INTRODUCTION

My conscious engagement or association with silence began in my high school days, when I studied in Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur, and continued in my college days, while I was pursuing my English Honours Course from Ramakrishna Mission Residential College, Narendrapur; and this association has never left me thereafter. Ramakrishna Mission and the institutions associated with it are considered to be religious organisations promoting education in the way Vivekananda conceived it, that is, to promote an education that would lead to the development of character. In those days, we were supposed to wake up early in the morning and attend the early Morning Prayer. It was a residential College and all the students had to go to the prayer hall and attend the prayer. The prayer usually began with singing or chanting and was then taken over by silence when we were to sit silently in the lotus position and meditate. Initially we were also instructed by the monks as to the importance of the silent meditation which would help us in building our concentration, focus of mind and provide us with an inner strength. We were made aware of the necessity of silence and the salubrious effect that it will have upon our life, if we practice it regularly. Thus I began my long association with silence.

The Partition of the Indian sub-continent happened much before I was born. The liberation of Bangladesh also took place four years before I was born. These two events, however, had determined, dominated and, to a great extent, shaped my growing up. I had not seen the grotesque physical violence that followed the aftermath of the Partition but I have always felt the eternal division between ‘bangal’ and ‘ghoti’ in the Bengali psyche.
and the consequent violence that lay embedded in everyday language. There is this continuous enactment of this division in the cultural sphere—from food habits to football. There is this strange feeling of animosity that creeps up for not being part of that great cartographic violence and yet being implicated in its nefarious designs. There is always this other fear that is ever present in South-East Asia: the fear that Ghosh often talks about, the fear that any moment a riot may suddenly erupt and disrupt any false sense of normalcy that we might harbour for a period of time. The politics of violence, the politics of difference and the politics of separation are something that post-independent India has to continuously negotiate with. There is also this fear of terrorism: of 9/11 becoming 26/11 and the possibility of such events recurring in the future. The disruption that such events create arouses in us a crippling feeling of how “normalcy is utterly contingent”\(^1\). The nostalgia for an undivided Bengali past still haunts the Bengali imagination. The metaphor of the divided house that we find in *The Shadow Lines*\(^2\) still creates in us a sense of pain and unease. The quest to locate all the members of the undivided family, to harbour the possibility of being reunited again, to rediscover or recreate the possibility of coming home has been an important aspect of post-Partition Bengali literature. The Partition and the unceasing violence that have followed thereafter had created a permanent rupture—so much so, that it is this rupture that still decides our modernity. I have always thought about the role that silence may have played or still may play in such a situation. Would I be reduced to a silence that arises from the sense of helplessness? Or, should I find an inner strength, a resilience with which I can deal with my predicament? How does an author react to this violence? Does his silence recoil into

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\(^2\) Ibid. 125.
apathy? How can an author negotiate the silence which arises from his understanding of the utter banality that such a condition of violence generates? How does one represent silence in such a context? How does one understand and address silence from an ethical perspective? These are the questions that have always perturbed me, and I have specifically chosen to seek my answers in the works of Amitav Ghosh: firstly, because he is a Bengali-Indian author whose work seeks to negotiate with the questions that have always disconcerted me, and secondly, because his grounding in the academies of the U.S and the U.K. would be able to provide me with that sense of detached perspective that comes from looking back at one’s home from a faraway place. In addition, it would be interesting to find an answer to the question by using the phrasing of the title of one of the chapters of Audre Lorde’s book *Sister Outsider*, “The master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s house”. This is the question that is relevant to all the Indian English authors, because to write in English about one’s past is to be implicated within the generic and linguistic confinements of Western knowledge systems. And, in a way, to write about the past is to write about imperialism and colonialism, which forms an inevitable background or an inevitable referent. How does an author then seek to dismantle the master’s house within the parameters of his language? What type of intervention in the knowledge system and the language system would make this possible?

