

# The quality of silence

Literature



Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" is similar to J. M. Coetzee's "Foe" in subtle and meaningful ways. Although the setting and the storyline of the two books derive their inspiration from two entirely different cultures and struggles, the underlying theme in both is undeniably alike. One theme, which is the subject of focus in this paper, is the theme of silence. There are two variants of silence as presented in the texts: voluntary and unavoidable. Both types are present in each text although these are manifested through the situations of several and not unitary characters in the two books.

Despite the silence of the characters to be studied it will be seen that these persons are key components required to move the story forward. In fact, two characters, one in each book, who have been subjected to forced silence are main characters in the story. The story being told in the book is theirs even though they do not have the voice to flesh out their actual sentiments. It is this incapability of the characters to express themselves which the story clings to and strives to impart to the readers.

Thus this paper will show how Roy and Coetzee's works manifest that there is an oppression of the weak which robs them of their narrative and of their voice in society. The silence that engulfs the victim convolutes the true account of the story. This convolution of the story may be another act of oppression in itself apart from the silence that the third party is made to endure. Through the discussions it will be shown how despite the distinction between voluntary and unavoidable silence, there in fact is only one true nature of the silence depicted in the two stories.

Voluntary silence although seemingly accepted or even embraced by the persona is hardly willingly entered into. The discussion on the two stories will show that the root of the silence in both texts is the unfolding of circumstances forcing the characters to be molded into a societal construct of hierarchy and order. This construction will be made quite clear through the analysis of the novels. *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy's novel takes place in a small town in India and tracks the development and growth of one family resident therein.

Key to the discussion on silence are the characters of the twins Estha and Rahel as well as their mother Ammu and her lover Velutha. Their family is one beset by disappointment and hardship from the time of Ammu's father and to the resultant lives of Estha and Rahel. Velutha is an untouchable, a member of the lower caste, by birth and works as the local carpenter. The twins admire Velutha and are unaware that their mother admires him as well, although in a romantic light. Ammu is separated from her husband and so Velutha and Ammu engage in an amorous affair.

It is soon discovered however and Velutha and Ammu are separated. The twins are distraught to find Velutha gone and their mother locked up in her room but when they inquire about it they are rebuffed. They decide to run away and take with them their cousin, Sophie. The cousin drowns during their get-away. Baby Kochamma, aunt of Ammu, seizes the situation to extract her revenge on Velutha for a past offense which she attributes to the latter. The turn of events leads to the execution of Velutha for Sophie's death and the exile and separation of the twins from their hometown and from each other.

Estha chooses to remain unspeaking after his torturous experiences. He is reunited with his twin sister after more than twenty years apart and in a final grotesque act, the two commit incest with each other as if to testify to the family atrocities they witnessed yet could not speak about. Foe Unlike Roy's novel, Coetzee's story revolves around a lady who is cast away on an island with two other men. Susan Barton, the lady, was cast off a ship when the crew mutinied against the ship's captain, of whom she had been a mistress.

She swims to shore and finds herself in the company of Friday, a former African slave, and his master Cruso. Friday has been mutilated by Moorish slavers who cut out his tongue thus rendering him unable to talk. A year after her arrival on the island, Susan and the rest are rescued by a passing ship. Cruso dies on the voyage as he had already been ill before they were rescued. When Susan and Friday arrive in England, Susan decides to write about their experience as castaways. She does not publish this in her own name but seeks out the author Daniel Foe to act as ghostwriter on her behalf.

What ensues is Foe's adoption of Susan's memoir quashing the voice of the female narrator. Their relationship turns sexual and Susan finds herself struggling against Foe for control of her story. She finds that the meaning which she injected into her story is slowly being tainted by Foe's own authorship. Throughout this time Friday remains with Susan as she has seen fit to adopt him. She impresses upon him the opportunity open to them both through the publication of their story.

She insists that they will make a fortune and attain popularity. However, Friday's own story cannot be told in his own perspective of the events that transpired. What ensues is Susan's taking on of Friday's perspective and injecting her own words into what she perceives has been his experience. The novel ends with a narration by an unnamed persona revising the story as unfolded to the reader. It is thus of great interest as to whose version of the story is believable and whose account of the story embodies what actually transpired.

The reader is left thus with varying accounts all of which are tenable though only one recourse would have shown the actual occurrence of events.

