

## SILENCE AS RESISTANCE OF FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN TONY MORRISON'S BELOVED

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### **Abstract**

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe, the central female protagonist, wields silence as a potent form of resistance against the intersecting oppressions of slavery, patriarchy, and racial trauma. This article argues that Sethe's silences—embodied in her scarred body, withheld narratives of milk theft and infanticide, and participation in communal rituals—transcend mere repression, functioning instead as a strategic, voiceless discourse that subverts white patriarchal control and preserves Black female agency. Drawing on trauma theory (Caruth) and Black feminist critiques of articulation (hooks, Paul), close readings of key passages reveal how these silences evolve from individual self-protection to collective re-memory, culminating in the exorcism at 124 Bluestone Road. Contrasting prior scholarship focused on silence as absence, this analysis positions it as proactive power, with implications for contemporary movements like #BlackLivesMatter where strategic muteness challenges erasure. Ultimately, Morrison reimagines silence not as defeat, but as an encrypted pathway to survival and rebirth.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Sethe, silence, resistance, trauma, Black feminism

## INTRODUCTION:

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), silence is no mere void but a haunted architecture, enveloping 124 Bluestone Road like the "not-me" shadows that flicker in its corners, shaping Sethe's fractured existence amid slavery's enduring scars. "There is no way to tell it whole," Sethe reflects on her unspeakable traumas, encapsulating how muteness serves as both the wound of racial patriarchy and a sharpened weapon for Black women's endurance. This Pulitzer-winning novel, inspired by Margaret Garner's 1856 infanticide—a real enslaved mother's lethal defiance against re-enslavement—transforms historical hush into narrative force, dedicating itself to "the sixty million and more" unvoiced dead (epigraph). At its heart stands Sethe, the female protagonist whose strategic silences—from the tree-like whip scars encoding milk theft to the wordless act of infanticide and communal exorcism rituals—reclaim agency in a world that polices Black female speech.

This article argues that Sethe's silences transcend trauma's muteness, functioning as a deliberate, voiceless discourse that subverts white patriarchal control and fosters Black feminist survival. Far from passive repression, these withholdings—bodily, narrative, and ritualistic—operate as "rememory", Morrison's term for persistent, unspoken imprints that disrupt the Schoolteacher's literate tyranny and Paul D's insistent probing ("You got two feet, Sethe, not four"). In a text where "definitions belong to the definers—not the defined", silence becomes Sethe's counter-definition, an encrypted rebellion preserving interiority against commodification.

## Theoretical Foundations

Black feminist theory illuminates this dynamic: bell hooks posits unspoken defiance as vital amid "talking back" risks, while Meenakshi Paul describes "articulate silence" in Morrison's oeuvre as gaps excluding oppressors. Trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth further frame unclaimed events as insistent returns, yet this analysis shifts focus from pathology to power—silence as proactive cipher, not deficit. Morrison herself, in interviews, underscores the enslaved's "wordless but graphic" testimonies, aligning Sethe's scars with ancestral modes of resistance predating literacy's imposition.

## Broader literary context

Sethe's voicelessness resonates across African American women's literature, from the mute rebellion in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* to the strategic pauses in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In "Beloved", it evolves communally: Baby Suggs' "Clearing" sermons channel collective hush into touch-based preaching, Denver's bush silences bridge generations, and the final "unspeakable" feast expels *Beloved*. This progression reveals silence's arc—from individual fortress to shared rebirth—challenging erasure in postbellum America and beyond.

## Scholarly Gap and Stakes

While critics like Barbara Christian celebrate Morrison's "new narration" breaking communal silence and Katherine Drake Selfridge explores embodied trauma, fewer probe silence's intentional agency over mere symptom. Recent ecocritical or digital readings overlook this economic-spatial nexus: silence as withheld labour against slavery's theft. By centring Sethe, this study bridges these voids, with implications for #BlackLivesMatter-era activism where viral muteness (e.g., kneeling protests) echoes her strategy.

Subsequent sections dissect traumatic silences, maternal defiance, communal resistance, and contemporary echoes, proving Morrison recasts muteness as survival's sharpest tool. In hearing Sethe's unvoiced roar, readers confront the cipher of Black female power.