In this dissertation, I would like to analyse the silences in Amitav Ghosh’s works. My discussion would not be restricted to an analysis of silence as opposed to sound, noise or word; rather I will approach the many silences that we deal with in everyday life in terms of inter-disciplinary perspectives. There have been considerable efforts to establish a theoretical paradigm for ‘silence’ in other disciplines, like anthropology and

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philosophy, the influence of which can be felt in Ghosh’s works. Silence, in this thesis, would be treated as a metaphysical and an ontological category having a significant influence in our lives. Silence is important in Ghosh’s work in four major ways. Firstly, his novels show how history and politics manipulate the various types of narrative silences, as it interferes with its primary intentions. I would like to suggest that Ghosh addresses the generic silences by, first, preferring the fictional form and, secondly, by experimenting with the form, so that generic boundaries seem to dissolve and coalesce in his works. It is, for example difficult to ascertain the manner in which history or ethnography becomes fiction in his works. Secondly, his characters affirm the significance of silence in human relationships, suggesting at times that the truest part of communication goes on in the silent dialogue. Thirdly, I will like to deal with the notion of violence and how Ghosh addresses the issue of violence both in his fictional and non-fictional works. Here, I will deal with silence as an ethical imperative on the part of the author, when he is faced with contemporary violence. Fourthly, I will explore how Ghosh’s novels make use of silence as a religious and a metaphysical priority. Silence, in his works, is depicted as a form of alternative method of acquiring knowledge. Lastly, I will try to figure out how his novels make use of silence linguistically, whereby the word fails to signify a particular meaning within and outside a particular cultural context, especially in cases of translations from one language to the other.

Logocentrism, as is defined by Derrida in his book, *Of Grammatology*, is the privileging of speech over other forms of communication. Logocentrism is a belief in

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\text{absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning.}^4
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Logocentrism thus privileges speech as constituting the subject and silence as an absence of voice, meaning and being. Both logocentric and phallocentric views of silence seem to treat silence in terms of the negative and the feminine. In the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition as well as in the philosophical traditions of the West, silence was thus given negative connotations. The use of silence in Literature and other arts have not been an isolated modern phenomenon. The issue of silence has been dealt with from several theoretical stand-points. It has been a constant preoccupation since time immemorial to reflect upon silence as opposed to speech. And, at least in Western knowledge systems, the word has been given preference to silence. It is something that characterises a man, according to Aristotle: “Man is, to Aristotle, a being of the word.”

Human beings, possessed of word, have broken away from the great silence of matter. This breaking free from the silence of matter by human beings is both “miracle and outrage, sacrament and blasphemy.” Claude Levi-Strauss calls this man’s self banishment from the natural rhythms and anonymities of the animal world. Freud also tells us that in us we have a backward longing for re-immersion in an earlier inarticulate state of organic existence.

George Steiner, one of the theorists of silence, looks at silence in regard to speech in terms of the limits of language and the corruption of language. His analysis of silence is, however, restricted by the binary opposition between silence and language on which his arguments are based. This longing to go back to the so-called ‘pure’ state of silence as opposed to speech has been suitably reflected in twentieth century French and German literature. In Christianity, the ‘word’ is privileged over silence. The opening verses from

6 Ibid. 55.
7 Ibid. 55-56.
the Bible in the Gospel of John assert: “In the beginning was the Word”. In mainstream Christianity, speech has often been perceived as presence and silence as absence. There have also been deviant traditions within Christianity, like the Quakers, the Trappist and the Amish, that have privileged silence over the ‘word’. Speaking, to the Quakers, is a carnal activity and, therefore, has little place in religious worship. Silence, to them, seems an appropriate condition for worship. The Amish also encourage the use of silence in their way of living. They are supposed to be quiet in whatever they do. There is also the notion of the ineffability of God, that is, God cannot be described in terms of words. The ineffability of language has also been a major concern for poets and philosophers alike. German-Swiss theologian, Max Picard’s classic study, *The World of Silence*, also takes a very positive view of silence. He suggests:

> Silence is not merely negative; it is not the mere absence of speech. It is a positive, a complete world in itself. Silence has greatness simply because it is. It is, and that is its greatness, its pure existence.

Picard also speaks about the necessity of silence in this world of noise.

