Chapter Two

The ideology of Silence

“Silence is as deep as Eternity” – Thomas Carlyle

Silence is a diverse concept. This chapter views silence in many different, partly overlapping ways. For e.g., silence is discussed as an auditory signal (pause) in a linguistic theory, as a pragmatic and discursive strategy, as a realization of a taboo, as a tool of manipulation, as part of listener’s ‘work’ in interaction, and as an expression of artistic ideas.

The concept of silence is so wide ranging. It is appropriate to introduce in this chapter, the idea of silence as a ‘metaphor for communication’. This will allow us to go beyond the simple view of silence as ‘absence of sound.’ Instead, we can see silence as a unifying concept for tackling diverse communicative phenomena: linguistic, discoursal, literary, social, cultural, spiritual and meta-communicative. Of course, there will also be room for silence understood as pause, non-speaking etc., but these will not be the only and dominant conceptualizations of silence here.
If we treat silence as metaphor, we can use it to define various communicative phenomena. For e.g., we can say that a pause in discourse, a question left unanswered, a refusal to greet someone, a whisper which is not to reach a third party, avoidance of a topic in conversation, deafening noise, irrelevant talk, or a frozen gesture of an artist on stage are all different instances of ‘silence’ and so, instead of the risky attempts to specify what ‘silence’ is, we must look at different practices of African Americans, and then decide if the label or metaphor of silence is the appropriate one for their description.

In this way we can generate many representations of silence and then subject them to different kinds of analysis. Depending, therefore, on whether the silence is linguistic (e.g., pause), visual (e.g., monochrome painting) or kinetic (e.g. stillness), whether it occurs on a continuum with talk or with sound (noise) in general, whether it functions as a medium of face-to-face or mass communication, we can approach it from many different angles, points of view, frameworks, philosophical and cultural traditions.

It is the goal of this chapter to capture the diversity of ways in which silence can be studied. This chapter relates to different situations, ideas, phenomena which are conceptualized as silent or made manifest through silence. This chapter plans to underscore the richness of the forms of silence, their meanings and functions.

Silence is conceived as an auditory signal (pause) in contrast to speech. Silence is the marked member of the pair ‘speech-silence’. Silence does not perform as many functions as speech (e.g., it lacks the metalingual function). It is not as widespread in communication as speech. The meaning of silence is more ambiguous than that of speech (i.e., it is more “context – dependent”), and the relative cognitive difficulty with which silence is accepted and processed in communicative situations is far greater than that of
speech. Silence can also realize super strategies (namely “positive politeness” and “negative politeness” strategies); and obviously, remaining silent can be “impolite” or face–threatening too.

This chapter represents different conceptualizations of silence. When silence occurs in ballads it is to conceal a horrible crime, or ultimately to signal death. Silence is dangerous if characters ignore important sounds of warning. Thus silence should be avoided or broken if it occurs. Silence is experienced in a multitude of forms. For worshippers it is an active state through which the only communion with God is possible.

Silence is neither positive nor negative; it simply works in achieving certain communicative goals for some but not for others. In its broad sense, silence, usually refers to the absence of something which should be present. Sometimes a form of silence is usually produced consciously, promotes or fails to promote interaction in different ways, and can reflect a variety of both positive and negative attitudes and values. For instance, deliberate abstention from talk in an on-going interaction may indicate consideration for the other person or lack of it. Thus, it can be a way of preventing disagreement and conflict or it may, on the contrary, indicate that there is conflict. This is the type of silence described in Greek as “eloquent silence” (Kitto 114).

In encounters with participants of unequal status, the superior’s silence may indicate domination, whereas the inferior’s silence may indicate subordination. However, the inferior’s silence may also indicate defiance against the superior’s authority, as for example, when a student refuses to answer a teacher’s question, which Gilmore calls it “stylized silent sulking” (155). Likewise, Tannen suggests that “silence in itself is not necessarily a sign of powerlessness, just as volubility in itself is not
necessarily a sign of domination. It is the interaction of the two and attributes meaning to each form of behaviour” (176).

Our concept of, as well as our practice of silence has been influenced by all the other things that have changed as our world has become a technological milieu. Silence is an enabling environment. When one thinks about the concept of silence, one notices the fact that there has to be somebody there who listens before you can say there is silence. Silence, that is, the absence of sound is defined, by a listener, by hearing. In this way the modern soundscape and the modern understanding of silence divides itself into two domains. It divides itself into the domain that we traditionally associate with silence, the enabling condition in which unprogrammed and unprogrammable events can take place. That is the silence of contemplation; that is the silence where people get in touch with themselves; that is the silence of meditation and worship. And what makes this distinct is that it is a silence that is an enabling condition, which opens up that possibility of unprogrammed, unplanned and unprogrammable happenings.

We require silence in order to hear God’s voice. Beyond the individual’s centring, beyond the individual effort of meditation, there was the need for collective silence. The collective silence is an enormously powerful event and a message comes out of that silence. The strength of collective silence is probably one of the most powerful spiritual forces. Now in order for something to happen a lot of things are required to be with heart and mind prepared. But there is also the collective decision to be silent. And to be silent in order to let the unforeseen, unforeseeable and unprogrammed happen.

There yet is another silence. That is the silence that enables a programmed, a planned, event to take place. There is the silence in which one courteously engages so
that one might be heard: in order for one to be heard all the others have to be silent. And in many cases the silence is not taken on voluntarily. This is the form of forced silence that one is afraid of. It is not only the silence of the padded cell, the silence of solitary confinement, but it is also the silencing that comes when there is the megaphone, the boom box, and any variation in which sound and voices are silenced so that a planned event can take place. Silence is being taken out of common availability.

Silence does not always perform all communicative functions to the same extent as speech. The two categories—speech and silence—seem not only to complement each other, but also form a contrasting pair: “Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored” (Minh-Ha 1).