## Literature Review:

Scholarship on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* richly engages Sethe's trauma, motherhood, and narrative gaps, yet reveals a critical under-exploration of silence as intentional resistance rather than mere symptom. Early feminist readings, such as Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985), celebrate Morrison's "new narration" that breaks communal silence through polyvocal memory, positioning the novel as a collective voicing of slavery's suppressed histories. However, these emphasize eruption over endurance, framing Sethe's muteness as prelude to speech.

Trauma theory dominates subsequent analyses, with Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) interpreting Sethe's withheld stories—like the milk theft—as unbidden returns of the repressed, where "the story cannot be told" without bodily inscription. Katherine Drake Selfridge's "Beloved: The Physical Embodiment of Psychological Trauma" (2018) extends this, linking Sethe's stagnancy and relational avoidance to repression's "dark silences," rooted in slavery's violent mothering. Similarly, Eriksson's 2023 study on Sethe and Denver highlights mental imprisonment post-infanticide, where silence imprisons as much as liberates. These views pathologize quietude, overlooking its strategic dimensions.

Black feminist critics offer nuanced correctives, foregrounding intersectional resistance. bell hooks' *Talking Back* (1989) theorizes Black women's unspoken defiance amid risks of "talking back," a lens Meenakshi Paul applies directly in "Voice-less Discourse: Silence as Strategy in *Beloved*" (undated, ~2025), positing Sethe's gaps as "articulate silence"—efficient non-verbal communion excluding oppressors, as in convicts' eyed exchanges. A 2025 English Journal article on Black feminist consciousness in Morrison traces Sethe's internal insurgency from trauma to ancestral re-memory, elevating silence to communal archive.

*Motherhood-focused* studies intersect here, with Trudier Harris (1991) and others viewing Sethe's infanticide silence as maternal agency against re-enslavement, echoing Garner. Yet, gaps persist: ecofeminist or spatial readings (e.g., Clearing as silent sanctuary, underexplore economic withholdings, while digital-age parallels (#BLM muteness) remain nascent.

This article bridges these by centring silence's proactive agency in Sethe—beyond Caruth's returns or Selfridge's embodiment—as Black feminist cipher, evolving from individual shield to collective rebirth

### **Traumatic Silences**

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe's traumatic silences emerge as embodied inscriptions of slavery's violence, transforming personal wounds into resistant voicelessness that shields her from further violation. These silences—manifest in her tree-like whip scars, the withheld milk theft narrative, and relational withdrawals at 124—function dually as trauma's muting force and strategic refusal, subverting the white patriarchal gaze epitomized by Schoolteacher's dehumanizing "studies".

**Whip Scars as Wordless Testimony**

Sethe's back, "ragged as the tree", encodes the milk theft's brutality—her breasts stolen by Schoolteacher's nephews—yet remains unspoken to Paul D initially, a silence born of shame and self-preservation. Unlike verbal testimony, these keloid "chokecherry tree" markings communicate graphically, evading literacy's control while asserting bodily sovereignty. Critics note this as repression's "dark silences" (Selfridge), yet it resists by withholding interpretive power from oppressors.

**Milk Theft and Narrative Gaps**

The assault's core trauma—"what they did right before they whipped me"—eludes articulation, with Sethe halting mid-revelation to Paul D: "Something came clear between Sethe and Paul D" only via touch. This gap exemplifies Cathy Caruth's unclaimed events, returning somatically rather than discursively, yet strategically excludes white judgment. By embodying rather than voicing, Sethe denies commodification, her milk symbolizing maternal essence reclaimed through muteness.

**Relational and Communal Withdrawal**

Post-Paul D's arrival, Sethe's stagnancy—refusing work, echoing house 124's "spite of a baby girl's ghost"—manifests communal silence: neighbours' "humming" distance mirrors her isolation. Denver inherits this, retreating to bushes, while Baby Suggs' failed "Clearing" sermons underscore silence's spread. These are not mere pathology but encrypted boundaries, protecting interiority amid trauma's return via Beloved.

