exile that shapes Alvarez's writing is inseparable from linguistic displacement. English, the language of her public literary life, is repeatedly shown to be insufficient for capturing the emotional textures of childhood, family intimacy, and cultural memory rooted in Spanish. At the same time, Spanish itself is marked by distance, nostalgia, and loss, having been disrupted by political exile and assimilation. The space between these two languages becomes a site of both creativity and constraint, where Alvarez frequently draws attention to words that resist translation or emotions that lose their force when transferred across linguistic boundaries. In these moments, silence emerges as the most honest response to untranslatability, and *Something to Declare* constructs silence as an ethical and affective mode of diasporic self-representation. Rather than attempting to resolve linguistic and cultural fractures through fluent narration, Alvarez allows gaps, ellipses, and untranslated phrases to remain visible. Such narrative choices align with broader critical discussions of diaspora, which emphasise rupture, discontinuity, and loss as constitutive rather than incidental. As Avtar Brah observes, diasporic identities are formed through "the interplay of multiple journeys and histories," marked by what is remembered as well as what is forgotten or left unspoken (193). Silence, in Alvarez's essays, registers these fractured histories without reducing them to simplified narratives.

The ethical dimension of silence is particularly significant in the context of migrant writing. Scholars of trauma and testimony have noted that specific experiences resist full narration, and that forcing articulation can risk aestheticising or appropriating suffering. Alvarez's essays often stop short of complete disclosure, especially when dealing with political violence, family trauma, or cultural shame. For example, when reflecting on exile and its longterm emotional effects, she avoids melodrama, opting instead for understatement and reflective distance. This restraint allows silence to carry emotional weight, inviting readers to listen rather than consume.

Moreover, *Something to Declare* challenges dominant expectations surrounding voice in minority literature. While much critical discourse celebrates the recovery of silenced voices, Alvarez complicates this paradigm by suggesting that not all silence demands breaking. Some silences protect intimacy, preserve dignity, or acknowledge the limits of understanding across cultural boundaries. In this sense, her work resonates with Doris Sommer's argument that strategic withholding in minority texts can function as a form of resistance, preventing dominant readers from claiming total access or mastery. Silence thus becomes a way of maintaining narrative sovereignty. By focusing on silence as a central organising principle in *Something to Declare*, Alvarez contributes to contemporary debates on migration, bilingualism, and narrative ethics. Through close textual analysis supported by diaspora theory and studies of linguistic untranslatability, the discussion demonstrates how Alvarez's essays articulate diasporic loss not through excess speech but through careful restraint. Silence, far from signalling narrative inadequacy, emerges as a form of diasporic

literacy—one that acknowledges the ethical limits of articulation and the enduring presence of loss in exile.

Silence, Diaspora, and the Ethics of the Unsaid: A Theoretical Framework

Silence has long occupied an uneasy position in literary and cultural theory. Traditionally associated with absence, repression, or marginalisation, it has often been treated as a condition to be overcome through speech and visibility. However, recent work in diaspora studies, bilingual writing, and trauma theory has complicated this view, recognising silence as a meaningful and sometimes necessary mode of expression. In the context of migrant narratives, silence frequently signals not a lack of voice but an awareness of linguistic, ethical, and emotional limits. This paper draws on such critical perspectives to read *Something to Declare* as a text that actively produces meaning through restraint and hesitation.

Diaspora theory provides a valuable starting point for understanding this function of silence. Avtar Brah's influential formulation of diaspora emphasises discontinuity rather than seamless belonging. For Brah, diasporic identity is shaped by "the lived experience of dispersal and settlement" and by fragmented, selective, and often painful memories (Brah 182). These memories are not always narratable in linear or transparent ways. Silence, in this sense, becomes part of diasporic consciousness—a marker of what has been lost, displaced, or rendered inaccessible by migration. In Alvarez's essays, exile from the Dominican Republic does not simply generate stories waiting to be told; it produces emotional residues that remain partially unspoken. Then, the question of language intensifies this condition. Writing between Spanish and English, Alvarez inhabits what Homi Bhabha describes as a "third space" of enunciation, where meaning is constantly negotiated rather than fixed. However, unlike celebratory models of hybridity that emphasise linguistic playfulness, *Something to Declare* foregrounds the strain of bilingualism. Certain words, emotions, and cultural memories do not survive translation without distortion. Silence emerges here as a response to untranslatability—a refusal to flatten difference for the sake of clarity. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warns, the desire to fully translate or recover the voice of the Other can become an act of epistemic violence, imposing intelligibility at the cost of complexity. Alvarez's restraint reflects this ethical awareness.