This long prologue is an introduction to an attempt to interpret the concept of silence and speech. Speech is an interaction, a social and situation-based activity. All these perspectives see speech as an integral part of people’s daily lives. People use their speech to create an image of themselves to others. Speech is the liberty to express opinions and ideas without hindrance and especially without fear of punishment. Speech is the freedom of liberty to speak and otherwise express oneself and one’s opinions. Freedom of speech is the freedom to speak freely without censorship or limitation or both. The synonymous term ‘freedom of expression’ is sometimes used to indicate not only freedom of verbal speech but any act of seeking, receiving and imparting information or ideas, regardless of the medium used.

The right to freedom of speech is recognized as a human right under Article 19 of the ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ and recognized in international human
rights law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The 
ICCPR recognizes the right to freedom of speech and states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right 
includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, 
receive and impart information and ideas through any media and 
regardless of frontiers. (Freedom of Speech)

Furthermore freedom of speech is recognized in European, inter-American and African 
regional human rights law. The Declaration provides for freedom of expression in Article 
11, which states that:

The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious 
rights of man. Every citizen may accordingly, speak, write, and print with 
freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall 
be defined by law. (Freedom of Speech)

Freedom of speech is understood as a multi-faceted right that includes not only the right 
to express, or disseminate, information and ideas, but three further distinct aspects: (1) 
The right to seek information and ideas, (2) The right to receive information and ideas, 
(3) The right to impart information and ideas.

Milton in his Areopagitica, made an impassioned plea for freedom, and tolerance 
of falsehood stating: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according 
to conscience, above all liberties” (560). In the twentieth century Noam Chomsky states 
that:

If you believe in freedom of speech, you believe in freedom of speech for 
views you don’t like. Stalin and Hitler, for example, were dictators in
favour of freedom of speech for views they liked only. If you’re in favour of freedom of speech, that means you’re in favour of freedom of speech precisely for views you despise. (Freedom of Speech)

Thomas I. Emerson argued that freedom of speech helps to provide a balance between stability and change. Freedom of speech acts as a ‘safety valve’ to let off steam when people might otherwise be bent on revolution. When people remain silent, representative writers come forward to act as a safety valve, to speak on their behalf, to voice their grievances. Toni Morrison is one such living example who represents her race and their voice in her writings.

Richard Moon has developed the argument that the value of freedom of speech and freedom of expression lies with social interactions. Moon writes that by communicating, an individual forms relationships and associations with others – family, friends, co-workers, church congregation, and countrymen. By entering into discussion with others, an individual participates in the development of knowledge and in the direction of the community.

There is no such thing as absolute freedom of speech. It is an abstract concept. If we want absolute freedom of speech, we have to be prepared to accept the consequences of it. The concept of freedom of speech has continued to evolve since the days of the American Revolution. It is still legal for private citizens to express controversial or unpopular speech under most circumstances, which means a group such as the Ku Klux Klan can deliver speeches or publish materials which denigrates African Americans or other targeted groups. The rules which govern freedom of speech must be applied equally regardless of the quality or veracity of the speech itself.
Silence is the unbearable repartee, says G.K. Chesterton. Silence can exist without speech, but speech cannot exist without silence. Silence takes on meaning only in a surrounding content of verbal and nonverbal symbols. Silence is the meaningful absence of speech. Speech is silver, but silence is gold.

It is hardly breaking fresh ground to say that within any culture, there are norms and values regulating the amount of talk or silence required in particular contexts: “Speaking at the wrong time (interrupting) or being silent at the wrong time has impolite implications” (qtd. in Jaworski 79) even within the same culture, let alone cross-culturally. Silences can be more threatening than arguments even fierce ones. It is not speech or silence as abstract entities which are valued, but the amount, the content, the timing and the manner in which speech and silence are produced.

Silence shows lack of rapport. The central role of the concept of silence has undergone some changes. There is no such thing as silence. At first, silence is conceived in a traditional way, as the absence of sound or as minimal sound activity. Silence is not just a negativity. It acquires an important role. Silence becomes an absolute prerequisite for the introduction of all sounds to the domain of speech. This new concept of speech originates from silence. The relation between speech and silence is horizontal, that is to say, they take turns in succession, thereby excluding each other.

Silence should not be approached from a negative point of view, i.e., as absence of sound. Silence is no longer the absence of sounds; silence itself consists of sounds. Silence begets sounds. We need not fear the silences. We may love them. Through the intertwining of silence and speech, their mutual penetrability becomes appreciated. Each requires the other as its frame. The necessary interdependency between sound and silence
relates to two principal aspects: Silence is not only the precondition for sound – this means that silence contains sound – every sound in turn harbours silence as well. Sound and silence develop in a parallel way without mutual exclusion; the one is always already present in the other.

The relation between silence and sound becomes more complex. Silence and sound are mutually dependent in order to exist. Sound emerges from silence. Silence resounds in sounds. Silence becomes more prominent when traces of silence in sounds are detected. The opposition of silence-sound, together with oppositions such as nothing-something, death-life, law-freedom etc., form an entire chain of apparent oppositions, but these can no longer be thought as oppositions.

Silence is not nothing; it is no longer the absence of sound. It consists of all the ambient sounds that make up a speech. Silence is the space in which sounds occur. Sound and silence are simultaneously present with one constantly carrying traces of the other. Silence is not emptiness. Merging of silence and life brings about a dispersion of the difference between silence and sounds. Silence cannot be the absence of sound. There is no such thing as silence, says Cage (Cage 191). Silence consists of all existing sounds that surround us.

Silence is not to be understood as ordinary silence. Silence can be full, all encompassing, indeed, it may even be loud. Silence and sound are both present at the same time. One is not reduced to the other. Silence is a potent force. Toni Morrison has concerned herself with the relation between speech and silence. We should listen to the silence with the same attention that we give to the speech. The crucial observation is that
the materials of protest consist of sounds and silence; to materialize means to articulate these two.

Looking at silence cross-culturally, it is instructive to consider the predominant values of a society as they relate to speech and silence. In some societies, speech helps to release emotions, anxiety and tension and enables people to maintain balanced social relationships. In others, the release of emotions, anxiety and tension indicates aggression and should be avoided, and uncertainly is better tackled with silence (Wardhaugh 234).