**Toward Resistance**

These silences evolve from defensive repression—Sethe's "tobacco tin" psyche akin to Paul D's—to proactive agency, prefiguring maternal defiance. By refusing speech's surveillance, Sethe crafts a Black feminist cipher, where trauma's muteness births subversive power

**Beloved's Disruption of Sethe's Traumatic Silence**

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the embodied ghost Beloved does not simply break Sethe's traumatic silence but violently pries it open, forcing confrontation with repressed memories through parasitic intimacy and relentless questioning. Initially a catalyst for deeper muteness, Beloved ultimately catalyses partial

vocalization, shifting Sethe from isolated repression to communal re-memory though at the cost of temporary paralysis.

### **Initial Deepening of Silence**

Beloved's arrival amplifies Sethe's withdrawal: post-Paul D, Sethe quits work to "explain" her infanticide, but their locked gaze devolves into silence's tyranny. "Beloved is my sister. She is mine", Sethe thinks, yet words fail; instead, Beloved drains her physically—Sethe's feet swell, hair thin—mirroring trauma's somatic return. This echoes Caruth: unclaimed events demand embodiment over articulation, as Beloved "cracks" Sethe's psyche like Paul D's tobacco tin.

### **Forcing Vocal Re-memory**

Beloved's stream-of-consciousness pleas—"Tell me your earrings", "Your crown of hair?"—evoke Sethe's milk theft, mother-loss, and escape horrors, dragging buried narratives into fragmented speech. In Part Two's monologues, Sethe finally voices maternal logic: "Beloved, she, my daughter. She mine", differentiating her "love-act" from her mother's rejection. These breaks silence selectively, excluding white judgment while affirming Black kinship. Denver's parallel confessions extend this rupture communally.

### **Parasitic vs. Healing Dynamic**

Critics note duality: Beloved embodies "re-memory", compelling testimony, but her vampirism enforces new silence—Sethe's obsessive caregiving silences external relations. The turning point arrives via communal intervention: thirty women's songs/prayers expel Beloved, freeing Sethe to whisper "She gone". Paul D's return seals healing: "You your best thing, Sethe", transforming individual muteness into a shared voice.

### **From Rupture to Resistance**

Thus, Beloved breaks silence not gently but as trauma's revenant—extracting stories through pain, enabling Sethe's evolution from scarred cipher to vocal survivor. This prefigures the novel's thesis: silence yields to strategic speech only through collective force

### **Maternal Silence as Defiance**

Sethe's maternal silence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* constitutes her most radical act of defiance, a wordless assertion of agency that denies slavery's ultimate

theft: ownership of her children's bodies and souls. The infanticide—slitting her "crawling-already?" baby's throat—remains largely unspoken, not from shame but as a strategic refusal to let white patriarchal law judge or commodify her love. This silence, echoing Margaret Garner's historical muteness, transforms motherhood from victimhood to insurgency, preserving her daughter's freedom in death over subjection in life.

### **Infanticide's Voiceless Logic**

When Paul D confronts Sethe—"You got two feet, Sethe, not four"—she offers fragmented rationale: "I got close. I got close. To know you what. To have to watch them put her back in". This halting speech excludes full explication for white ears, positioning the act as Black maternal cipher: "Thin love ain't love at all". Critics frame it via Trudier Harris as "other mothering" gone lethal—defiance against Schoolteacher's auction block, where silence denies narrative closure to oppressors. The rust-smear'd coroner's record testifies externally, but Sethe's internal hush reclaims authority.

### **Post-Trauma Maternal Muteness**

Beloved's return enforces intensified silence: Sethe ceases work, whispering only "She my daughter" in their locked trance, prioritizing restitution over explanation. This mirrors her mother's migratory rejection—"threw away" unwanted daughters yet Sethe inverts it, hoarding Beloved exclusively. Denver breaks in: "You can't just stop work", highlighting silence's communal cost, yet it defies Paul D's linear probing, asserting nonlinear Black time where maternal bonds transcend speech.

### **Communal Echoes and Legacy**

Baby Suggs' "Clearing" silences—preaching touch over words—foreshadow Sethe's logic, while Denver inherits defiant quiet in her bush vigils. The women's prayer expulsion vocalizes what Sethe withholds, proving maternal silence seeds collective voice. Thus, Sethe's hush evolves from solitary rebellion to shared re-memory, challenging slavery's linguistic dominance: "Definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined".