Doris Sommer's work on minority discourse further clarifies the political dimension of such silence. Sommer argues that some texts practice "strategic withholding," deliberately denying readers full access in order to resist cultural appropriation. Rather than inviting complete identification, these texts demand respect for opacity. *Something to Declare* repeatedly enacts this strategy. Alvarez does not always explain Dominican customs, political histories, or Spanish expressions, especially when such explanations would reduce lived experience to cultural spectacle. Silence, in this context, protects what Sommer calls "the right to remain partial," preserving narrative autonomy. It also intersects with theories of trauma and memory, which emphasise the limits of testimony. Scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub have shown that traumatic experience is often marked by belatedness and fragmentation, and that it resists direct narration. While *Something to Declare* is not a conventional trauma memoir, it repeatedly touches on political exile, family disruption, and cultural dislocation—experiences that leave traces but do not always yield coherent stories. Alvarez's preference for understatement and reflective distance aligns with what trauma theorists describe as ethical narration: speaking around pain rather than claiming to capture it

fully. Importantly, the ethics of silence in Alvarez's work does not imply passivity. Silence here is active and chosen. It reflects a writerly decision to acknowledge that not everything can—or should—be declared. This challenges dominant literary expectations that equate authenticity with confession and completeness. In contemporary literary markets, migrant writers are often encouraged to perform transparency, offering legible narratives of suffering or cultural difference. Alvarez's essays quietly resist this demand. Her silences disrupt the assumption that visibility is always empowering, suggesting instead that dignity sometimes lies in restraint.

From a stylistic perspective, silence in *Something to Declare* operates through narrative gaps, tonal understatement, and moments where reflection replaces exposition. These techniques invite readers into a mode of attentive listening rather than consumption. Meaning is not delivered fully formed but emerges through implication and pause. Such writing assumes an ethical reader—one willing to accept uncertainty and incompleteness. By situating Alvarez's work within these theoretical conversations, this paper treats silence not as a secondary theme but as a central narrative principle shaped by diaspora, bilingualism, and ethical self-awareness. Silence, here, is both a consequence of displacement and a deliberate aesthetic choice. It enables *Something to Declare* to articulate diasporic loss without turning it into spectacle, and to honour the complexities of migrant memory without forcing them into fluent narration.

Silence Between Spanish and English: Bilingual Loss and Linguistic Gaps

In *Something to Declare*, silence assumes its most complex and resonant form in the space between Spanish and English—a charged linguistic interval shaped by migration, memory, and emotional displacement. For Julia Alvarez, language is not merely a communicative tool but the very medium through which identity and belonging are constituted. The rupture of exile, therefore, produces not only geographical dislocation but also a fracture in linguistic continuity. Writing in English about a childhood lived in Spanish, Alvarez repeatedly acknowledges that translation cannot fully recover the emotional density of earlier experience. Something vital recedes in the movement between languages. Rather than attempting to bridge this gap through excessive clarification or cultural exposition, Alvarez allows silence to remain visible within the text, transforming linguistic insufficiency into an aesthetic and ethical principle. The pauses, untranslated phrases, and tonal hesitations embedded in her essays become structural markers of what cannot be seamlessly carried across languages.

