ETHNOGRAPHY AND SILENCE

“You’re nothing but a cheat and a liar, Livingstone—I-presume. Without the African, you couldn’t have done anything—nothing … And furthermore, while you thought you were discovering Africa, it was Africa that was discovering you.”

In this chapter, I would like to explore the ways in which Ghosh addresses the silences embedded within the discipline of ethnography by writing a self-reflexive ethnographic fiction in *In an Antique Land*. This self-reflexive mode of writing, in a way, critiques the conventional anthropological text in regard to its ambiguous colonial past. By introducing the observer/field-worker as a character in his text, Ghosh is able to address the constructedness of the writing process. Further, I would like to point out that this self-reflexive nature of the narrative also helps him to recuperate his past from the silences of history and, in that process, question the hegemonic domination of the West as being a perpetual referent in such recuperation. I will be dealing with the notion of silence not from any particular theoretical point of view, but with the notion of silence as it is addressed across a range of disciplines. Anthropology, as a discipline, has its roots in the colonial system and was complicit in the empire building process with its several attempts to create a scientific theorisation of human races:

On one hand, it is the discipline [Anthropology] that once nurtured “scientific racism” and the racial world view that

---

provided a rationale for slavery, colonialism, segregation, and eugenics…\(^3\)

Lee D. Baker, in his book, *From Savage to Negro*, traces the origin of contemporary racism and how Anthropology had helped in propagating scientific racism:

The origins of contemporary racial categories lie in sixteenth-century England and emerge from the age of exploration, the rise of capitalism, and the rise of science. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries the term *race* consisted of folk classifications that were interchangeable with concepts like nation, type, variety, or stock. These folk ideas about cultural differences were viewed as natural or biological differences and merged with the Anglican and Puritan belief in the sacredness of property rights and the individual. These ideological ingredients were transferred to the New World. They helped to shape colonial identities, the form of slavery, and the relationships between colonists and indigenous peoples.\(^4\)

The findings of anthropology have often been projected as something that has the validity of scientific truth. That such truth claims were merely social constructions were often overlooked. Diana Lewis for example comments on the relationship between Anthropology and Colonialism:

Since anthropology emerged along with the expansion of Europe and the colonization of the non-Western world, anthropologists found themselves participants in the colonial system which organised relationships between Westerners and non-Westerners. It is perhaps, more than a coincidence that a methodological stance, that of the outsider, and a methodological approach, “objectivity,” developed which in retrospect seem to have been influenced by, and in turn to have supported, the colonial system.\(^5\)


From the 1980s onward, however, there have been several attempts to rid anthropology of its discriminatory background and to formulate it as a discipline which is not too obsessed with the projection of truth. In this regard anthropology came much closer to fiction. This is often referred to as the ‘literary turn’ in Anthropology, which primarily questioned issues related to representation and the construction of socio-cultural reality. The anthropological texts came to be treated as ‘situated texts’. A text does not emerge out of nowhere: it is always situated in a particular socio-cultural context and, therefore, does not present an unbiased reality. The claim to truth also becomes a particular rhetoric, something that gets related to knowledge, representations and power. This ‘literary turn’ in Anthropology, like much of postmodernist theories, is self-reflexive in nature, questioning the very assumptions on which the foundations of Anthropology are laid. This ‘literary turn’ in Anthropology also encourages it to adopt a more inter-disciplinary perspective. Three important literary-anthropological texts that had significantly contributed to the literary turn are Clifford Geertz’s *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*⁶, the anthology titled *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*⁷ edited by George Marcus and James Clifford, and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*⁸ by George Marcus and Michael Fischer. James Clifford, in his Introduction in *Writing Culture* questions the objective nature of ethnography as well as the truth claims it makes. He says that “...culture [is] composed of seriously contested codes and representations; they [the

---

contributors in the Anthology] assume that the poetical and the political are inseparable, that science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes...”⁹ and so “Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete.”¹⁰ The contributors in the anthology [Writing Culture] “assume that academic and literary genres interpenetrate and that writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental and ethical.”¹¹ Cultural and social texts are, therefore, inter-disciplinary in nature.

Amitav Ghosh’s fiction and non-fiction transcend the limits of generic boundaries in such a way that it often becomes difficult to classify his work within a particular genre. One of the most extreme examples of this straddling of boundaries is his work In an Antique Land which can be variously classified as a novel with endnotes or as an ethnographic novel. Ethnographic fiction is not something that is new, but Ghosh makes innovative use of this emerging discipline, where artificial generic boundaries collapse, so as to come out of its limitations arising out of the colonial legacy. Ethnographic fiction is considered to be an alternative approach in writing ethnography, in which the ethnographer’s subject is portrayed through creative narrative or story. One must also consider the generic division between ethnography and anthropology that became prominent in the late nineteenth century. An ethnographer was thought to be a person who describes and translates a custom, whereas an anthropologist is one who develops and builds general theories about humanity. James Clifford explains:

Modern ethnography appears in several forms, traditional and innovative. As an academic practice it cannot be separated from anthropology. Seen more generally, it is simply diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation… A modern

---

⁹ Clifford and Marcus, Writing Culture, 2.
¹⁰ Ibid. 7.
¹¹ Ibid. 2.
‘ethnography’ of conjunctures, constantly moving *between* cultures, does not, like its Western alter ego ‘anthropology’, aspire to survey the full range of human diversity or development. It is perpetually displaced, both regionally focused and broadly comparative, a form both of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct.\(^\text{12}\)

In this regard we can say that ethnography as a genre suits Ghosh’s purpose where the observer is also a participant. The very nature of its displacement echoes the condition of the present times. The rigidity of generic boundaries was also a part and parcel of the Western epistemology and to be able to defy such a strict classification is to choose not to be complicit or confined within its boundaries. This is appropriate in terms of the narrative strategy where one is trying to write the subaltern into history. The silence in regard to the role of the observer in an anthropological text, where the gaze and the position of the anthropologist is taken for granted in the revelation of truth, is also brought to question in such an ethnographic work. Its colonial legacy is thus properly confronted. In an interview by Claire Chambers, Ghosh says that:

> … the reason why I stopped doing anthropology, and I knew I had to stop as soon as I finished my PhD, was precisely because anthropology was creating a kind of hegemonic voice. It was an authoritative voice, an authoritarian voice, and all the time I was in this village I never had that sense of authority. And essentially, this was because I’m Indian.\(^\text{13}\)

Another important aspect in creating such a work as this is also to suggest that strict generic classification is not a part of other knowledge systems. The Indian identity that

---


Ghosh asserts here points out two things— firstly, you do not feel as having an authoritative voice because you have grown up in a multi-cultural society in the third world; and secondly, that his position as a third world anthropologist does not give him that sense of superiority which might make his voice hegemonic. The act of doing Anthropology is implicated in the socio-cultural position. The objective truth that the anthropological text seeks to project is thus relative to the position of the anthropologist. Writing the anthropologist back to his own text is to give his silent subjectivity a perspective that can problematise any truth claim.

Ghosh unearths the story of Bomma, the slave of M.S. H6, from the footnotes of history and re-inscribes him in the present to serve as a memory for the culture of accommodations that existed between two ancient civilizations— that of Egypt and India. Bomma’s story and with him probably the medieval Indian Ocean trade between India and Egypt and the medieval cultural life between these two countries have been deftly restored to the frontyard\textsuperscript{14} of history. The story of Bomma gives Ghosh the entitlement to be in Egypt and to carry on his field-work in two villages of Egypt. The two countries had shared a trade relation in the pre-colonial period. The relation that had existed between India and Egypt for centuries and is attested by Bomma’a presence in the manuscripts is what gives Ghosh the right to be there:

I knew nothing then about the Slave of MS H.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} I am using U. R. Ananthamurthy’s use of the word in his seminar talk, \textit{Towards the Concept of a New Nationhood: Languages and Literatures in India} delivered at Institute of Physics, Bhubaneswar, India on 3 September, 2006.


\textsuperscript{15} Ghosh, \textit{Antique Land}, 19.
Why is Ghosh talking about this entitlement? Why does an anthropologist require the right to be in a particular place? Ghosh does this in order to remove the possibility of the hegemonic voice of the anthropologist. He is not there as a European studying a distant tribe in Africa or Asia, where Europe is always the standard of reference; but rather he is an anthropologist from the third world who has chosen for his field-work another third world country. His right to be there is established by the long trade relations that these two countries had with each other. His right to be there is also determined by the presence of Bomma— it thus becomes a quest to recover his own past from the silences of history. I have already mentioned the literary turn in anthropology which concerns itself with the situatedness of a text and that the anthropological work is also a discursively constructed text. The field-work as well as the experience related to the field-work is also something that is discursively constructed. This experience of the field-work is also often silenced by the final ethnographic account. Both in the choice of the ‘field’ and in the choice of the nature of ‘work’, the anthropologist gets implicated in a power relation, which had once created surreptitious links between colonialism and anthropology. Roger Berger analyses the discursive construction of an ethnographic field and suggests its relation with the notion of scientific colonialism:

Notions of the “field”-like those of “tribe,” “primitive,” or “underdeveloped”— are part of a discourse of what Galtung (1967) terms “scientific colonialism” and contribute to the ongoing othering (“repeated acts of oppression”) of the ethnographic subject. The “field” metaphorically reduces human beings to the level of plants or insects and sees them inevitably as “people without history” (Wolf 1982).16

Even in the choice of the field-work the anthropologist inscribes the hidden figuration of Western hegemonic power in the final ethnographic text. A critical ethnographic work, therefore, needs to be self-reflexive not only about the text and the writing process, but also in the choice of place and the nature of the fieldwork. These fields are sites of struggle which situates the anthropologist not only in terms of domination and comfort, but also in terms of failure and frustration. The construction of the field-worker as observer is thus related with the construction of the informant as the other. The ethnographic work goes on to silence the constructedness of this relationship. The right to be in a place that Ghosh speaks about critiques the choice of the ‘field’ as a subjective choice which also involves elements of power. Ghosh, therefore, feels it necessary to explain his choice. The two primary ur-texts of *In an Antique Land* are first, his unpublished doctoral thesis in Social Anthropology at Oxford entitled *Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community*, and second, the scholarly article published in *Subaltern Studies* Series (Vol. VII), entitled “The Slave of MS. H.6”. The liberties or rather creative differences between these two scholarly works and *In An Antique Land* hint at Ghosh’s prerogative for the fictional mode rather than the more scholarly historical and ethnographic mode. This tension between the two types of works, in a sense, highlights the silent assumptions that inform an ethnographic work, and these are the assumptions that Ghosh seeks to point out as well as escape from.

Ghosh’s choice of the ethnographic fictional narrative mode where the personal experiences of the ethnographer are recorded along with field-notes, results in a more

---

17 Ibid. 177.
humane and personal approach to the subject. The rather omniscient anthropological gaze of the ethnographer is now called into question: by situating the observer-character within the fictional mode one is also able to problematise the notion of scientific reality that anthropological research claims. The reality that an anthropologist seeks to project is actually often encumbered with the ideological baggage that he carries with him. His education is often in keeping with one particular knowledge system (in most cases, considered to be the dominant one). His upbringing in a particular society and culture allows him to see reality in the way he conceives it to be. The ethnographer is situated in a particular socio-cultural reality—not only confined by the limitations of language and the rigours of his academic discipline, but also subjected to the methodology of the discipline, so that whatever he observes is whatever he had been trained to observe and this selective seeing leads to selective telling. The interactions and the conversations that he has with the native informants are often written out of the final anthropological text because of the narrative demands of objectivity. The interactions between the observer and the observed help to bring out the silences contained within the text. The silences lie in the removal of the subjectivity of the ethnographer relative to his personal and social standing. The day-to-day interactions between the observer and the observed is important for the readers, for them to be able to critically read the doing of ethnography, because in that way the otherwise objective nature of the text would be subjected to critical scrutiny. The objectives of an otherwise ethnographic research work are questioned and, in this way, we get to know the true perspective from which a culture or a society has been studied.
It is, therefore, necessary to deal with the conceptualization of several aspects of silence in relation to ethnography and anthropology, so as to be able to put Ghosh’s *In An Antique Land* in perspective. Clifford Geertz rightly points out:

> …doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary and so on. But it is not these things, technique and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, “thick description”.19

Silence plays an extremely important role in ethnography. The methodological basis of ethnographical research includes selection of data compiled from field research. Meaning is, therefore, selectively constructed from the selective use of material from field research. Some information is given privilege and some other information is silenced in keeping with the requirements of the final presentation. The choice of information is often deliberate, in keeping with imperatives of the research project. Sometimes the choice is unconscious and falls in line with the personal prerogatives of the ethnographer. This privileging of information often leads to silencing of information which can often lead to a particular type of representation of reality. In this selective silencing is the assertion of power. This assertion of power can be on multiple levels and can be realized in terms of the agency of the ethnographer as well as a manifestation of superior/inferior binaries in terms of cultural, religious and educational prerogatives. The selection of voices from the field-note also leads to privileging of certain materials:

> In the field one inevitably silences many voices, but that silencing also occurs in the work-up of the field notes themselves, a compendium, if fieldwork has gone well,

almost always too rich in voices to be entirely included in the final write-up of the ethnography.  

Silencing of certain materials on the part of the ethnographer is a conscious process which leads to the structuring of materials according to his own requirement. It can often lead to the fashioning of his own way of representing reality and can stand as an expression of power.

It is the observer's own baggage of knowledge and intentions that is responsible for the partial way in which identity boundaries reflect the experience of those so identified. As observers, we actively participate in the construction of our objects of observation: in part, because the questions we ask, the areas we highlight, the selective recognition of salience direct the spotlight to some aspects of experience and not others, thereby permitting the recognition of only some elements of significance (Beeman, Achino-Loeb, Fernandez); in part, because the baggage of knowledge we bring to the task or the intentions that direct our search skews the inherently partial nature of the knowability of things in one direction or another—thereby erasing, eliding, muting or generally suppressing all others (Achino-Loeb, Cook, Kingsolver, Barber, Sheriff, Sider).  

The relationship between the observer and the observed is extremely important in Ethnography. Anthropological field research was often implicated by the authoritative gaze of the observer. The observer usually belongs to a superior culture with a better knowledge of things and, therefore, his gaze is turned downwards towards the common informant as somebody beneath him and not capable of perceiving higher reality because of his otherwise lack of education. The observer has the opportunity to choose his informants as well his materials. This element of choice is silenced in the ethnographic

---


21 Ibid. 14.
work. The informant should conform to the ethnographer’s notion of all that is considered as commonsense in terms of behaviour and expression. Agency is thus inherent in the meaning construction process, as the potential significance of the research work often depends upon the silencing and suppression of deviant informants. In this process of suppression, reality is often forged. The observer on his part should be aware of the metaphor and the symbols of expression of a particular culture within whose parameters the informants’ expression is closeted. His engagement with the language, religion and culture of that particular place is important in eliciting a proper response from the informant. The observer’s interpretation can be subjugated to several priorities like the purpose of his research, for whom he may be researching, his own ideological baggage, his abilities as an ethnographer and, above all, his attitude towards the culture. The ethnographic work is often able to silence all these priorities.

On the phonemic level, our ability to express and understand depends on our capability of processing the packets of sounds made available to us within the limits of our language. This becomes an important factor when the language is not known to the observer or the informant or it is a foreign language. In case it is a translation, meaning can be lost in indirect communication. Any perception of sound is usually a product of agency. The significance of one particular packet of sound would depend on the silencing of other forms of sound.

To the extent that the perception of phonemic discreteness is the first instance in the potential creation of meaningful utterances, any recognition of meaning in speech is embedded in and depends on a silencing activity. Hence language ideology begins at the level of sound where the perception of significance rests on the ability to suppress a wide range of acoustic cues in favor of those permitted by our linguistic context. Further, this muting capacity is
swiftly harnessed in the transferal of meaning, where the intentions of the speakers are central— as Austin (1962) has shown in the case of lies.22

The intention of the speaker and the listener and the ability to perceive and interpret the silences in speech-acts become extremely important in the creation of meaning. The behaviour of the speaker and the listener and their phonemic discreteness is important in understanding data. In this, the expression of self interest on the part of the observer and the listener in terms of the phonemic discreetness assumes significance. With the discreteness of the choice of sound and the discreteness of the choice of expression, the discreteness of identity is formed, which results in the expression of self interest. Selective hearing and selective listening can often enable us to manipulate knowledge. There is always a domain of silent sounds, silent structures and silent meanings, so that our utterances often cater to our self-interests as representing or projecting ourselves. Hearers also form an integral part of the meaning construction process through selective hearing and suppression of sound variations23. The metaphor of power operates in these several ways of silencing— from the selection of material of field research, the selection of informants, the utterances and speech-acts involved in the process, the suppression of data etc.

Silence on the thematic level also operates in several ways. The politics of silencing in terms of race, gender and language patterns also plays an important role in our understanding of ethnographic fiction. Michel-Rolph Trouilhot’s book Silencing the Past24 provides vital clues in dealing with ethnographic fiction that seeks to recover and

---

22 Ibid. 6.
23 Ibid. 44.
reconstruct the past. Historians and anthropologist alike try to reconstruct the past by privileging certain materials and screening out evidence that is averse to the politics of that privilege. The silence of the historical record and the privileging of elite or authoritative voices has also been a constant concern for Ghosh. Ghosh’s affinity towards the subaltern group is indicative of his position in this respect. Silencing of different knowledge systems by the dominant Western epistemology, which often refuses to acknowledge the possibility of alterity, also forms a part of the ideological baggage that an ethnographer carries with himself. Silence, as a response, can also be a part of the resistance provided by the informant when he or she avoids answering certain questions. Such form of silence is often misunderstood as lack of understanding and the inability to comprehend the meaning. It can also be a method to counteract the authoritative gaze of the ethnographer. Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* seeks to recuperate and rescue a multitude of unheard voices from the silencing of the past.