As opposed to the logocentric bias of the West, the Eastern philosophies, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism, have laid great importance to the notion of silence. The notion of the ‘Brahman’ is also associated with silence and ineffability. The ‘Brahman’ cannot be described in terms of words. The word ‘Muni’, for example, is derived from the word ‘mauna’ which means silent. *Muni* is thus a person who has taken a vow of silence: he has the capacity to achieve enlightenment on his own, that is, without a teacher; his body, speech and mind are muted, so that he is in a perfect state to

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9 Ibid. 69.
receive enlightenment. The Sanskrit word ‘shantam’ has many implications and means more than the English word ‘silence’. It can also mean peace, quiet and restfulness—something that can be associated with the sublime. One can know oneself through silence and silence then becomes the source of all wisdom. One of the theorists of silence, Dauenhauer, in his book, *Silence, the Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance*, points out how Oriental philosophies, especially in Indian and Chinese thought, have a long tradition of paying attention to silence. Silence, in these philosophies, constitutes an entire way of life in which is implicated action, thought and discourse. The notion of the Buddha’s silence acquires great significance in Eastern philosophies. Dauenhauer points out the three main silences in regard to the Buddha: the ascetic or purifying silence; the silence after his enlightenment when he chooses to withhold his doctrine from the people at large; and the silence that he observes in regard to the questions about the ultimates. Thus silence, in Eastern philosophy, is not placed in opposition to speech or language as such; but rather silence and language are taken to be integral to the understanding of the central tenets of religion and philosophy. Silence then, like speech, provides a different way of understanding the world. Silence and secrecy has thus been an important part in the ancient civilisation as well as in many non-Christian traditions. Ghosh actually researches into this heretic and esoteric cults, as we find in *The Calcutta Chromosome*[^13], and, in a sense, combines the *logos* and the *mythos* in order to weave a tale that includes the necessity of both language and silence.

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[^12]: Ibid. 109.
Besides religion, theosophy and philosophy, in subjects, like anthropology, ethnography, linguistics and music, there have been some ground-breaking studies in regard to silence. The book, *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*\(^{14}\), edited by Adam Jaworsky, approaches the concept of silence from an interdisciplinary perspective by primarily treating silence not as mere absence of sound, but rather as a metaphor for communication. The meaning of silence is also based on the value that is given to it by a specific culture. Its usage can easily be misunderstood by strangers. The Finns, for instance, are extremely reserved group of people, and foreigners often find their silences difficult to understand in international meetings and frequently take it to be a lack of involvement on their part.\(^{15}\) Linguistics, as a branch of knowledge, has also preoccupied itself with the notion of silence fairly recently, because of its increasing engagement with philosophy as well as with literature. The study of acoustics and discourse analysis also let to an increase in interest in the study of silence in linguistics.\(^{16}\) Many critics like Dauenhauer\(^{17}\), Saville-Troike\(^{18}\) and Bruneau\(^{19}\) have pointed out that the concept of silence in linguistics during the 1970’s was also perceived in terms of lack, negativity and absence of meaning and intention. The role of silence in the emotive context, as signifying something meaningful, was, however, accepted. Poets have always harped on the idea that words are not adequate vehicles to express emotions. Amitav Ghosh has

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\(^{17}\) Dauenhauer, 5.


been particularly interested in the etymology of words as well as the translatability of words across cultures. The issue of translatability is very important to a bilingual or multi-lingual author. For the Indian authors writing in English, the act of writing itself is implicated in the translation process. The works are always/already a translation. The ideas that language and silences are based on culture, and that dispute and discord arise when we try to impose our own meaning to the words of another culture is a theme that is well expressed in Ghosh’s fictional as well as non-fictional works.