### **Theoretical Implications**

Black feminist motherhood (Collins) recasts this as "blood mother" insurgency, where silence circumvents patriarchal inscription. Unlike verbal resistance

risking recapture, Sethe's muteness—rooted in infanticide's unspeakably—embodies love's extremity, prefiguring communal healing.

### **Communal and Generational Resistance**

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, communal and generational resistance transforms Sethe's individual silence into collective power, weaving maternal defiance across lineages through shared rituals, spatial sanctuaries, and inherited remembrance. Baby Suggs' "Clearing," Denver's bush vigils, and the women's final prayer circle exemplify this evolution—from hushed isolation to vocal solidarity—disrupting slavery's generational trauma while affirming Black feminist survival.

### **Baby Suggs' Clearing: Proto-Communal Silence**

Baby Suggs holy, preacher of touch over words, gathers freed kin in the Clearing's woods, where "her words come from the silence she has known." Her call-and-response—"Listen here, you girls; you boys"—channels ancestral hush into bodily sermons: "Here in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs." This wordless worship defies Schoolteacher's book-bound definitions, modelling silence as communal cipher. Post-infanticide ostracism, however, reveals limits: neighbours' envious distance fractures unity, foreshadowing 124's haunt.

### **Denver's Generational Bridge**

Inheriting Sethe's muteness, Denver retreats to Creekside bushes, listening to ladybug lessons and *Beloved*'s whispers, forging solitary resistance amid maternal obsession. Her breakthrough—venturing to Lady Jones for literacy—shifts silence strategically: "I need to learn to read so I can know what's in the world". This bridges generations, rejecting inherited trauma for empowerment, as Denver tells Paul D, "Beloved is my sister", echoing Sethe's claim yet extending outward.

### **Collective Exorcism**

Silence to Song, Climaxing resistance, thirty Black women converge on 124, their initial "humming distance" yielding to ecstatic song and prayer: "Jesus Christ had a cross to bear... but Sethe got the nigger here". This ritual vocalizes

Sethe's withheld infanticide, expelling Beloved via communal breath—"not a baby voice" —reversing isolation. Ella leads: "Disremember", mandating selective forgetting, proving silence's endpoint is shared voice, not endless repression.

### **Legacy Across Generations**

Sethe's maternal silence seeds Denver's agency and Paul D's return ("You your best thing" ), while Baby Suggs' ethos endures in communal bonds. Critics highlight this per Collins' Black motherhood matrix: resistance via "other mothering" networks, countering slavery's atomization. Generational arc—from Suggs' touch, Sethe's blade, Denver's words—recodes trauma as legacy, where silence births collective rebirth.

### **Theoretical Resonance**

This progression embodies Morrison's communal aesthetic: individual cipher amplifies through solidarity, challenging linear white history. From hush to harmony, resistance proves generational, ensuring "re-memory" revolves beyond haunting to healing.

Sethe's silences in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—from scarred testimony and maternal blade to communal song—recast trauma

### **Conclusion:**

Sethe's silences in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—from scarred testimony and maternal blade to communal song—recast trauma's muteness as Black feminist insurgency, subverting slavery's patriarchal definitions while seeding generational rebirth. This evolution reveals silence not as defeat but as cipher: a voiceless discourse preserving interiority against erasure, culminating in the women's prayer that expels Beloved and affirms "She gone.". By withholding speech from Paul D's probes and Schoolteacher's gaze, Sethe reclaims her children's legacy, transforming infanticide's hush into Denver's literacy and communal harmony.

These findings extend beyond *Beloved*'s 1850s Cincinnati, illuminating contemporary Black women's strategies—from #BlackLivesMatter's kneeling

silences to viral pauses challenging police narratives. In an era of digital surveillance, Sethe's encrypted resistance models strategic muteness as power, echoing Morrison's dedication to "the sixty million and more" whose unvoiced stories demand hearing on their terms. Scholars must further explore this in digital re-memory, probing how silence endures as activism amid algorithmic erasure.

Ultimately, Morrison proves that true resistance speaks without words: Sethe's quiet roar births survival, reminding us that Black female agency thrives in the gaps where oppressors cannot follow.

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