Jacques Derrida’s term ‘écriture’ rather than ‘writing’ indicates how useful a construction of oppositions can be in this context. In his essay “Violence and Metaphysics” Derrida has stressed that philosophy itself is involved in issues of violence and oppression. Violence and oppression are not, in Derrida’s view, extrinsic to the philosophical or any other text; he deconstructs simple binary oppositions such as speech/writing or violence/nonviolence. Derrida suggests that “the limit between violence and nonviolence is perhaps not between speech and writing but within each of them” (102).

Even silence may be interpreted as violent; Derrida at one point defines violence as “the solitude of a mute glance, of a face without speech” (99). It is therefore impossible simply to equate silence and resistance. Derrida’s comments raise the possibility that silence itself may be a mute marker of violence. Similarly, the silence of African Americans and Toni Morrison’s breaking of that silence subvert any simple connection of silence and resistance, or any separation of silence from violence. The power of Toni Morrison’s writings resides in the way she resists any straightforward equation between silence and resistance.
To link violence and silence is to subvert a current critical orthodoxy. Silence in a text had hitherto been interpreted as a sign of victimization. While there has been a great deal of critical interest in the idea of silence in the context of writings by women and ethnic minorities, such analysis has tended to read silence univocally as the product of hegemony and as a sign of resistance. Whether hegemony is named as patriarchy or as a broader form of oppression, the works of Toni Morrison interpret silence as the locus of a counter-hegemonic critical position. This approach romanticizes certain texts as purely resistant, as if they were immune from contamination by hegemony.

Silence is certainly one locus of a text’s potential resistance to hegemony. However, the act of writing a text, as a means of breaking that silence, is inextricably bound up with the very forces it wishes to oppose. The idea of breaking a silence underscores the implicit violence in the act of writing. Jose Rabesa has advanced the proposition that “discourse is violence” (132). In each of Toni Morrison’s works, the act of writing is a breaking of silence that becomes embodied within the narrative itself.

Defining discourse as violence avoids the temptation to romanticize the author's position as purely counter-hegemonic. It is an alluring idea that texts have an unproblematic political status as ‘resistant’ literatures. As Foley points out, there is a widespread critical belief in studying what has come to be called ‘ethnic’ literature that "these voices, because excluded, must somehow constitute a significant threat to the hegemony of dominant social groups" (67). Symbolic violence is aimed at minorities, a violence that both appropriates and silences them.

One of the hallmarks of American culture, along with apple pie and flags, is violence. Toni Morrison’s works are noteworthy not because of their ‘ethnic’ status but
because of the way in which they problematize the relationship of the subject to violence. They simultaneously record the effects of violence, representing the position of the victim, and enact violence themselves, taking the position of the victimizer. They therefore eschew neat categories such as violent/nonviolent, and suggest the ways in which the subjects themselves are implicated in violence.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "monologism," is a universal trope that represents the hegemonic power of a centralized and normative bureaucratic state. As Bakhtin emphasizes, there is no such thing as a purely "dialogic" text; every text participates simultaneously in the monologic and the dialogic (272).

The Bakhtinian category of the monologic raises the possibility of language as "coerced speech," a use of language implicated in ideas of power and domination. A pluralist approach, on the other hand, tries to deny or repress violence and conflict in favour of an image of "shared conversation." Rather than presenting speech as "conversation," the works of Toni Morrison in this study represent it in terms of coercion and domination. To speak, to break the silence, becomes in this context fraught with anxiety. Violence is potential within both speech and silence. Toni Morrison therefore represents her speech i.e., her works, as a liberation from the internalized violence of her enforced silence.

The release of speech therefore is liberation from oppressive forces. The ‘release’ is also a response to the symbolic violence of growing up as a poor black woman in the South. Toni Morrison’s works record not only the literal violence but also the symbolic violence of a white cultural hegemony that metaphorically threatens the intellectual as well as physical existence of the African Americans.
Toni Morrison’s novels help her race emerge from the cocoon of silence in which they enveloped themselves. Thus the novels of Toni Morrison help reproduce a race- and class-based system of oppression that identifies the pre-eminent cultural values as rich and white. Her novels can also be instruments of cultural hegemony and reinforce the symbolic violence, the oppression of one social group by another.

Silence is linked with victimization. The violence of the American system on the African Americans gave Toni Morrison a voice and forced her to speak. The oppression of African Americans is represented as a symbolic violence to which the writing of the text by Toni Morrison is a response.

Silence is a mark of oppression. Silence and oppression are linked; for instance, the silence of the marginalized which is more telling. The word ‘telling’ resonates especially deeply in this context for they can never ‘tell their story’ and are thus doomed to a perpetual silence. The silence in Toni Morrison’s works stands as a testimony of victimization. It is impossible to separate hegemony and resistance. So in any act of writing it is impossible to escape the interrelated categories of the violent and the nonviolent. To speak for texts, to break their silence, is itself an act of appropriation and in Derrida's terms, an act of violence.

Silent and silenced voices are a different type of narrative. Silence is a rich conversational and expressive resource. The discussion on silence in this chapter will make this point a convincing one. Considering the plight of the African Americans, silence is shown to have a manipulative dimension. Women or the marginalized are silenced or assume the silent position. The opposition of speech and silence is equated here, not only with the powerful position of men or people in authority and the powerless
position of women or marginalized, but also with the traditionally public domain dominated by the former, and the private occupied by the latter. Silence is an ‘ideological practice’ which creates and perpetuates gender roles of the communities in question.

African American literature is evidently a record of the struggle of the Black race through ages. They suffer everything in silence without protesting which is the hallmark of African American literature. The lives of the marginalized are to be pitied as well as to be changed radically in the modern world. In the polarity of the centre and the margin, the worst affected is the race of African Americans who are in between and who are denied a place of existence. In a primarily white dominated society of America, the African Americans are marginalized but the silent sound of them has gained momentum to a level of a deafening noise, through the works of writers like Toni Morrison. She expresses the problems her race faces because she is a minority. She uses Art as a medium to burst out her agonies. She saw how African Americans are poorly treated by the dominating class. Since they are minorities they were seldom given a chance to develop their social status. Even democracy has not put an end to their suffering.