The silence imposed by the formative and methodological limitations arising out of the strict boundaries of genres imposed on the author is often a severe limitation. This is particularly true in the case of social sciences, especially in the fields of history, anthropology, ethnography and the likes. Social sciences, like anthropology and ethnography, have all been complicit in the empire building ideology in trying to prove that one race is superior to the others. There have also been a lot of pseudo-sciences, like phrenology, craniology, eugenics etc. which have constantly endeavoured to gather and provide scientific evidences that promote racial superiority. Anthropology as a subject emerged with the colonial expansion of Europe in the non-Western world. The anthropologists were participants in the colonial system in defining the differences between the Western and the non-Western. There are inherent biases in the setting up of the object and subject of studies, since both the subject and the object are human beings. The biases involved are also related to the methodological procedure of anthropology, which poses to be an objective field of study. The relation between the agency of the anthropologist and the subject he studies involves complicated equations of power. Anthropology as a subject became a tool for the self-understanding of the Western man
based on the creation and absorption of the ‘other’, which, in this case, is the non-Western subject preferably defined in terms of the primitive. The methodological status of the outsider and the methodological approach of ‘objectivity’ had in retrospect given anthropology the pretence of a scientific discourse and made its intervention in bolstering the colonial ideology much easier. Postcolonial anthropology thus tries to escape from its colonial past through self-examination as well as through critical examination of the methodology which is implicated in the colonial bias and also by questioning issues related to gaze, agency and power. The insider/outsider perspective has also been questioned, as there are extensive anthropological research works being carried out by anthropologists in their own society today. Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*\(^{20}\) is, in this sense, a revolutionary work, where we find a third-world anthropologist, who has been trained in the first-world academies, is carrying out his ethnographic work in another third-world country, so that the privilege of position that an anthropologist usually enjoys is problematised. Such anthropological works are not perturbed with claims towards objectivity and truth. In attempting to achieve such a radical transformation, the fixity of its disciplinary boundaries has collapsed and, in the process, anthropology has also come much closer to fiction than it actually is. The phoenix of anthropology should rise out of its ashes anew, so that the subject can again be born, leaving out its colonial hangover. My endeavour in this dissertation would be to address such a generic transformation and delineate the role that silence plays in such a transformation. Silence thus becomes an important methodological apparatus, whereby the ‘looked upon’ forces itself back to the narrative by constructing its own agency within its own epistemological framework.

History has also been complicit in creating the grand narratives and writing about the people in power. There has been several attempts post-1950 to change the way history has been written. Sometimes in the mid 1970’s, an important shift took place in the discipline of history. The shift was mainly based on philosophical theories that inform history. Hayden White’s publication of *Metahistory*\(^{21}\) in 1973 is a significant landmark in this respect. Rather than studying history as science, historians started questioning the nature of historical narrative and its claims towards objectivity; they began to analyse historical narratives in terms of agency and the perspective from which the historians write. This change in the orientation of analysing history has often been described as the linguistic turn in history. The historians as well as the creative writes started analysing historical discourses as narratives which can be re-read and re-interpreted. The other significant movement that have influenced Ghosh’s writings is the work of the subaltern group of Indian historians. Ghosh himself had contributed an article in the *Subaltern Studies* Series\(^{22}\). The effort of the subaltern historians collective has been remarkable in the way they have questioned existing historiography as well as tried to reconstruct or restore the subaltern agency in history. Adapting the Gramscian notion of the subaltern, the subaltern collective attempted to redefine and reframe the concept to recuperate the agency of those who have been written out of history, because they did not exercise enough power. The Gramscian notion of the subaltern was particularly adaptable to the Indian condition and context, because of the possible parallels between the division of labour in Mussolini’s Italy and the colonial division of labour in India.


The difference between the Marxian perception of the industrial class and the Gramscian notion of the subaltern was that the subaltern, unlike the Marxian labour class, was not systemic or coherent in their opposition to the state. The subaltern in the Indian context is further constituted by multiple layers of the rigid class system as well as by the colonial system of oppression. The subaltern historians collective, therefore, sought to recuperate the history of the subaltern agency and resistance from the perspective of the people rather than that of the state. The subalterns have almost been written out of the mainstream nationalist narratives, as it was dominated by the elite class. Ranajit Guha, in his book, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*, asserts:

> The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively.23

The narratives of the subaltern were thus appropriated by the post-independent narratives of the bourgeois elite or by the colonial masters. This is precisely why the subaltern collective wanted to restore the subaltern agency in Indian historiography.