Doing ethnography is an interpretive process which is also greatly dependent on the skill of the anthropologist. It is like trying to read a culture as a scholar does a manuscript. Such readings are often constructions of the data available. Clifford Geertz rightly points out:

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.²⁵

We understand the tremendous rigours that Ghosh goes through in involving himself in both—deciphering obscure manuscripts in unknown language and doing ethnography.

His narrative in *In an Antique Land* thus traverses generic boundaries from the past to the present, from scavenging through manuscripts for some little detail in different parts of the world to doing ethnography in Egyptian villages.

The two primary narratives of *In An Antique Land* are derived from Ghosh's doctoral thesis “Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community” and “The Slave of MS H.6” published in the *Subaltern Studies* Series (Volume VII). Two papers— “The Relations of Envy in an Egyptian Village” and “Categories of Labour and the Orientation of the Fellah Economy” published in *The Imam and the Indian* were derived partly from the materials and field research for his doctoral dissertation. The difference in the narrative structure of the two primary texts and the two articles in *The Imam and the Indian* from that of *In an Antique Land* suggest the radical nature of the ethnography he is attempting at. The thesis is divided into chapter divisions that cater to traditional anthropological categories— “Introduction”; “Chapter 1, The Household”; “Chapter 2, Marriage and the Lineage”; “Chapter 3, Work and Production”; “Chapter 4, Politics”; “Chapter 5, Unity and Division”. The chapters in *In an Antique Land* are ‘Prologue’, ‘Lataifa’, ‘Nashawy’, ‘Mangalore’, ‘Going Back’ and ‘Epilogue’— which is a clear reminder of the difference between the two narratives. Here the sense of place and the sense of travel has been given a privilege of place. *In an Antique Land* is produced from the tension between the two notebooks that Ghosh carries— the one where he records various subjective details and the other where he records objective data. In an Interview with Claire Chambers, Ghosh emphasises the essentialness of conversations:

---

All the stuff about Egypt comes straight out of my diaries. I kept very extensive diaries, and all those conversations are from them. It was an odd experience; when I was living in the village of Nashawy doing my PhD I used to go to Cairo occasionally to get books out of the library, and once I borrowed Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*. That had an enormous impact on me because *Life of Johnson* is all conversations; that’s how the whole book is constructed, it’s just a series of conversations. And it’s riveting because Johnson never did anything; all he did is just talk; he just sat in tea-rooms and talked. And that made me realize the absolute essentialness of conversations to any kind of narrative.27

The nature of ethnography usually silences the materials of one diary, so that the research thus presented takes the form of an objective scientific representation of data. What Ghosh does in *In an Antique Land* is extremely radical; the participant-observer is replaced with a character and a scientific narrative is replaced with conversations. The silenced ethnographer and his silenced conversation now intrude the text and make it more humane. It is as if both the cheering Bomma (the narrator imagines Bomma to be drunk and cheering soldiers into battle against the pirates by standing on the shore and waving his empty wine flask) and the railing as well as the perplexed narrator, Amitav, (the narrator is perplexed when confronted with the Imam and also starts railing at him) are given intimate voices. Another important difference between the thesis and the fictive form is that the thesis is written in the denotative present tense, whereas *In an Antique Land* is written in a connotative “narrative past tense”, as Neelam Srivastava rightly points out.28 The thesis is written in a manner of a timeless present, as if the customs and the rituals mentioned therein would go on occurring in the same manner. Such a

27 Chambers, 28.
description represented in a scientific manner, however, gives a lie to the transitoriness of a lived life and culture.

The observer then is brought back to life and the text is given a social relevance, where the silenced past can still be redeemed to save the future. The conversations that were otherwise silenced in the anthropological work is given more importance, so that a dialogue becomes possible, so that the past and the present can interact, the narrator and the other characters can interact, and so that religion and culture can converse and dispute. *In an Antique Land* thus engages in a true dialogic interaction with the polyphony of voices in the true Bakhtinian sense. The use of polyphony as a narrative technique is used in recent ethnographic works. Bakhtin in his *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*\(^ {29}\) had said that critics have failed to understand Theodore Dostoevsky who was able to create a new type of novel, which defies the essentially monologic European novel by replacing it with a polyphonic one. The author’s intention here is to create

\[ ... \text{free people who are capable of standing beside their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even of rebelling against him...} \]\(^ {30}\)

The characters are given a plurality of voices which can even contend with the author. This notion of the representation of the plurality of voices can also be extended to ethnographic fieldwork and it emphasises the constructedness of an ethnographic work. *In an Antique Land* is rich with this polyphony of voices. Ghosh gives his characters strong, and often resisting, voices so that they contend and confront with that of the

---


\(^ {30}\) Ibid. 4.
observer; and by bringing this dialogic interaction in the forefront we have a self-reflecting, self-conscious postmodern narrative.

The two narratives— that of the quest for Bomma in the past and the second narrative of the observer’s own engagement in the present to make meaning of the past—cross each other’s path. Ghosh’s two main purposes in writing this work is to bring the subaltern in the frontyard of history by recuperating him from the silence of the grand narratives of history, where destinies of ordinary persons hardly seem to matter and, secondly, to recuperate conversations and private aspects of the family into an ethnographic narrative, which pretends otherwise to be objective and scientific in its approach.