Toni Morrison became aware of racism at an early age. Her works claim a positive, strong voice for her – a voice deeply embedded in her black heritage. In her novels, Toni Morrison effectively transforms black silence to speech. She defines speech as a force that embraces blackness. She goes on to question how much a black woman can speak, and in what tone. Her works define Toni Morrison as a black female writer who breaks the boundaries of silence and proclaims that her asserted aim is to bring light to periods of history untold and hidden: “…to bear witness to a history that is unrecorded, untaught in mainstream education and to enlighten our people”(Conversations 185).
Writing is seen as a historical act of reclamation, a way of recognizing and charting roots and identity. It is a political act of breaking silence for women from a diversity of backgrounds. Particularly notable is the deliberate development of expression which enables the articulation of experiences, thoughts, feelings and arguments unrecorded or marginalized in the discourse of male and particularly white male writers:

The use of Black women’s language and cultural experience in books by Black Women ABOUT Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. (Smith Barbara 164)

Interest in reclaiming both individual and community leads to the adoption of the vernacular and oral storytelling modes: circling, repeating motifs, spiraling narratives. The interest in herbalism and rootworking aligns itself with the use of spirituality, magic and the metaphorical in the content and language of much work by African American women writers. Confronting and dealing with a history of racism and sexism is a powerful motive for writing. Writers, like Toni Morrison, moving through and beyond their articulated rage, celebrate difference.

Dealing with difference springs from political, gendered, philosophical and psychoanalytical positions. As the African-American writer Audre Lorde says: “In our work and in our living we must recognize that difference is a reason for celebration and growth rather than a reason for destruction” (101).

Audre Lorde’s point is powerful and liberating. It challenges westernized imperial and colonial, polarized thought processes (black or white, male or female, good or bad) which would not merely categorize as ‘Other’ all that is not ‘self,’ but then produce
notions of hierarchy, making the ‘Other’ secondary, subordinate, to be controlled, conquered, owned or destroyed. Difference should instead be a reason for celebration, argues Lorde.

Critical response is an important way to articulate and negotiate communication. Merely celebrating and recording, without critical response, is insulting, and ‘speaking for’ other people’s experiences should be avoided. When we discuss and write about the writing of others hitherto marginalized, hidden and silenced we need to avoid appropriation, taking them over, feeling our critical attention is the only thing that indicates their worth.

Post-colonial critical practice should avoid seeing all women writers solely in terms of speaking from a subordinate position, and speaking out against oppression. Each writer and each context is different and Toni Morrison’s work in particular ensures that we appreciate the specificity of individuals, whose individuality and specific histories are explored, and often celebrated through this exploration. So when we want to discuss work by authors from different contexts whose lives are different from our own, how do we do that? Two critics, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sneja Gunew offer solutions:

Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced? The problems of speaking about people who are ‘other’ cannot, however, be a reason for not doing so. The argument that it’s just too difficult can easily become a new form of silencing by default….But whites can never speak for Blacks. (137)
Toni Morrison’s novels give voice to the gendered dimensions of colonial violence. She explores the way that personal and historical trauma, initially silence, may be recorded across generation, as well as across complex national, racial and gender lines. Her only rebellious recourse is silence. Her characters begin a process of racial transformation when they set out to fight their own battles, through personal struggle and Civil Rights work. Their refusal to speak negates the existing order’s ability to use them as ventriloquist’s dolls, a mindless vehicle that would spout the ideological line. When Morrison made her characters open their mouths, she at last finds here voice and moves beyond her method of strategic silences. By giving a voice to her voiceless race, she finds a way to serve her people. She speaks out against racist patriarchal hegemony, rather than standing silent and alone in the margins.

*Beloved* contains Morrison’s most extraordinary and spellbinding womanist remembrances of things past. As Alice Walker’s epigraphs to *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* suggest, womanist connotes “a black feminist or feminist of color”; a woman who, among other things, is audaciously “committed to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi). As Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems remind us in their bio-critical study *Toni Morrison*, because of the silences in the slave narratives due to authorial compromises to white audiences and to self-masking from a painful past, Morrison sees her role as a writer as bearing witness to “the interior life of people who didn’t write [their history] (which doesn’t mean that they didn’t have it)” and to “fill[ing] in the blanks that the slave narrative left” (97).

Unlike James Baldwin, who also defined his role as bearing witness, Morrison privileges the authority and epistemology of black and Third World women in America.
“I use the phrase ‘bear witness’ to explain what my work is for,” she told Steve Cannon and Ntozake Shange in 1977:

I have this creepy sensation ... of loss. Like something is either lost, never to be retrieved, or something is about to be lost and will never be retrieved. Because if we don’t know ... what our past is ... and somebody has to tell somebody something. (qtd. in Samuels 139)

Toni Morrison tries to project black women’s predicament in America and delineates the way they become aware about themselves and their life. She gives voice to her characters and thereby retrieves from the white master their power of verbal preproduction. She made blackness visible and audible through her works. She seeks to substantiate and give voice to African Americans silenced by the historical narratives of a dominant discourse.

This research paper examines the silences within Toni Morrison’s works as well as her attempts to ‘speak’ these silences. Such an examination shows that Morrison’s narrative repudiation of silence connects ideas of physical and verbal reproduction with the generative defining of ‘blackness’ as something other than a negative absence. Through such a definition and communication of silence and blackness, Morrison’s works attempt to unify the reader and speaker by making the presence within black silence known.

