

# Breaking the silence

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



“ We feel safer with a madman who talks than with one who cannot open his mouth,” stated the French philosopher E. M. Cioran. Though seemingly counterintuitive, this statement is undoubtedly true, begging us to question what it is about silence that is so powerful. Silence is, by definition, simply the absence of sound. How can an absence be so commanding? The answer lies in its ability to stifle, to overwhelm, and to control. Because it is undefined, silence invites the imagination to run its course, thereby making it profoundly intimidating and controlling. This fact has often been utilized as a means for control. This theory is clearly seen in both Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, in which different cultures and individuals use silence as a means for power, control, and manipulation. However, though it is the less imposing of the two, language is by no means less powerful than silence. In response to the threat of silence, an urgent need for language and expression arises. As seen in both *Beloved* and *The Woman Warrior*, the power of language always prevails; whether through writing, telling stories, or simply allowing memories to present themselves, language always finds a way to break through the silence. In *Beloved*, silence is used by whites as a tool to suppress blacks both directly and indirectly. Morrison introduces this concept immediately with her dedication to the “ 60 million and more” blacks that were killed in slavery. This is Morrison’s way of honoring those people that were faced with the ultimate silence - death - and are consequently unable to tell their own story. Yet even the blacks who survived struggled against silence. They were denied the opportunity to learn how to write, and were given no say in their fates or the fates of their families. They were also stifled in a more symbolic

way, through the brutal and senseless treatment they were made to endure. They were completely deprived of their humanity, made to believe they were worthless, and treated as less than animals. Not only did this dehumanization result in the loss of a personal voice, but it also did lasting damage to the slaves' internal ability to find expression for their pain. In order for them to continue living as functional human beings even after slavery, they needed to silence their own memories and hide them from others and often from themselves. Sethe, for example, constantly struggles to silence her memories of the pain of slavery, often by working or distracting herself. When the occasional memory resurfaces, she finds herself unable to deal with the emotions that accompany it. In one such instance, " she had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful...had seeped into a slit in her mind" (Morrison 73). Not only does this display the paralyzing effects of their ill treatment, but it also shows the shame that supplements these horrible memories. To fight these emotions, Sethe forces them back into the recesses of her mind, often by distracting herself. Her motto is, " nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (ibid 86). In Paul D's case, he keeps his memories " in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (ibid, 86). Even Denver, affected by the problems of slavery only through inheritance, experiences this suppression, this silencing of painful memories or thoughts. When she hears something about her family's past that " she could not bear to hear" (ibid, 122), " she could not hear...anything at all thereafter. For two years she walked in a silence too

solid for penetration” (ibid, 121). This is quite an extreme case, manifesting as it does in physical symptoms, but silence in any form throughout the novel is indicative of the horrible damage caused by slavery. Whether self-inflicted or not, this silence is not a solution; it only prolongs the pain. This suppression cannot last long, for confronting this silence is the only way the former slaves can move on with their lives. While ultimately beneficial, this is not an easy process. As Amy says, “ It’s gonna hurt, now...anything dead coming back to life hurts” (ibid, 42). The first problem, the dehumanization (the direct result of slavery’s destruction), is a difficult, yet more approachable problem than the suppressed memories. Baby Suggs makes it her goal to tackle this first problem by holding gatherings that promote the expression of humanity, individualization, and love of oneself. She tells them, “[the whites] ain’t in love with your mouth...what you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear...You got to love it” (ibid, 104). In response, a huge emotional outburst ensues, with “ laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up” (ibid, 103). The release of such pent-up hurt is powerful indeed. For Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, their release is catalyzed by the presence of Beloved, the human embodiment of suppressed memories that are now not only resurfacing, but assuming a physical presence in their lives. Her presence forces them to confront the past, each in a different way. For example, when Paul D is having sex with Beloved, he finds that “ the flakes of rust...fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it” (ibid, 137). For Denver, Beloved is a reason for her to tell stories. They sit together and “ Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to

create what really happened” (ibid, 92). This is therapeutic for Denver, who has had to grow up in a house of silence and repression, given only scraps of stories to which she desperately clings. For Sethe, *Beloved*’s mere presence is enough to initiate the catharsis. For everyone, she is a reminder that memories cannot – and should not – be smothered forever. The silence in *Woman Warrior* is far less damaging, but is still a very difficult subject for those who are bound by its restrictions. Though with less malicious intentions as those seen in *Beloved*, this silence similarly tries to control the culture and traditions of a specific society. Efforts are aimed at children, women, and those who transgress – all those who are threatening to the continuation of the traditional culture. By controlling what people say (or don’t say), the Chinese are able to make sure that people continue to think, act, and feel the way that tradition dictates they should. Especially during a time when their culture is in danger of disintegrating (when faced with immigration to the United States), being selective about what is said allows only select messages to be passed on. This is exemplified in the story of the “no name woman,” an aunt who is rejected from the family and who later takes her own life (and the life of her newborn baby). The first thing Maxine is told about this woman is “you must not tell anyone...we say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born” (Kingston, 3). By not allowing anyone to speak her name or admit her presence, they suppress the parts of their memories that do not agree with the common goal of the culture – an exercise in selective memory carried way too far. Silence is especially valued in girls and children, as seen when *Brave Orchid* goes to the market to buy a slave girl as a nurse, and readers see that only