The ethnographic fieldwork of the present is juxtaposed with the historical narrative of the past. The narrative of the past attempts to reconstruct the life of Bomma, a slave and business agent of Ben Yiju, an Egyptian merchant. The historical narrative not only unearths the life of Bomma and Ben Yiju, but also, in the process of doing so, recovers the type of Indian Ocean trade that existed during the pre-colonial period. Modern historiography is more or less silent about the peaceful trade that existed between the two ancient civilisations. The other more important aspect is the fact that trade could be carried on peacefully and the fact that such peaceful trade relations could be a matter of civilisational [reword] priority rather than weakness is also highlighted. Grant Parker in his article “Porous Connections: The Mediterranean and the Red Sea”31, describes Egypt as a ‘theatre of contact’ between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. He discusses an Egyptian text *The Periplas of the Erythraean Sea*, (1st century CE), the

---
manuscript of which can now be found in Heidelberg University and which unveils the existence of the two sea-routes. The first one goes towards south rounding the Horn of Africa towards probably Dar es Salaam, and the second route rounds the Arabian Peninsula and moves towards the South Asian sub-continent. This indicates that trade existed between Egypt and India much before the period which is dealt with in *In an Antique Land*. Peaceful trade relationship existed side by side with a true sense of multiculturalism. It was a world of accommodations where religious syncretism flourished. The privileging of European knowledge system has not only imposed upon us a language, a world-view, but has also subjugated other forms of knowledge systems. In my M. Phil. Dissertation, I have argued how in *In an Antique Land* Ghosh, by straddling between generic boundaries, had tried to recuperate that part of history that has been lost in the meta-narratives, because they were thought not as important as to matter; and I have also argued that Ghosh by doing so acknowledges the existence of alternative epistemologies.

In this chapter I will also discuss the nature of ethnographic fieldwork and the silence that is embedded within its very structure. The silence of the historical narrative, that is also present in *In an Antique Land*, will be dealt with in another chapter. The focus in this article will be on the issues concerning ethnographic fieldwork and the ways in which Ghosh makes use of it in *In an Antique Land* and other non-fictional works. I will also deal with problems regarding language, especially with regard to cultural translation and the silence therein. The issue of medieval notion of slavery would form an important aspect of my argument as well.

In the historical narrative we have the story of the 12th century Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, who travelled all the way from Aden to Mangalore in order to trade.
Ben Yiju had, in fact, lived his life in transit, for he was not born in Aden. Bomma, who was supposedly from Mangalore, was his slave and business agent. In a letter written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq in 1138, Bomma finds a mention as a “…respected member of his household”. The transcript and translation of this letter can be found in S.D. Goitein’s article, “From Aden to India: Specimens of the Correspondence of India Traders of the Twelfth Century”, where Bamah (in Goitein’s text) is given “bountiful well-being”. Goitein in his notes describes ‘Bamah’ as the “slave and house-steward of Ben Yiju”.

The paradox implied in such a reference from across the seas and across ages is what makes Ghosh embark in an arduous and obscure journey of unearthing and deciphering obscure medieval documents, visit several places in Egypt and India and also to learn Arabic. This entire endeavour is directed toward restoring to his fellow countryman a place in history, and in return Bomma and his world had given him an entitlement to be there. Thus an Indian in Egypt from the long forgotten times had given another Indian in the present the right to visit and uncover the medieval world of peaceful trade relationships between two ancient civilisations. What is it that makes Ghosh feel an affinity towards Bomma? Why is it that he is bent on reconstructing his life and in the process rediscovering it for himself. Is there anything that he seeks from history, for himself and for his millions of countrymen? These are the silences that would give the text essential unity and would help us to understand the need to write such a text. Ghosh unearths the answers to this question to give himself and his fellow countrymen a place

34 Ibid. 52.
35 Ibid. 55.
of pride in the meta-narratives of history, which are otherwise bent on following the
grand intentions of Europe.

I would mainly concentrate on the ethnographic fieldwork of the present and not
engage with Bomma’s world here. In this ethnographic account, Ghosh writes of the two
Egyptian villages, Lataifa and Nashawy, that he visited three times in the course of his
fieldwork for his D. Phil. thesis. On the recommendation of Dr. Aly Issa he rents a room
in Abu Ali’s house. He immediately takes on a dislike for the over-bearing old
businessman. The first impression that we get of Abu Ali is that he “…berated his wife or
shouted at some unfortunate customer…” 36 Most of the people in the village hated him
or kept out of his way. He is described with a great sense of humour—“…a gargantuan
lollipop being carried away by its stick”. 37 This is the type of humour akin to the style of
the Bengali writer, Syed Mujtaba Ali. Ali’s Bengali travel narratives, where he is
describing a different person in a different culture, (Syed Mujtaba Ali’s Deshe Bideshe)
seems to have quite a significant influence on the type of narrative that Ghosh is using in
In an Antique Land. The similarity does not end in the type of travel narrative, but rather
continues in thematic similarities. Ghosh and Ali observe life in the rural parts of the
country. The question of superiority is absent in both the narratives. Europe remains a
referent in both the narratives and both the author strive to counteract it in their own
manner. Mujtaba Ali’s appreciation of the Baburnama probably has inspired Ghosh to
read it. In The Imam and the Indian, there is an article on the Baburnama. This humour is
present throughout in In an Antique Land. It is not malicious, but rather a light hearted
humour, which evokes a warm laughter. Abu Ali is the type of person, whom an

36 Ghosh, Antique Land, 23.
37 Ibid. 28.
ethnographer won’t take for an informant. An ethnographer has to work often in an unfamiliar environment and has to quickly pick up and understand the customs of his place. He is also affected by a sense of loneliness, of not only missing his family and place, but also of missing the familiar tone of his own language. So Ghosh carries a radio, “…scanning the waves for the sound of a familiar language, listening for words that would make me feel a little less alone”.\(^{38}\) The ethnographer, who is silenced out of the ethnographic narrative, is making his trials and tribulations re-appear in the fictional narrative by making people like Abu Ali a part of his account as well as by incorporating the narrator’s view of the characters. The ethnographic narrative in the conventional sense is replaced by the narrative of the family— the narrative of characters and conversations. The fictional writer, unlike the ethnographer, thus enters into the realm of the family:

\[
\text{…a secret, curtained world, protected from the gaze of outsiders by walls and courtyards, by veils and laws of silence.}\^{39}\]

These are the words that Ghosh uses to describe Mahfouz’s fictional world and is also applicable in this context. In spite of writing a sort of objective commentary— which subscribes more to a sort of statistical reality as is found in ethnographic accounts, as is also evident in Ghosh’s dissertation— Ghosh here seeks to write the family back to the ethnographic account, thus bringing it close to a lived reality that the reader so readily identifies with. He also seeks to restore the sanctity of those silences that reside in the inner recesses and writes them back into the ethnographic fiction.