To define—or, even more generally, to speak—necessitates the maintenance of boundaries which separate. Barbara Johnson has stated that “articulate language requires the co-presence of two distinct poles, not their collapse into oneness.... The reduction of discourse to oneness, identity ...has as its necessary consequence aphasia, silence, the
loss of the ability to speak” (Johnson 212). Johnson’s somewhat logocentric diagnosis of silence stresses the loss or absence of speech in terms of clinical disorder, but silence can also mark the achieved end of speech, a state of immediate understanding which follows articulating language. This doubleness of silence as a mark of separation and/or unification is mirrored in Johnson’s use of the adjective ‘articulate’ to describe language. According to the American heritage Dictionary, ‘articulate’ is derived from the Latin ‘articulare’, which means ‘to divide into joints’, ‘to utter distinctly.’ It denotes both the differentiation of parts (‘Spoken in or divided into clear and distinct words or syllables’) and the joining of parts. (‘To unite by forming a joint or joints’). “In perfect communication,” writes Sumanta Chaudhury, “there is nothing but unity…. Thus, communication proper abolishes the very condition which makes possible communication” (qtd. in Hirsch 460).

Morrison made an attempt to express what lies latent in black silence. Just as a work or a sentence is surrounded and informed by silence, Morrison’s narrative would be intermediate between two poles of silence. But would the initial and the final silences be identical? What separates the silence that signifies the loss of ability, or the refusal to speak, from the silence which negatively represents the obsolescence of speech when communication has been effected?

To define the essence of silence has been a philosophical project of intellectuals and religious thinkers throughout world history, and recent studies recognize that the multiplicity of types of silence throws into question a definition of silence as merely the absence of speech. “Persons, in fact, can be silent and keep their thought to themselves, and that is quite different from simply saying nothing. It is an active attitude,” (qtd. in
Hirsch 460) writes Max Scheler, pointing to one type of difference within the category of silence.

Each character and each story of Morrison emerging from the matrix of joy and pain, struggles for voice. Each novel evidences the sense that Morrison is a vessel and out of her mouth the characters speak, what they are, were and can be come. In all her works, there is a constant witnessing, almost a sacred sharing, a responding to the necessity to speak of and in a kindred sense, speak for those whose tongues have historically been exorcised, whose cries as well as laughter have been and still are smothered by their white masters. African Americans still believe in and practice the power of the word. Hence they produce works which can only be fully comprehended as both text and speech, as both documentation and incantation, as both representation and catalytic inspiration.

Morrison is one of the most significant postcolonial thinkers who have their roots in Africa. She proves to be socially as well as artistically committed. Her narrative strategy is to employ many voices, supposedly diverse, depicting the Black and his ‘ways.’ But while these many voices purportedly offer a multiplicity of points of view, what Bakhtin refers to as ‘heteroglossia’, they are shockingly similar, blending into the single authorial voice. If there is silencing in the slave narratives, there is also a potentially dangerous process of voicing which occurs in current criticism. Beloved speaks for the slaves whose voices were silenced (alluded to as ‘Sixty Million and more’).

Jazz is a novel where we hear the silenced voices of motherhood. Many of the characters are in state of orphanage. Violet’s mother is left with no other option except to
choose not to have any children. Joe Trace’s mother lives in the wild, and even when he goes to look for her, he is able to collect only some traces of her and his own history amounts to some “traces.” Consequently history is truncated as well as silenced. Dorcas (JZ) has lost her parents to the riots. Alice Manfred and Felice (JZ) are orphans at some level. But the characters learn to reclaim their mother’s voice and are once again re-connected. “Joe, Violet, Alice, and Dorcas all cry out for their mothers, “…. In each case, the actual flesh mother is unable to answer; yet, ultimately, the mother’s voice is resurrected as history and serves to re-connect her child” (JZ 63).

Colonial discourses have meticulously constructed a power structure, which assumes a European cultural dominance. Out of this belief is created a Manichaean binary system, the west symbolizing all that is forward and the east anything that is retrograde. Postcolonial discourses seek to deconstruct the structure that underlines an occidental superiority against an oriental inferiority. In the words of Elleke Boehmer, “the postcolonial is that which questions, overturns, and/or critically refracts colonial authority—its epistemologies and forms of violence, its claims to superiority” (351). During the colonial era, natives were ruled by a power endorsed by a structured system of knowledge that projected them as “weak-willed, inferior, secondary, effeminate, and unable to rule themselves” (351). The conceptualization, “oriental” is European in origin and it served its purpose of dominating the defined. In consequence, this knowledge structure muted the colonized.

The muteness is what postcolonial thinking seeks to cure. The muteness is perhaps a dimension of the disintegration of native history, culture, literature, language, pride, identity. Postcolonial discourses strive to find their lost voices amidst the chaos of
European hegemonic noises. The muteness had been imposed on the colonized as a custom during the colonial era, whereas articulation had been established as the coloniser’s authoritative domain. The designed establishment is gradually shaken in its foundations and gradually reconstructed brick by brick by postcolonial thought and discourses in the venture to revoke the imposed muteness and reconstruct their identity.

Silence is the religion and secrecy, the language of the subaltern agency as against articulation, the choice of popular science. As Paul Sharrad says: “… the subaltern speaks by not speaking, but by existing, invisible and silent, at the heart of darkness, of colonial life” (222). Silence is not followed for the sake of secrecy. Rather it is rooted in their philosophy of knowledge.

Morrison’s repeated emphasis on silence provides a reading of the subaltern which suggests that a figure denied a voice by hegemonic cultures could exist as a viable power player in her own right. She gives a new rendering of the silence embodied by the native. Silence is a pervading theme in the novel presented in contrast with articulation. The silence of the black slaves in her novels shows an utmost dimensional change. Here the silence is deliberate and it teases and shuns articulation, the method of the coloniser. The followers of the ‘silence’ are not compartmented in class or gender specific terms. The secret movement functions as a cult and the choice of followers are not restricted by labels.