the quiet girls are valued. Also, when Moon Orchid comes to live with Brave Orchid and family, she is astonished by how “impolite [‘untraditional’ in Chinese] her children were” (ibid, 121). The children do not know to speak only when spoken to, and to talk only at the correct volume, and so Moon Orchid considers them abominable. The children cannot learn these things, however, because no one vocalizes the rules or traditions; they are just expected to know them. The fact that the adults withhold this kind of communication from the children only worsens the anxiety the children have about not being able to fit in. They do not know how to fit into American culture, for no one tells them how. They do not know how to fit into Chinese culture, for no one tells them how. And they certainly cannot figure out how to be Chinese-American, for no one even knows how. The children are even lost when it comes to tradition. Maxine observes, “even the good things are unspeakable...we kids had to infer the holidays...the adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask” (ibid, 185). Maxine even insists that her mother cut her tongue when she was a child to keep her silent. Though not for that reason, this did in fact happen – she remained completely silent for three years. She did not really understand her silence or the reasons for it, but she could understand that “the other Chinese girls did not talk either, so [she] knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (ibid, 166). The children’s difficulty with language is one of many unfortunate by-products of their culture’s control over what is said and what is not said. As Maxine observes, “you can’t entrust your voice to the Chinese, either; they want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them” (ibid, 169). Though it is most clearly expressed in the

children, both children and adults struggle to find a way to maintain their own voices in a culture that wants to “capture” them. As has been demonstrated, the suppression of memories is never complete, never permanent, and never a solution; language and expression always show themselves, either aggressively or subtly. In *The Woman Warrior*, readers find that the methods for this vary from story-telling (referred to as “talk-stories”) to projection onto others and consequent bullying. *Brave Orchid*, *Moon Orchid*, and eventually Maxine all take the first path by using these “talk-stories” as selective messages chosen to reflect specific things that they cannot explicitly say. “*White Tigers*” is a story of female strength, of finding a balance between a woman’s filial, societal duties and her personal goals. These things can never be outwardly conveyed from mother to daughter in Chinese society, but through elaborate stories *Brave Orchid* is able to pass this wisdom on to Maxine. Similarly, the story of *Brave Orchid*’s past as a well-respected doctor serves to subtly inspire hope in Maxine, all the while teaching her that while she has goals, she also has duties to fulfill (as seen in *Brave Orchid*’s choice to leave this life for a more unstable one in America, with her family). This is the women’s disguised way of breaking the silence, of ensuring the psychological and emotional strength of the future female generations. Maxine does not observe this immediately, although she seems to have always been attracted to stories and storytelling. Instead, Maxine’s initial reaction to the oppressive silence is rather immature: she targets one girl in her class who never speaks at all (who is, consequently, the embodiment of this tradition of silence). She pinches her and screams, “Why won’t you talk?...If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality...you’ve got

to let people know you have a personality and a brain” (ibid, 180). Maxine is clearly taking out her anger on this girl. She can’t understand why the girl won’t talk, just as Maxine can’t understand the Chinese traditions, what is expected of her, and the silence that is seemingly forced upon her. Maxine’s second reaction is a healthier one: she decides to tell her mother all the things she had been afraid to say out loud. She thinks, “ maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat” (ibid, 197). This is a very proactive way of ending the silence that Maxine can no longer bear. Yet this effort is too bold, too incongruous with the culture, so she is rejected by her mother, who refuses to listen. She ignores the fact that her mother will not listen, and yells everything at her all at once – all her fears, regrets, aspirations, and frustrations. Maxine’s final solution is the most effective – she writes everything down in a book. Through writing, she can break the silence that has confused and stifled her for so long, and she can fill in the blanks with contextual (if often invented) realities to explain everything that she has never been told. True, her disclosures might upset her family, but Maxine is breaking the silence of all those who were oppressed, using only a single tool: language. While language may hurt at times, it ultimately proves to be the only true end to the cycle of repression and manipulation that silence does its best to inflict. Through silence, the need for language only grows stronger and stronger. Therefore, language and expression are the necessary antidotes to silence, for a life of silence is confusing and



repressive. It is only through language and expression that we can find our release, our freedom, and our individuality.