---

\(^{38}\) Ibid. 31.

Ghosh’s friendship with Sheikh Musa and his family enables him to proceed with his ethnographic work. An ethnographer often fails to interpret reality when he himself carries a lot of prior ideological baggage, which dilutes his understanding of reality by silencing the others. An ethnographer should possess a child-like wonder in observing reality without being always-already prejudiced. Ghosh is not able to recognise the three women in Sheikh Musa’s house, although he is quite certain that he had encountered them earlier. This was because of his guarded reaction in looking at Muslim women in general. It comes from his previous understanding or knowledge that Muslim women everywhere in the world wear veils.

The fault for this lay entirely with me, for neither they nor anyone else in Lataifa wore veils (nor indeed did anyone in the region), but at that time, early in my stay, I was so cowed by everything I had read about Arab traditions of shame and modesty that I barely glanced at them, for fear of giving offence.40

Thus we have here an ethnographer who reflects upon the very process of ethnography and brings them out of their silence into a sort of dialogue, so that the process as well as the depiction of reality is put into question. We as readers also get a clear notion of why Ghosh has chosen this form of an ethnographic fiction.

Words as Symbols

Ghosh’s encounter with Ustaz Mustafa, the school teacher, started Ghosh’s ordeal with words and symbols. The ethnographer is rattled with questions. This would not have happened, if the superiority of the ethnographer were beyond question; and that is usually the case when the ethnographer is a European. The nature of ethnography depends on the

40 Ghosh, Antique Land, 41.
position and acceptability of the ethnographer. A white male ethnographer would have levels of interaction which are different from a native ethnographer, and to stretch it further, altogether different from, say, a black female native ethnographer. The ethnographic account which appears to be a scientific collection of data suppresses the agency of the ethnographer, who actually makes the information available. To be more precise, the narrative silences the subjectivity of the whole ethnographic process. Ghosh is subjected to perplexing questions from Ustaz Sabri and others. So the interaction takes place between both sides in terms of equality, or it may be argued that, there is wholesome contest between the two sides and their claim to superiority. The otherwise superior gaze of the anthropologist is questioned. Secondly, it restores the agency of the otherwise silenced ethnographer as a character in his own drama. Ustaz Sabri’s questions are what Ghosh dreads— the untranslatable, incommunicable symbols of a culture. An Indian is thus one who uses “‘...a lot of chilli in the food...’” 41, India is a place where “‘...when a man dies his wife is dragged away and burnt alive’” 42, and Indians are the ones who worship cows. Ustaz Sabri is unable to comprehend this “‘Hinduki’” 43 business. This leads naturally to a pressure on Ghosh to convert to a Muslim. It is natural in the sense that they have a feeling that their religion and their way of life are superior to the Hindu way of life, as they have come to understand the Hindu religion in terms of certain symbols which are restricted by language and possibilities of translation. If Ghosh were a Christian from the West, the pressure of conversion would not have remained. The anthropological gaze, when it is surrendered for considerations of true ethnographic

41 Ibid. 46.
42 Ibid. 46.
43 Ibid. 47.
account, leads to problems in seeing things in terms of equality. On Ustaz Sabri’s invitation Ghosh refuses to go to the mosque in spite of the fact that it is part of the job.

Ghosh is preoccupied throughout *In an antique Land* and other fictional and non-fictional works with the etymology of words and their translatability. The corpus and scope of a meaning of a word is often fixed within a particular society, culture or religion and is difficult, therefore, to translate it into other language. A word often serves as a metaphor—a cultural or religious symbol. The untranslatability of such words leads to the inability to comprehend other societies, other cultures and even other realities. The ‘other’, therefore, is translated in terms of one’s own worldview; the other, therefore, is never really translatable, realisable or understandable in terms of one’s own language. The aura of silence that encompasses the meaning of each word makes translation difficult. Moreover, symbols create discord through barriers of meaning. Ghosh finds it difficult to reply to Ustaz Sabri when he uses the word “shiyu‘eyya”44, which has a whole range of meaning—from communist to atheist to adulterer. Ethnography thus grapples with meanings of words. Presentation of data through field research becomes doubly difficult—firstly, to translate social reality in terms of words, and secondly, to express it in terms of a completely different language. The self-reflexive manner in Ghosh’s writings brings these larger issues back to the net of writing. Naming word and consequently the system of classification has always been a convenient tool to construct, frame and silence the other, so that the other is totally subsumed within its discourse, thus negating the possibility of alterity. Ghosh unveils the way through which Europe has constructed Egypt as the imaginative other merely by the naming of ‘Egypt’. In doing so,

44 Ibid. 50.
the reality of Egypt, its culture, its religion and all the other possibilities of alterity have been undermined and negated.

What bind the ethnographer and the informant together are the acts of fellow feeling, empathy, sympathy and the elemental nature of the relationships—which are the same everywhere. They, unlike words, do not depend upon their context. They belong to the realm of silence which permeates our essential being.

‘Well, it would not be right for you to upset your father. That is true.’

...And so, as the rival moralities of religion and kinship gradually played themselves to a standstill within him, Ustaz Mustafa and I came to an understanding.45

Ghosh finds it extremely difficult to reply to questions related to religion and feels ‘...trapped by language’.46 The connotation of the Arabic word ‘circumcise’ derives from a root that means to purify—“...to say to someone that they are ‘uncircumcised’ is more or less to call them impure”47 The anthropological gaze in such circumstances is almost reversed. The ethnographer is finding it difficult to answer questions directed at him and his religion. Ghosh is likened to a child: “But he doesn’t know a thing,” said Jabir. ‘Not religion, not politics, not sex, just like a child.”48 Not only Jabir, but also Ustaz Sabri’s mother treats him similarly because she feels that he gets cheated in the market. What restores the narrator some pride is the ‘water-pump’. The identity of the ethnographer is thus fixed in terms of the country to which he belongs and how it stands in terms of the Western rhetoric of modernity.