However, the whole expression of the silence, juxtaposed with articulation, through the various quests can be allegorically perceived as the native or the colonized reiterating their voice and reconstructing their identity, thereby emphasizing their existence as an independent force. This goes a long way in proving the discourses of the
articulators, the scientific men or the colonizers, false. In a broader understanding, there is a resultant blurring of lines between silence and articulation. As Phulboni puts it:

Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life: that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice. It is not: indeed the Word is to this silence what the shadow is to the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life. (The Calcutta Chromosome 25)

The subaltern always speaks, though in a different way and in a voice very subtle. The black women writers not only speak but take upon themselves the responsibility of safeguarding their rich cultural heritage. Ogunyemi calls our attention to this:

The intelligent black writer, conscious of black impotence in the context of white patriarchal culture, empowers the black man. She believes in him; hence her books end in integrative images of the male and female worlds. Given this commitment, she can hardly become a strong ally of the white feminist until (perhaps) the political and economic fortunes of the black race improve. (68-69)

Ogunyemi sees signs of hope in the emergence of black women writers as spokespersons for the black women. They recognize the saving graces of womanism which is deeply grounded in black togetherness which alone addresses the core problems in woman-man relationship. She argues persuasively:

Nevertheless, the black woman writer in Africa and in the United States has finally emerged as a spokeswoman for black women and the black race by moving away from black male chauvinism and the iconoclastic
tendencies of feminism to embrace the relative conservatism of womanism. She consequently ensures larger horizons for herself and her people. Indeed, in helping to liberate the black race through her writing she is aiding the black woman who has been and still is concerned with the ethics of surviving rather than with the aesthetics of living. Womanism with its wholesome, its religious grounding in black togetherness, is her gospel of hope. (79)

It is quite paradoxical that while white men treated their women as fanciful and pleasurable objects, the black men did not allow the question of gender superiority or inferiority to wedge in as a delimiting and dividing factor. The very peculiar nature of slavery in fact nurtured gender equality among the blacks. Their very survival depended on comradeship. They were to each other citadels of consolations and courage. This indeed has given rise to the ideology of silence which so realistically depicts the very ideology of the Africans. The present study seeks evidence for the prevalence of silence in Toni Morrison’s novels.

Black women writers are made an attempt to articulate “The muted voices of tale-telling women …” (Mori 20). Fortunately, the rich oral traditions of black culture preserved the sagas of story telling women and this helped history from sinking into oblivion. What Morrison does is to give her women the much denied centrality. Mori observes:

By placing a woman at the center of her novels, she takes a historical approach in order to reconstruct African-American culture and history in slavery. Aiming at subverting a racial hierarchy and validating African-
American culture, she challenges a dualistic western Civilization which has mutilated and debased African Americans physically and psychologically: right or wrong, black or white, the oppressors or the oppressed. African Americans have been subject to the harmful dichotomizing by race which has strongly restricted their behaviors and social and political participation. (21)

Morrison in the Afterword to her first novel *The Bluest Eye* speaks of the way in which this story was first and foremost, her effort to “shape a silence” while “breaking it”, at the same time. She addresses questions about what it means to bear witness or give testimony, to multiform histories and experiences of ‘silence.’ For many writers, however, the practice of testimony is not only a matter of speaking out against silencings but also entails the task of making space for the affective, emotive, and political dimensions of what the Japanese Canadian poet and activist Joy Kogawa has aptly described as “a silence that cannot speak” or “a silence that will not speak” (*Obasan* 1-2).

The intention of the researcher in writing this thesis is to examine the complex and multi-faceted ways in which the works of Toni Morrison may be read, as practices of bearing witness and resisting voicelessness and erasure that marginalized women writers have developed through their story telling. Morrison’s novels seek to give due weight to lives, experiences, events, and realities that, otherwise, seem to have “no living word” in the current critical terrain of mainstream North American literary studies. In may ways, the works of Morrison, constitute and offer testimonies to what Lorna Goodison evocatively refers to as “…the half that never been told, / and some of us must tell it” (*Mother, the Great Stones Got to Move* 7-8). Reading what her works have to say may
involve a certain process of bearing witness where we, as readers ask ourselves: What do we notice through our own reading practices and why? What happens when we read her stories which are silenced, or rendered invisible or unnoticeable? Through an analysis of Morrison’s works, this thesis attempts to chart more precise critical outlook for understanding the meaning and reverberations of silence and voice in her novels.

Set and written against and amidst the mid-twentieth century U.S. Black political history, Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* addresses the violence and unspeakability of incest, among other things. Focussing largely on the perspectives and stories of children who have been silenced through experiences of sexual violence, the novel explores the various somatic and non-linguistic modes of testimony and witnessing – for example, in the form of watching, observing, hearing, internalizing, or otherwise sensing and embodying the different violences, pains and desires that are constructed within locales of familial intimacy.

This thesis also argues that Morrison’s works also offer ways of critically transforming silence through their linking of isolating and individualizing experiences of abuse to larger, systematic and historical processes of sexual, racial, gendered, classed and colonial violence – including the ways in which these are always articulated through each other. She writes from variously peripheralized positions, and her novel addresses situations, experiences, and collective histories of oppression and injustice. She has articulated a concept of her own craft or story telling as a form of witnessing and is clear about the fact that her writing emerges out of specific historical conditions and social realities. Morrison frequently discusses her writings in terms of their rootedness in many of the significant markers of black political history – evidenced, for instance, through
Beloved’s engagement with the effects of the Middle Passage and slavery, Jazz’s narration of the histories of Black Urban Migration, and Paradise’s situatedness in debates generated by the Civil Rights Movement and Black nationalisms. Being fully aware of having a specific role as an African American writer, Morrison speaks of her writing as an effort to restore value and integrity to the languages of black cultural production in the face of racist violence and degradation.

All her novels exhibit an uneasy relationship to speech and are concerned as much with the words that are told as with what cannot be said. To borrow from the words of Kamala Visweswaran, these novels help us to know that we must “learn to listen not just to women’s speech, but women’s silences as well” (qtd. in Tagore 13). Many of her novels convey knowledges and events that have been passed down, and often transformed, across several generations. In other words, her works relay experiences that are often witnessed by and through others. Her works elaborate, as well, on many different forms of witnessing: from watching, speaking, listening, remembering, feeling, to doing and being. Inviting reconsiderations of the very definitions of speech, silence, and voice, including their relation to each other, her works also call for new critical and political vocabularies and languages for describing what they do, and what it is that we might hear them saying.