The success of the Peasant Rebellion against the Government in the Naxalbari area of West Bengal in 1967 prompted the subaltern studies historians to rethink the national independence narrative from the perspective of the subaltern. The historians thus sought to reconstruct the various histories of subaltern insurgencies, which were distinct and different from the bourgeois nationalist movements. Such recuperation also demanded rethinking of the methodologies as well as re-reading of the archives, since the

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agency and the voice of the subaltern did not get an adequate representation in the archive. It was felt that if the subaltern voice could not be retrieved from the colonialist and nationalist histories, it can at least be re-inscribed by critiquing the dominant historical representations. Spivak critiqued the subaltern studies project primarily on the ground that Marxist methodology informs the subaltern studies project. She tries to point out that the revisionist history, which this group is interested in, is at odds with the methodology applied. It is difficult to recover a pure subaltern consciousness in terms of Marx’s notion of class consciousness, as the power structure in India is too complex to allow such a representation. The differentiated struggles of particular subaltern groups are thus again bestowed by a false sense of coherence. In doing so, the subaltern historians are in danger of objectifying the subaltern. She also particularly refers to the articulation of the struggles of the subaltern woman. In “A literary Representation of the Subaltern”24, she suggests that literary text can provide an alternative rhetorical site in articulating the histories of the subaltern woman. She does this by providing a reading of some of the fictional works of Mahasweta Devi. In another seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”25, Spivak suggests how the benevolent impulse on the part of the elite actually goes on to appropriate the voice of the subaltern and thus silences them. The important question is the agency which seeks to represent the subaltern and the inevitable generalisations involved in the process. The representation of the agency of the subaltern forms an important preoccupation in most of Ghosh’s novels. It is difficult to restore or recuperate the subaltern agency through the methodology of conventional historiography.

because the West remains an inevitable referent in every such attempt. The history of the subaltern would then be inevitably filtered through the lens of European knowledge and, therefore, would be appropriated or silenced. Moreover, history is too preoccupied with claims to truth and claims to objectivity, as are the claims of anthropology. History also provides a particular perspective to things by giving priority to a particular type of archive and this reduces the possibility of multiple perspectives. Although history informs, and is the starting-point of, all of Ghosh’s novels, he prefers the fictional mode because it allows him to tell many stories from different perspectives. The subaltern then gets located in his own backyard and is not appropriated by the methodology of meta-narratives. In a way Ghosh ‘does’ history in trying to recuperate stories that have been silenced by the meta-narratives of history, and his preference for the fictional mode allows him more freedom than any other form of discourse would have allowed him, to escape from the always/already present meta-discourses that informs subjects like history or anthropology.

History prefers some stories over others, but this deliberate selection is not referred to in the existing historiographies. The stories of nationalism get preference over the stories of communities, and the stories of war gets preference over the stories of riots. This silencing of one type of stories by the others leads to the hegemony of one particular knowledge form over the others. Indian nationhood has thus violently strove to put up with European notions of nationhood, as a result of which our post-independence journey has often been traumatic in the sense that we continuously have to negotiate with different forms of violence. The question that gains significance in this context is how does an author come to terms with the utter banality of violence that has often perturbed
South Asia. India’s post-colonial journey has been a growing up with violence. The Partition of the country, which ultimately led to the creation of three independent nations—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, was not a moment of rupture in history, but something that has remained etched in our painful memory permanently. The siblings have often been at war with each other. Terrorism and riots have further reduced the possibility of any complacency that might have temporarily been aroused from a sense of normalcy. How does an author come to terms with such violence? The narratives of violence, that time and again go on to challenge the conception of nationhood, are often silenced. Riots are passed over as something that is temporary, a casual occurrence with no permanent effect. War, on the other hand, is given a centrality in the historical narratives because it engages the nation. The Indo-China war, as the narrator in The Shadow Lines finds out, is given more importance and space in the newspapers then the riots that took place in Bangladesh and West Bengal, although more people might have died in the riots than in the war. Ghosh tries to recuperate the silenced stories of riots and give them a voice. History has always given preference to the narratives of the states and the institutions and, in short, to those who have power. Ghosh, on the other hand, tries to represent the other stories that have been silenced in the historical narratives. The stories of violence, however, require a cautious approach and telling. It is in itself difficult to come to terms with such violence and give it a voice. It is also difficult to write about such violence and not to valorise it. In today’s media-dominated world where there is a proliferation of images, any representation must follow a sense of responsibility; otherwise the lives of people might be at stake. Violence also requires many voices and many stories, for one voice might seek to appropriate all the other voices and thus
actually do violence to the other stories. Throughout Ghosh’s fictional and non-fictional works, we find an attempt on the part of the author to represent the violence as well as to seek out ways and means of coming to terms with that violence. It is often difficult to represent such violence in terms of language, as any simple cause-and-effect relationship would fail to describe it. Silence and violence thus share a strange relationship with each other.

