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Silence As Resistance: The Power Of The Unspeakable In Modern Fiction

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Abstract:

In an age where expression is abundant, silence remains a powerful and subversive literary device. This paper explores how silence functions not merely as absence but as **a form of resistance** in modern fiction. Through the analysis of key contemporary works—including those by Toni Morrison, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Arundhati Roy—this study examines how characters and narrators use silence to confront trauma, reject authority, and preserve agency. The research also investigates the thematic and structural use of unsaid or unspoken elements, arguing that silence, when deliberately employed, becomes a language of protest, memory, and power.

Index Terms –Silence in literature, Literary resistance, Trauma narratives, Narrative structure, Unspeakable experiences, Modern fiction

Introduction:

In literature, speech is traditionally equated with power—heroes persuade, villains threaten, and poets proclaim. Yet in modern fiction, silence has emerged as a powerful counter-force. Particularly in the narratives of trauma, marginalization, and political repression, silence speaks volumes. Authors often use silence not as a void, but as a **deliberate narrative choice** that challenges dominant ideologies and reshapes reader expectations. This paper aims to unpack the **symbolic, emotional, and political functions of silence** in selected works of modern fiction.

Defining Silence in Literary Contexts:

Silence in literature can be structural (narrative gaps), emotional (suppressed speech), or dialogic (characters choosing not to speak). According to theorist Elaine Scarry, silence often represents the limits of language in expressing pain. Michel Foucault, on the other hand, viewed silence as a political space where discourse is controlled or resisted.

Case Studies in Silence and Resistance:

1. *Toni Morrison's* *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, silence surrounds the unspeakable trauma of slavery. Sethe, the protagonist, struggles to articulate the violence she has endured. Morrison deliberately leaves gaps in the narrative to represent the inexpressibility of certain experiences. This fragmented storytelling is not only a literary technique but also a **form of protest**

against historical erasure. The silences are haunting, forcing the reader to confront what has been hidden or silenced in mainstream history.

2. *Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day*

The butler Stevens embodies a stoic, emotionally muted narrative voice. His refusal to acknowledge personal grief, missed opportunities, or even moral complicity in fascism reflects the **silence of denial**. Ishiguro uses Stevens's reticence to critique British social repression and the cost of emotional and ethical silence.

3. *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*

Roy masterfully deploys silence around themes of caste, incest, and political violence. The silence of characters like Ammu and Velutha becomes a mode of survival in a world where speaking out invites ruin. The narrative technique—shifting timelines and fragmented memories—mirrors the fractured way in which silenced people experience trauma and history.

Silence as a Feminist Strategy:

For many female characters in literature, silence has historically symbolized oppression. But in modern fiction, silence is often **reclaimed as a strategy**. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's internal monologue contrasts her external silence, highlighting how **resistance lives within**. Similarly, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the protagonist's silence under her father's authoritarian rule becomes a form of internal resistance that later blossoms into open defiance.

The Ethical Implications of Writing the Unspeakable:

Writers often face the ethical challenge of depicting extreme trauma without sensationalism. By using silence—through ellipsis, fragmented narration, or refusal to narrate certain scenes—authors respect the **dignity of suffering** while still drawing attention to it. Silence, in this way, becomes a more authentic response to horror than any graphic description.

Conclusion:

Silence in modern fiction is not passive. It is an active, often radical choice. It challenges the reader to look beyond words and question what remains unspoken—and why. Whether used to express trauma, defy authority, or assert identity, silence functions as a literary tool of resistance and meaning. In a world oversaturated with speech and spectacle, fiction reminds us that **what is not said** may be just as powerful as what is.

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