Numerous historic and contemporary conditions of violence and trauma are rendered invisible or unnoticeable. Multiplicity of responses to both personal and collective violence is possible and may even exist simultaneously. Silence, absence, disappearance and death may be important sites for thinking about trauma; many people, however, have and do live through and with trauma or grave situations of violence on a
daily basis. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to trace the variety and range of responses that have been generated by a marginalized woman writer like Toni Morrison, while bearing witness to past and present conditions of colonial violence. One of the central interests in this thesis is to examine the institutional violence on Blacks and different forms of silencing with their historical and political dimensions. Through a reading of Morrison’s works, an attempt is made to understand how violence and silence come to be theorized, through an understanding of Morrison’s storytelling as a particularly important archive of witnessing, remembrance and resistance.

Narrated, for the most part, through the viewpoint of children and the perspective of early adolescence Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is a novel that begins by drawing and inviting the reader into various intimacies and, to different degrees, into places of comfort, familiarity and fluency. It is a novel about bitterness, rage, self-hatred and the silence that results from suppressed anger. In the Afterword to the 1994 edition of the novel, as well as in her essay “*Unspeakable Things Unspoken*”, Morrison herself comments on the particular writing strategies that she employs in order to bring readers into confidence and gain their attentions. For example, Morrison remarks on her use of a “speakerly” voice and her choice to begin the novel with the phrase, “Quiet as it’s kept” (*TBE* 3). This phrase, she explains, functions as a means of signalling to her African American readers a recognizable and everyday situation wherein a young child might be listening to older women conversing or gossiping with each other around a kitchen table.

The exigencies of Morrison’s novel, however, arise in the overwhelming and often uncomfortable subject matter that it engages: it is a story of a young girl’s extreme victimization and rape by her father. One of the most dramatic, yet disturbing episode in
the novel, is the scene where two white men coerce Cholly and his first lover, Darlene, to perform sexually under their gaze. Cholly and Darlene’s love-making is suddenly and traumatically interrupted by the appearance of two armed white men. Using the threat of their guns, the two men force Cholly to have sex with Darlene under the harsh light of their flashlights and for the benefit of their entertainment. As the white men watch and laugh at the spectacle, they become eyewitnesses to Cholly and Darlene’s subordination. The two white men have the power to see, but Cholly and Darlene, while visible as Other, cannot look back at them: “There was no place for Cholly’s eyes to go. They slid about furtively searching for shelter, while his body remained paralyzed” (TBE 148). The white men assume the position of all-powerful subjects, while Cholly and Darlene are left with no subjectivities of their own, caught, as they are, in whiteness’s gaze. This scene makes readers acutely and uncomfortably aware of the violence of being made to watch oneself from the outside, even or especially during the most intimate of moments.

Through their unique engagements with silence, questions of violence and witnessing, these texts facilitate more responsible and responsive practices of listening, testimony and intervention not simply on behalf of people who cannot tell their own stories but rather for what we do not yet know, or cannot yet speak, of our own selves. Morrison’s works emphasize that violence (whether sexual, racial, religious etc.) is often silent and silenced, made secret and unspeakable. Violence cannot be viewed as belonging ‘elsewhere’—in the lives of Other(ed) women and people. Rather, different forms and structures of evidence implicate each of us, albeit on unequal grounds.

Since sound first vibrated, its counterpart, silence, has been concurrently audible. The reverberating power of silence has long been acknowledged. Silence as a narrative
has been examined often. Yet, it lends itself more readily, either to romanticisation or to restriction as a ‘weapon of the weak.’ Meaningful silence is a cauldron where resilience and rebellion often seethe. Here, it is essential to note that the indicators of silence as inferred in this thesis are not limited to the absence of words. They include non-verbal communication of gesture, totem, subtle social behaviour, encoded music and metaphor, as also verbal non-communication in which the unheard and unregistered are also effectively defined silence, encrypted song and genealogy, cultural legend and words not extended cognizance to, being instances of this articulate silence. This absence of voice, unsaid or unheard can become a potent means of alternative or alternate discourse.

The spectrum of silence spreads from meditative stillness to quite resolve, as the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* realizes in her silence, “This above all, to refuse to be a victim” (*Surfacing* 191). Refusal to voice then is not essentially negation and can well be an expression of affirmation. Silent stemming from non-cognizance of the spoken has led to resistance movements around the world. The tribals in Central India, it has been observed, assiduously kept silence even when beaten. Their voicelessness was not due to an absence of words but because there were too many. They acknowledged the necessity and potency of articulation, but their collective unconscious avoided possible de-culturisation through direct expression. So, they sublimated or voiced their anger, despair, and their hope in encoded song and dance, thus generating silence of the unregistered and, hence, the ‘unheard.’ The averted eyes of black slaves, therefore, can also possibly be viewed as a deceptively submissive response to the master’s presence. Perhaps, it was a willed refusal to make eye contact, and so reveal their feelings, as the force of history and culture behind them. Black music, from
pulsating drums and field songs to gospel music and later the blues and jazz and manifests different aspects of slave experience. Ranging from intense, yet, harnessed passion of an individual to the interactive rhythm of the collective, blacks used music competently as an alternate text, of the unvoiced and unvoice-able, to the stated. This complementarity, direct or through inversion, of the said and the unsaid, of the said and the sung, underlines a very important component of the strategy of silence.

Innumerable such manifestations of silence are evident as strategy to sustain survival, dignity, affirmation, and protest. Thus, abject and helpless silence has no role to play in strategy and passive, brutalized, and dumb silence is excluded from the ambit of voice-less discourse. Thoughtful and purposeful silence, on the other hand, is the turning point where the process of meaningfulness and proaction begins. It forms the interface between the heavy and mute silence of the marginalized and its articulation of protest. Thus, silence, words, and actions become strategic extensions and correlatives of each other. While focusing on the articulation, inaudible processes that made it possible, cannot but be considered.