Alvarez reflects explicitly on the affective limitations of English when recounting her early life. Spanish, she notes, was the language in which she “first learned fear, love, and loyalty,” the language of childhood intimacy and political anxiety under dictatorship. English, by contrast, arrived later as the language of adaptation, education, and self-conscious performance. When memories formed in Spanish are narrated in English, they appear attenuated, as though drained of their original immediacy. She remarks that certain childhood expressions “lose their heat” once rendered into English, becoming pale approximations of lived experience. This recognition does not lead her to compensate through explanatory overreach; instead, she foregrounds the inadequacy itself. Silence, in this context, signals an honest acknowledgement of linguistic loss. It marks the distance between lived memory and narrated recollection without pretending that such distance can be eliminated.

Throughout the collection, Alvarez frequently leaves Spanish words and phrases untranslated, thereby resisting the conventional expectation that immigrant writers must serve as cultural interpreters for an English-speaking readership. This resistance is articulated most clearly in the essay “Doña Aida, with Your Permission,” where she addresses the persistent demand to explain “myself, my country, my language, my people.” The repetition of such expectations reduces complex histories and identities to digestible narratives designed for external consumption. She observes with quiet irony that “the explaining never ends,” and that each act of clarification invites further requests, threatening to flatten the self into cultural shorthand. What troubles her is not the act of communication itself but the presumption that her writing exists primarily to render exile legible and comfortable for others. In response, she turns to silence as a deliberate strategy of refusal. By withholding translation and leaving certain experiences only partially narrated, Alvarez preserves the opacity and integrity of her cultural memory. Silence thus becomes a mode of narrative autonomy, a refusal to commodify cultural difference.

This refusal is not only aesthetic but also ethical. Alvarez suggests that excessive fluency about painful or intimate memories risks converting them into performance. In “Doña Aida, with Your Permission,” she implies that there are moments when not saying everything is the only way to stay faithful to what was lived. Alvarez says, “I am not a Dominican writer or really a Dominican in the traditional sense. I don’t live on the Island, breathing its daily smells, enduring its particular burdens, speaking its special dominicano. In fact, I would tell a different story and write poems with a different rhythm if I lived and worked there, ate there, made love there, voted there, dried my tears there, laughed my laughter there” (596-598). Such a statement underscores the moral dimension of silence: to articulate fully is sometimes to diminish. Memory, especially memory shaped by political fear and familial vulnerability, cannot always withstand the pressure of constant interpretation. Silence, therefore, safeguards emotional truth by acknowledging the limits of representation. It allows memory to retain its density and complexity rather than being exhausted by explanation.

Bilingual silence in *Something to Declare* is inseparable from the broader condition of exile. Alvarez describes leaving the Dominican Republic as an experience that left her “tongue split in two,” a striking metaphor for linguistic and psychological division. Spanish becomes associated with intimacy, childhood, and loss, while English bears the marks of distance, assimilation, and intellectual formation. Between these languages lies a space that belongs fully to neither—a liminal terrain where meaning hesitates. Rather than attempting to reconcile this division into smooth bilingual fluency, Alvarez sustains the tension. Silence inhabits this interstitial space, registering the persistence of displacement within language itself. Family memory further exemplifies this pattern of bilingual restraint. When recalling fear under the Trujillo regime or the guarded silences of her parents, Alvarez often gestures toward experiences rather than exhaustively narrating them. She notes that certain family stories were “never told straight through” but surfaced in fragments, pauses, and hints. To render them fully transparent would risk reopening wounds or simplifying complex emotional histories. Silence here functions as an act of care—toward the past, toward others, and toward the limits of narration. It acknowledges that some histories must be approached obliquely, through suggestion rather than declaration.

Formally, the essay genre enables these practices of withholding and reflection. Alvarez allows sentences to move into contemplative digression, memories to appear briefly

before receding, and emotional intensities to surface without complete resolution. Such structural pauses require readers to adopt a posture of attentiveness rather than consumption. Meaning emerges through implication, demanding interpretive patience and humility. In *Something to Declare*, the silence between Spanish and English is therefore not an absence but a charged and living space shaped by exile, linguistic fracture, and ethical restraint. The gaps between languages register loss, resist the commodification of cultural identity, and protect the writer's right to speak selectively. Alvarez ultimately suggests that the immigrant experience is constituted not only by articulated narratives but also by what remains deliberately unsaid, by the silences that language itself cannot entirely bridge.