Ghosh also seeks to replace the histories of the nation by stories of the family. The stories of the family are silenced by the narratives of the nation in the same way that the stories of war get precedence over the stories of riots. The nation-state has been a constant referent in many novels written in English by Indian authors. Starting with Salman Rushdies’s famous novel, *Midnight’s Children*, to Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* to Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and the others— all seem to be engaged with what can be termed as ‘nationromans’\(^\text{26}\). In an e-mail correspondence with the Indian historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, in December 2000, Ghosh articulates his emphasis on the family:

Two of my novels (*The Shadow Lines*, and my most recent, *The Glass Palace*) are centred on families. I know that for myself this is a way of displacing the ‘nation’— I am sure that this is the case also with many Indian writers other than myself. In other words, I’d like to suggest that writing about families is one way of not writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities).\(^\text{27}\)

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Ghosh, in the same correspondence, goes on to elaborate why this preference for the family is not in a sense a compensatory act, but rather something that he feels is necessary to the novel in the Indian context:

Novels almost always implicitly assume a collective subject: this is what usually provides the background, milieu, setting, dialect etc. Sometimes this collective subject is the nation itself (one sees this most clearly in the work of the magical-realists). Sometimes it is a culture or a class (very common among Brits and Europeans) or (as in modern US writing) ‘a generation’. All of these are clearly sub-sets of the nation— since the boundaries of the culture, class or generation are usually assumed to coincide with the boundaries of whatever country the writer happens to be from. In India, collectivities such as nation, class, generation, culture etc. do not have the same imaginary concreteness that they do elsewhere (even today, I think). This is one of the reasons why Indian (and African) writers so often look to a different kind of collectivity, the family. In my case, the family narrative has been one way of stepping away from the limitations of ‘nation’…

This is, however, not to say that Ghosh is against the concept of the nation. In the interview he points out:

So don’t imagine that I am opposed to nationhood. If you look at our nationhood, at the borders between us and Pakistan, between us and Sri Lanka, or the border between us and Burma, or the border between us and Bangladesh— these are not trivial borders, they define the reality. What is on the other side is the real thing— it is really different and it is not different because the peoples are different, but because the institutions are different and that is basically what it is; the institutional difference is because of nationhood and this institutional difference is not a trivial difference.

Rather by focussing on the narratives of the family, he tries to escape the trap laid by the grand narratives of history which are often sustained by the nation.

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28 Ibid. 166.
29 Appendix 1.
The relation of individual memories to official versions of history becomes a curious theme in Ghosh’s novels. It is the silence of memory in official history that Ghosh seeks to address in most of his novels. The personal memories are also given the same legitimacy as the historical narratives. Pierre Nora, in his article, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”, talks about the relationship between memory and history and goes on to suggest the eradication of memory by history:

This conquest and eradication of memory by history has had the effect of a revelation as if an ancient bond of identity had been broken and something had ended that we had experienced as self evident— the equation of memory and history.\footnote{Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire,” Representations, 26 (1989): 7-24, 17 May, 2007 <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/201/articles/89NoraLieuxIntroRepresentations.pdf> 8.}

The author goes on to distinguish between memory and history:

Memory and history far from being synonymous appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life; borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformation, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History on the other hand, is the reconstruction always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.\footnote{Ibid. 8.}