I began to wonder how Lataifa would have looked if I had had the privilege of floating through it, protected by the

45 Ibid. 52.
46 Ibid. 62.
47 Ibid. 62.
48 Ibid. 63.
delegated power of technology, of looking out untroubled through a sheet of clear glass.\textsuperscript{49}

The untranslatability of words had rendered the ethnographer silent. This untranslatability is more a product of the modern condition. The story of Ben Yiju’s survival in Mangalore and Egypt is a proof that difference between languages was not so important in communication during the past. A plethora of pidgin languages is itself a proof of the desire to communicate. The language was not as inclusive as it is now. The language of the sailors in \textit{Sea of Poppies}\textsuperscript{50} is an example of several experiments with language during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

\textbf{Trapped by Language}

It was as if language opened up to the needs of communication. The world of accommodations survived during the Middle Ages— so much so that Ben Yiju’s world and Bomma’s world could correspond with each other in spite of the vast differences in language, religion and culture. This is the type of world that Ghosh continuously re-invokes throughout his fictional world. This untranslatability of words and symbols across culture is found in Ghosh’s focus on the word ‘slavery’ in medieval Egypt and India— both in “The Slave of MS. H6” and in \textit{In an Antique Land}. Hegel’s concept of Lordship and bondage, as delineated in his book \textit{Phenomenology of Mind}\textsuperscript{51}, occupied a central position in the understanding of the word ‘slavery’— both as a concept and as an ideology in Western Metaphysics. The empire building process during the colonial period was followed by various ways of rationalising and justifying an ideological apparatus that

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid. 74.
had the pretention of a scientific, religious or metaphysical discourse. The Hegelian notion of slavery was one such discourse by which the extreme inhumanity of slavery was sought to be justified in the name of the civilising mission. Hegel’s master and the servant (‘Herrschaft’ and ‘Krechtschaft’) are mutually dependent. The master who possesses a pure self-consciousness can rise above nature by struggling for recognition against the fear of death. The bondsman recognises that the consciousness of the master exists for itself and reduces himself to a mediated consciousness that exists for another, thereby improving his own state. The ideological basis of this relationship is founded on the basis that it is the slave who wishes to be ruled. This naturally leads to a justification for the master to have slaves. Such an idea thus becomes a justification for the act of slavery. Ghosh is not resorting to theorising how the metaphoric and the symbolic element of a word can be used to further the ideological imperatives of an empire; rather by fictionalising the complexities of such word-play, Ghosh is bringing out the silent investment of metaphoric meaning of several words. The European meaning infested in the word ‘slavery’ also seeks to appropriate most of the reference points for this single word. From the Hegelian notion of slavery to slavery as a justification of the white man’s burden to slavery as something monstrous for human kind—is a long symbolic journey. Western epistemology has invested a lot in the word ‘slavery’. It seeks to appropriate every other notion of slavery in any other language, in other geographical locations in terms of its own investment. European investment behind the word becomes the central reference point to include a huge number of varied experiences throughout the world. In reconstructing the life of the medieval slave Bomma, Ghosh reflects on the possibility of other notions of slavery (probably more humane than European plantation slavery), that
might have existed before European colonialism. He refers to the notion of slavery of Bomma primarily in relation to economics and trade. To subscribe to the nuances of the word ‘slavery’ in terms of the European meaning infested in it and to discuss Bomma and Ben Yiju within the confinement of the same English word, is to be falling a prey, albeit rather circuitously. It is similar to finding oneself being confined to the expression of Post-Colonial Literature in spite of all the varied experiences that it might incorporate. The Sanskrit word ‘dasa’ or the Kannada word, which Ghosh refers to in “The Slave of MS. H6”, ‘tottu’ cannot be translated exactly into the English word ‘slavery’. Ghosh could have used an indigenous word to describe the range of meanings and thus distinguish it from the limitations of the connotations of the word ‘slavery’. Ghosh states in “The Slave of MS. H6”:

The fifteenth-century inscription that slave markets, however, uses the Kannada word \textit{tottu}, which is an ambiguous term, used for servants and hired workers as well as ‘slaves’. \footnote{Ghosh, \textit{Imam and the Indian}, 214.}

There is also a sort of nostalgic idealising in his descriptions of medieval slavery. Ghosh seeks to recuperate a lost world of accommodations which he desperately tries to hold on to in this present world of extreme violence and terrorism. The past, however, as historical and other form of narratives will tell us, is not only about religious syncretism. Differences in terms of religion existed throughout human history and hence the violence. In “Empire and Soul: a review of The Baburnama”\footnote{Ibid. 90-108.}, Ghosh tell us how Hinduism had flourished during the Mughal period. As this half of the account is true so is the other half— that a great number of Hindu temples were destroyed and a lot of people were forcefully converted into Islam, especially in the reign of Jahangir. If we need to use the...
term ‘slavery’ at all, then we need to have it explained with all the connotations it might have and even with those that might have been silenced as a consequence of the translation. The context which Ghosh uses vary from one culture to another culture, from one language to another language, from one to place to another place, and also from one field to another field, i.e., different perspectives like politics, trade and religion. To bring all these dimensions together is to again reduce the great deal of complexity by simplification. It seems that he somehow gets trapped within the very vicious network of that which he tries to escape from desperately. The religious dimension of ‘slavery’ in the Bhakti Movement and in Sufism cannot be likened to what happened in trade or race relationships. Slavery, as was practised in the pre-colonial period, was probably more humane than European plantation slavery, and this probably is the suggestion that is made in *In an Antique Land*; but to liken and club them together within the rubric of the same word is also to narrow down a vast range of experiences. The voluntary submission of one’s own will to the will of God is not slavery, and to at all compare them with plantation slavery is to forcefully reduce an altogether different experience. The Sanskrit word for ‘dasa’ was also often used to describe such a voluntary submission to God or a master. What Ghosh does is to suggest that the word slavery might have had a different meaning in the pre-colonial period. However, in doing so, he falls prey to the fact that he cannot escape the silent referent, which is Europe. It means that he is trying to argue that plantation slavery and the violence associated with it were not acceptable forms of human behaviour since time immemorial, but a European phenomenon that happened in the colonial period. These are points well-made and well accepted; but the problem is even by comparing the varying experiences, Ghosh is again trapped in language by silently
accepting the inevitability of the term ‘slavery’. Secondly, he has also made a selection of historical material to prove or suggest that a better form of slavery pre-existed the European notion. Eric Smith, in his article “Caught Straddling a Border: A Novelistic Reading of Amitav Ghosh’s In an Antique Land”, wonders how any form of slavery could at all be celebrated:

In other words, why should a slave celebrate the declaration of his freedom so joyfully if his station in life was only improved by his servitude? Indeed, what does freedom mean in such a relationship? As Ghosh’s scholarly predecessor Goitein has it, the Geniza records show that male slaves were occasionally released from service, at which time they were granted all the rights and privileges (were they previously denied?) of a free Jewish man-man because women were somewhat less likely to be freed except to marry their owners and Jewish because slaves of the Maimonides, for instance, were divested of their native religions and customs before being granted admittance into Judaism (in Docker 195). Moreover, as Goitein informs us, “the Geniza records are few of slaves running away” due to the kind treatment which they received (Docker 195). One cannot help but wonder, given these facts, how a Geniza filled with the accounts of the slaves themselves (the “true” subalterns in this case) might read. 54

The confusion regarding such an interpretation is due precisely to the using of the word ‘slavery’ as an umbrella-term for all the types of servitude that might have existed in the medieval period. The one way of escaping this could have been to use the indigenous terms rather than arguing that ‘slavery’ had a different form altogether in the pre-colonial period.

The Silent Referent

Throughout *In an Antique Land* and in his other works, we find that Ghosh is striving to conform, contradict and counter this silent referent—the hidden figuration of Western epistemology. Be it in terms of language, religion, culture or modernity, the West plays the role of a reference point. It is this referent that is ubiquitously perceived as entering any dialogic encounter in a surreptitious manner. It acts as an inevitable catalyst. The writers belonging to the erstwhile European colonies are continuously striving to erase this reference point. Their attempt to stay away from being classified as a postcolonial writer is one such endeavour. The colonial power has again conveniently used the system of classification to simplify and channelize all types of writings and all types of varied experiences within this one entity of postcolonial literature. In spite of the forces of capitalism and globalisation which strive to bring the world together with technology, the market has, in fact, created greater divisions through this system of classification, especially when it is a binary classification. Ghosh brings this generic conflict into dialogue in *In an Antique Land* by initiating a modern self-reflexive type of ethnographic writing, where the observer and the observed enters into a dialogue and also by making a confession that in translation one is trapped by language. This sort of self-reflexive writing is far better than complicated theorisation of an event, because a critic is then again enmeshed in the complexity of language rather than in the problem itself. The ethnographer in such a narrative is not only the discoverer, but also the discovered, as the traveller in *Looking for Livingstone* rightly points out in the lines that I have quoted in the beginning of the chapter. The difference, however, is that while Livingstone has never realised that the discoverer can also be the discovered, the ethnographer in *In an Antique Land*, by being self-reflexive, realises it.
The conflict with the Imam in *In an Antique Land* is the perfect example of how the West seems to intercede in any discussion of modernity. The Imam, who had a reputation for the traditional medicine, had gladly left it and replaced it with the syringe to embrace modernity in his own way; he is now no longer willing to talk about traditional medicines. The Imam launches a scathing attack on Ghosh’s religion: “They worship Cows.”55, “They burn their dead.”56— these are the same familiar symbols of discord that Ghosh has lived through all his life— disrespect towards anything other, anything that one is not able to comprehend within the confines of his own language and religion. This disrespect arises from a notion that there can only be one form of epistemology. Alternative epistemologies are discarded by conveniently mapping it within the scale of binaries. The belief that one’s own reality is the only reality and that other realities do not exist, is what causes so much differences, discord and violence in the modern world. Ghosh is aware of what these differences create— riots, terrorism and other unspeakable forms of violence; and he is, therefore, desperately trying to conjure up medieval images of religious syncretism and cling to that world of accommodation. The past thus is his only hope of remedying the future. A village Imam subscribes to the same Western ideas of modernity:

‘They don’t burn their dead in the West. They’re not an ignorant people. They’re advanced, they’re educated, they have science, they have guns and tanks and bombs.’57

Ghosh loses his calm and replies:

‘We have them too!’ I shouted back at him. ‘In my country we have all those things too; … we’re a long way ahead of you’.58

56 Ibid. 235.
57 Ibid. 235.
Ghosh soon realises that through the rhetoric of modernity, the silent West has again intervened with an inevitability around it, which renders any new dialogue impossible. Progress has become synonymous with the possession of bombs. Ghosh sadly reflects:

...the Imam and I, delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence.

...We were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West.59

Even the West as a referent is understood in terms of symbols rather than lived experiences. Herein lies the difference between the ethnographer and the Imam. Ghosh has lived in the West and is aware of its libraries, its museums, its theatres, whereas the Imam knows it only through symbols— science, tanks, guns and bombs. The dialogue between them has failed precisely because symbols have been given more priority than the lived experience, so that even the narrator is subsumed by the power of symbols. This failure is then the failure of language and our inability to comprehend the various silences that contain them. The language of the West has sought to homogenise all realities and had claimed them all. It has become the only referent:

...it seemed to me that the Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us: we had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences.60

Thus even in our everyday discussions, our everyday language, the West is often a silent but ubiquitous referent— so pervasive in its nature that it disrupts any other possibility of communication. This is why Ghosh goes back to the past, re-imagines, rediscovers and

58 Ibid. 235-236.
59 Ibid. 236.
60 Ibid. 236.
desperately recuperates it from the silence of the meta-narratives; he does all these, so that we become aware that there are other realities and consequently start living with our differences.