Exile, Memory, and Emotional Restraint: Silence as Ethical Remembrance

In *Something to Declare*, silence moves beyond linguistic fracture into the domain of memory, where exile shapes not only what is remembered but also the manner of remembrance itself. Across essays such as "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic," "A Genetics of Justice," and "Ground Zero," Julia Alvarez presents memory as fragmentary, emotionally burdened, and resistant to complete articulation. Rather than reconstructing the past in exhaustive detail, she approaches it indirectly, allowing pauses, ellipses, and tonal restraint to register the enduring weight of displacement. Memory, in her work, is not a transparent recovery of experience but a careful negotiation with what remains painful, inherited, and ethically complex.

In "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic," Alvarez recalls life under the Trujillo regime not through graphic political description but through an atmosphere of unspoken fear. Danger, she suggests, was "understood without being named," and children quickly learned that certain realities could not be voiced openly. Silence functioned as a survival strategy within authoritarian power, and exile did not entirely dissolve this habit of caution. The legacy of such restraint resurfaces in "A Genetics of Justice," where Alvarez reflects on her parents' continued vigilance even in the relative safety of the United States. Family stories circulated in fragments and hints, as though clarity itself carried risk. As Alvarez admits, "There are still things my parents cannot tell me. They lower their voices or fall silent altogether, as if the past were not safely behind them but still waiting to claim them if named." This lingering silence suggests that trauma is not confined to the past but continues to shape present modes of expression and restraint. It also reveals how fear becomes internalised, governing not only what is remembered but how, and whether, it can be spoken at all. Alvarez recognises that some memories are "too close to the bone to be handled roughly," acknowledging that full disclosure might reopen wounds or transform lived fear into narrative display. Silence, therefore, becomes an act of protection—preserving both personal dignity and emotional truth.

The ethical dimension of this restraint is further clarified in "Ground Zero," where Alvarez confronts the difficulty of articulating collective trauma in the wake of September 11. Faced with public pressure to explain and interpret catastrophe, she discovers the limits of language and the value of stopping short. Not every experience, she suggests, requires complete narration; some must remain partially unspoken to retain their gravity. Across these essays, remembering becomes an act of limitation rather than exposure. Alvarez has learned "to stop short of saying everything," recognising that silence can safeguard memory from exploitation. In *Something to Declare*, exile thus produces a mode of ethical remembrance in which restraint honours the fragility of the past. Silence is not absence but presence—a

deliberate refusal to convert loss into spectacle, and a means of carrying diasporic memory with care.

Also, in *Something to Declare*, silence significantly reshapes the reader's role by refusing the assumption that literature must offer complete cultural transparency. Julia Alvarez does not position her audience as passive recipients of neatly explained immigrant experience; instead, she challenges what may be termed a culture of entitlement—the belief that readers are owed full access to another's history and identity. In essays such as “Ten of my Writing Commandments” and “Chasing the Butterflies,” she reflects on the pressure placed upon her as a bilingual, diasporic writer to clarify, interpret, and translate her world for dominant audiences. Her reminder to herself—“Don't explain too much. Don't tell everything.”—signals more than stylistic restraint; it marks a deliberate refusal of total disclosure. Likewise, when she observes that “Some things cannot be translated; they must be lived,” she underscores the limits of textual mediation. Silence, in this context, does not interrupt communication but redefines it, shifting responsibility onto readers and asking them to accept the boundaries of their understanding. This strategy carries profound ethical implications. By withholding a complete explanation, Alvarez resists reducing immigrant experience to consumable cultural information. Her silences interrupt what Doris Sommer has described as the “readerly desire for possession,” whereby understanding risks becomes a form of appropriation rather than respect. By refusing to make every context transparent, Alvarez argues that lived experience—particularly that of marginalised communities—cannot be reduced to data accessible to dominant readerships. Silence thus becomes a protective boundary that preserves opacity and safeguards the integrity of memory and identity. It transforms reading from an act of mastery into an encounter shaped by humility.