**Voluntary Silence** The most apparent form of voluntary silence in the texts is the silence adopted by Estha after he is exiled from his hometown. Estha was the victim of molestation by a vendor in a theater when he was but a mere child. When Velutha and Ammu's affair was discovered, he also had to endure his mother's accusations that he was the reason for her grief.

Later he would endure the guilt and torment of his cousin's death as well as witness the torture of Velutha by the police. Even as a young boy he would find himself compelled by his great-aunt to choose between his actual account of what happened and lying to protect his mother from being imprisoned. His great-aunt would even convince him that he had intentionally allowed his cousin to drown because he had been jealous of her. All these events led to the muteness of Estha. The horrors that he could not speak of stole from him the desire to speak of anything at all.

Estha though is described as a quiet child so “ no one could pinpoint with any degree of accuracy exactly when...he had stopped talkin. Stopped talking altogether (Roy, 1997, 12). In Coetzee’s work Susan Barton admits to her voluntary silence as well. She attributes this to her silence as a result of her inability to get her work, as she wrote it, published: The silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is a child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born.

Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence. Coetzee, 1987, 122) Susan is confined to voluntary silence because in her society a woman would not be respected to be able to write and so she resorts to Foe’s ghostwriting. Thus, when Foe amends her writing and infuses it with his own voice and color, Susan is coerced to accept the changes as she voluntarily chooses not to assert herself. Estha’s voluntary silence results from his tumultuous childhood whereas Susan’s results from the perceived weakness of her gender. In both instances however it is seen that neither Estha nor Susan willingly entered into their silence.

In both cases it can be said that social hierarchies forced them to undergo experiences which convinced them that their need to remain silent is inevitable. Thus, although they both take on the task of keeping quiet, neither would have chosen to do so if not for the social constraints which bound them. Unavoidable Silence There are characters in the story which show that the silence which they endured was unavoidable. Friday’s silence is the prominent in this regard. Friday is rendered mute by the removal of his tongue by slavers.

Roy on the other hand presents a more subtle compulsory silence in the character of Velutha. Velutha is forced into silence by his death. He is unable to relay his version of events because there are none who would support his story. Those who could defend him choose to testify against him through the machinations of Baby Kochamma. In both these instances it is evident that the right to testify for themselves regarding the events that transpired is robbed from both characters. Looking into the similarities of the two it can be seen that both belong to a lower social status than other characters in the story.

Friday is an African slave and Velutha is an untouchable. They are both subjected to silence because those who would hold themselves above Friday and Velutha deem that their narratives are less important than those of others. In this regard, Susan's account is held over Friday's while Baby Kochamma's account is believed over Velutha's. This subjection of one to the will of another who is deemed by society as greater or of more worth than the former is conceded in Coetzee's text. Susan admits in *Foe*: I tell myself I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth?

There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Crusoe preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveowner. (Coetzee, 1987, 60-61) Although the subjection of Friday to the will of other's is a reprehensible thing, Susan and Foe find his silence attractive and would extract from it the opportunities which it presents. They feel therefore the obligation and the inclination to <https://assignbuster.com/the-quality-of-silence/>

open Friday's mouth for him and to speak the words which he cannot utter.

### Oppression

The above discussion shows that indeed there are various causes for a persona to keep silent. Whether deemed voluntary or unavoidable due to the physical impossibility of speech, silence as presented in the two texts resounds with a deep thrum of oppression. None of the characters presented entered into their silence of their free choice nor did they do so for mere inclination to be mute. Rather, the silence displayed in the two stories shows that the characters were made to believe that their oppression would not be remedied nor would their attempts to voice out the injustice bring change to the situation.

The most apparent show of oppression's hand in the silence of the characters is the cutting out of Friday's tongue and the execution of Velutha even though it was known that he did not commit a crime. The social hierarchies force their hand on those in the lower rungs and strip them of their ability to protest. In the case of Friday and Velutha the theft of their voice was done through physical assertion. Whereas in the case of Estha and Susan the theft was through persuasion that their speech would bring nothing but further trouble upon them.

Friday was a member of a lower social status because he was an African slave; Velutha was born an untouchable; Estha was deemed lower because of his youth and he was manipulated because of his impressionability; and Susan was deemed of lower ranking because of her sex. All these circumstances worked against the four characters silencing their speech and



their desire to speak. The two novels therefore use silence to reflect the social inequalities present in society and wreaking havoc by the unheard of victimization of classes of individuals.