Silence as language of resistance has two operatives: those of psychology and of praxis. The former is limited to token protest as a feel-good exercise. Mimicry, behind the back spitefulness and disorderliness are some examples of silence that serve only to mitigate absolute helplessness. Strategic silence needs to be praxis-oriented. Often, the two intermingle as in this old, black folk-song:

Got one mind for white folks to see,

’Nother for what I know is me;

He don’t know, he don’t know my mind. (qtd. in Levine xi)
The smugness of ‘he don’t know my mind’ can effortlessly be undone by proposing that white folks do not want to know a slave’s mind, even if they can bring themselves to admit his having one. Alternatively, the song could be the singer’s fierce guarding of his identity, the refusal to be totally enslaved, a precondition to his protest.

Nowhere is the eloquence of such voice-less discourse more pregnant than, perhaps, in Toni Morrison in whose works these submerged voices of race and also of gender become almost deafening. She is acutely aware of how “silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (Playing in the Dark 9). Morrison problematises the issue by speaking of words and of their absence in both the oppressed and the oppressors, and between them. Thus, muffled voices of the non-verbal and the uttered but unheard, half-heard, or mis-heard, acquire dimension of the Tower of Babel, requiring careful unravelling. At the level of narrative, too, ironic inversion of the said reveals the pattern of the unsaid. The following analysis seeks to examine Toni Morrison’s Beloved through this vital symbiosis of voicelessness and its discourse.

Beloved charts the movement of silences from the weak and the limited to the employment of silence for healing and regeneration. Silence acts as a means of an alternative discourse. The gaps and silences in black history can be interpreted through the vicissitudes of central character Beloved. In fact, silence was a strategy for black survival as slaves.

The strategy is realised through a tactical pattern of alternative silence, and voice which it facilitates, throughout the novel. A perusal of the significant incidents in the narrative bears this out. The central image of the novel is that of Sethe standing with her baby she has just killed in her hand and surrounded by the babies she has tried to kill.
The description is not verbal but strikingly visual in which Morrison focuses on the eyes of all present, living or dead, “Little nigger-boy eyes open in sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so her head wouldn’t fall off….But the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn’t have any … she looked blind” (BE 150). The contrast between the ‘staring’ eyes of the dead child and the unseeing eyes of her mother-murderer is built-up so, that it makes Beloved’s return possible and evokes the inward-turning effects of dehumanization. What follows is the chilling silence of the neighbourhood, “Sethe walked past them in their silence and hers” (BE 152). It is the silence of mutual withdrawal based on incomprehension and seeming pride which takes a long time and beloved’s extended visit to overcome. So, the songs that would have reached out, “like arms to hold and steady her on the way” (BE 152) are checked to mere, “Humming. No words at all” (BE 152). This alienating and horrified silence draws into itself the dumbstruck response of animalized slavery. But, it also becomes the vortex where a design could be made toward assertion. In stark contrast to the frozen picture of Sethe and her children is the vacuity of the whites, stilled in a tableau of incomprehension. The blood of Beloved screams its answer to the ‘skinless’ nephew’s uninformed, “What she go and do that for?” (BE 150). It defies and reduces whatever the slave master had done or could do to utter insignificance and irrelevance. Nevertheless, Sethe’s action is a silent scream of mutilated resistance and it draws the past and the future unto itself.

The driving force is hidden in Sethe’s flight from Sweet Home. Once caught, none of the Sweet Home’s men has a plan to fall back on, and fleeing like rabbits, are burnt, hanged or collared and sold. Presence of mind is Sethe’s advantage in this
exigency and she first sends her three children away to the train before returning in search for Halle in the barn. It is here that the seeds of what happened at the shed of Baby Suggs home are sown. Lactating and pregnant, Sethe suffers the worst a mother can. As she puts it, “those boys came in there and took my milk….Held me down and took it” (BE 16). Her attempt to voice the violation to the almost muted, Mrs. Garner results in her back being opened by the boys’ whiplash. What follows are two diverse aspects of silence, given in clear visual images. One, of Halle secreted in the loft seeing his wife being sported with and then sliding into the annihilating silence of the insane with butter smeared all over him. The second, of Sethe’s dead back closing to form, “A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves” (BE 16). The pus blossoms and her torn feet not withstanding, Sethe makes her way to Cincinnati and freedom.

All the songs in the novel belong to the blacks who besides using them as signals as Halle did employ the words and the rhythm for multitudinous expression. Songs are sung to express their suppression (BE 221); to sing of their family—its uniqueness and its legacy (BE 176); encoded expression of suffering for psychological survival (BE 71); re-live the horrors of the past and keep the fire stoked (BE 40); alienate oneself from the community (BE 171); sustain life (BE 89) and to as many more purposes.

*Beloved* reveals layers of silence that accommodate: those words which are spoken, but lost due to mis-communication, or breakdown of communication; words that fail to bear the full weight of what is to be voiced; words and silence that alienate, and those that bond; the language of touch, of the eyes and the face, of gesture and the body; the silence of practiced amnesia; the silence of encoded words; and the silence of the unspoken. Yet, it must be conceded that all strategies are finite and cannot exist always
by themselves. The strategy of silence also needs to cultivate its familiars. Thus, silence which procreates and crystallizes praxis-oriented thought and ultimately makes spaces for deep and forceful articulation is a powerful weapon of change. In tandem, silence, and its discourse—unvoiced before being voiced—provide for a highly complex but effective strategy.

This chapter thus extends and enriches our understanding of the concept of silence in the works of Toni Morrison. The study is grounded in African American theory, literature and history, feminist and gender theory. In the next chapter it moves out of the thicket of existing theories of concepts of silence and breaks fresh ground. A committed and engaged writer like Toni Morrison cannot content herself with simply being silent. "Writers, simply by virtue of their race and/or gender positioning, necessarily articulate a counter-discourse that is intrinsically subversive of dominant power relations" (Foley 67). The breaking of silence in her works opens up questions of dominance and violence. Breaking the silence of her race and speaking for them as the legitimate representative is really a problematic exercise. In her realistic representation of the oppression of her race, she opens up a space for the discussion of violence within the context of American social system. This provides an opening for next chapter where we can hear the protest in the voices of the African Americans through Toni Morrison’s novels—voice of the voiceless, speech of the silent race.