Ultimately, Alvarez cultivates what may be called an ethics of listening. Her essays slow down interpretation, compelling readers to attend to implication, absence, and tonal nuance. In a literary marketplace where migrant narratives are often expected to perform clarity and emotional accessibility, her refusal to reveal everything becomes an ethical stance. She does not exclude readers but repositions them within a relational framework in which curiosity is tempered by respect for limits. Silence, therefore, functions not as withdrawal but as a disciplined and practised mode of diasporic knowledge—one shaped by exile, bilingual negotiation, and repeated experiences of misrecognition. In *Something to Declare*, reading becomes an act of care, and silence is the medium through which that care is learned.

Silence as Diasporic Literacy: Knowing When Not to Speak

One of the most distinctive contributions of *Something to Declare* lies in its redefinition of silence as a form of diasporic competence—a way of knowing shaped by displacement, loss, and ethical awareness. Alvarez's essays suggest that survival in exile requires more than linguistic fluency; it demands an understanding of when speech is possible and when silence is more truthful. This sensibility, developed through migration and cultural negotiation, may be described as a form of diasporic literacy. In essays such as “My English” and “Doña Aida, with Your Permission,” Alvarez reflects on the gradual recognition that mastery of English does not guarantee expressive freedom. While English enables public authorship, it also imposes expectations of clarity, explanation, and accessibility. Alvarez notes that learning English meant learning “how much could be said and how much should be held back.” Silence, in this sense, is not ignorance but knowledge—an awareness of the limits of language and audience.

This form of literacy is closely tied to ethical judgment. Alvarez repeatedly demonstrates that silence can prevent misrepresentation, particularly when writing across cultural and political differences. Rather than claiming authority over every aspect of Dominican history or immigrant experience, she allows uncertainty to remain. Such restraint resists what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as the impulse to speak for others, which risks erasing difference in the act of representation. Alvarez's silences acknowledge that some experiences can be approached only indirectly, through suggestion rather than declaration. Also, diasporic literacy reshapes the relationship between writer and reader. Silence teaches readers how to engage responsibly, signalling that understanding across difference requires patience and humility. Instead of offering complete narratives, Alvarez invites readers to interpret pauses, gaps, and omissions. These moments cultivate attentiveness rather than consumption, reminding readers that not all knowledge is immediately available or ethically transferable.

By framing silence as a learned practice rather than a deficiency, *Something to Declare* expands the possibilities of diasporic writing. Silence becomes a marker of cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, and narrative responsibility—an essential skill for articulating exile without betraying its complexities.

Conclusion

In *Something to Declare*, Julia Alvarez demonstrates that silence is not merely a consequence of exile but one of its most meaningful forms of expression. Across her essays, silence emerges as a response to linguistic displacement, fractured memory, and the ethical limits of narration. Rather than attempting to overcome loss through fluent storytelling or cultural explanation, Alvarez embraces restraint, allowing gaps, pauses, and untranslated moments to carry emotional and political weight. Silence, in this context, becomes a way of acknowledging what migration disrupts without reducing it to spectacle. By writing in both Spanish and English, Alvarez foregrounds the inadequacy of language to fully recover the past. Her silences mark the places where translation fails, where memory remains fragile, and where experience resists articulation. These narrative choices challenge the dominant expectation that immigrant writers endlessly explain themselves. Instead, Alvarez asserts the right to partial telling, reminding readers that not all stories are owed complete disclosure. Silence thus preserves dignity, protects intimacy, and resists cultural commodification. Furthermore, Alvarez's use of silence reshapes the ethics of reading. Readers are invited not to master the text but to listen attentively, accepting uncertainty and incompleteness as part of diasporic understanding. In doing so, *Something to Declare* offers what may be called a form of diasporic literacy—one grounded in humility, ethical restraint, and respect for what remains unsaid. Silence, far from signalling narrative failure, becomes a powerful mode of witnessing exile, loss, and belonging in contemporary diasporic writing.

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