The objective nature of memories has always tried to reduce the subjective nature of the same. History with its global and national intentions has been a part of the larger politics and so, more often than not, it silences memory. Ghosh weaves into his tales both history and memory, so that multiple perspectives arise and one can grapple with what has really happened and how it can or has affected individual lives.
Silence, in Ghosh’s works, is not perceived in terms of dichotomies. The world perceived in terms of binaries, Ghosh suggests, is what creates so much discord and violence. Silence, in Ghosh’s novels, also forms an important tool of communication. Silence is here perceived as something that is creative: it is not merely opposed to language or speech; but rather assists them in order to add meaning to them. Silence by itself acquires the dimension of language, as it requires a staging and a telling. There are many characters in Ghosh’s novels who are characterised by their silence. They do not speak too much in terms of language, for language often carries the weight of an embedded violence. Language is situated in a particular culture: through its different modes of classification and address, there is always an element of aligning with power—so much so that violence done by language is more dangerous than physical violence. Language also fails to adequately represent the true emotive state of an individual. The philosophical impetus of this idea has been used in Western and Eastern Knowledge systems with different significations. The purity of silence in the non-elite subaltern gets reflected in their deep emotional attachment and human understanding, as we find in the characters of Fokir, Zindi, Alu etc. There are times and situations when one feels the necessity of creating one’s own language, as, in those circumstances, the language meant for social interaction becomes insufficient to express his feelings. Thus this language, through which a man develops his bonding with nature, his association with his artistic or professional activity, or his relationship with his near and dear ones, is more honest, more sincere and more intimate than the established social codes of communication. It is through the formation of this type of communication, much of which goes on in silence, that a man develops his world-views. The characters, like Fokir, Zindi and Alu are
otherwise silent in terms of verbal expression. They acquire their expression from their
object of passion— like Fokir from fishing, Alu from weaving and Dinu from
photography. It is through these crafts that they register their protest against the violence
of language; this is the way they seek to escape from the language of social
discrimination.

Travel forms a very important motif in Ghosh’s works. Like its author, the
characters of the novels also travel to different countries, so that travel allows them to
incorporate different stories and enlarge their world-views. It is what makes them more
accommodating in nature. The impetus that travel, story-telling and memory acquire in
his novel also derives much from Ghosh’s own upbringing. The sea also becomes a motif
in his novels, because life at sea defines not only man’s primordial relationship with
nature, but also the plurality that sea-life represents. The motley group of characters that
the Ibis is carrying with it itself provides a glimpse of the variegated life that the sea
provides in *Sea of Poppies*. It is thus pertinent that I should look at the author’s
biography which so much informs the themes that he creates in his fictions.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the major Indian writers writing in English whose
generically diverse works are informed by his own peripatetic life as well as by his multi-
disciplinary academic pursuit. Amitav Ghosh was born on the 11th of July, 1956, in
Calcutta to Shailendra Kumar Ghosh and Anjali Ghosh. His father was first a Lieutenant
Colonel in the army and later a diplomat; and so, Ghosh had an itinerant Asian childhood
spend in places as varied as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran and India. He completed his
schooling from the Doon school in Dehra Dun and graduated in History in 1976 from St.
Stephen’s College in Delhi, one of the premier educational institutions in India. He

completed his post-graduation in Sociology in 1978 from Delhi University. He then went on to pursue a diploma in Arabic from the Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes in Tunis, Tunisia, in 1979. Ghosh was awarded his D. Phil. in Social Anthropology from Oxford University in 1982 for his thesis on “Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community”. It was during his D. Phil. that he undertook fieldwork in some of the villages in Egypt as part of his course. His ethnographic work, *In an Antique Land*, is a re-working, or rather a creative rendering, of his research. He worked for a while as a journalist in the *The Indian Express*, a leading newspaper published from Delhi. He has held several teaching positions in quite a few places in India and in the U.S. He has been a Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature at Queens College of the City University of New York. (1999-2003). He has also been a Visiting Professor in the Department of English at Harvard University.

His grounding in different disciplines in social sciences has a significant influence in his fictional and non-fictional works in that the generic boundaries seem to merge, coalesce and even dissolve in these works. It is often difficult to determine when fact turns into fiction, and history to story-telling in his works. Each of his works travels to different places and is meticulously researched. His own peripatetic life greatly seems to influence his works, as his writings range across times and spaces— Calcutta, Dhaka, Colombo, London, rural Egypt, Ratnagiri, Rangoon et al. Migration becomes an important theme in some of his novels and is dealt with from different perspectives in different novels, like *The Circle of Reason*, *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies*. Migration in his novels, however, acquires a totally different dimension, because this

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migration involves the subalterns. These characters migrate to make a living or to escape the clutches of the law. They are often those who do not have a valid passport. His novel does not only deal with the diaspora or the migration of the elite seeking better opportunities in the West; but they also talk about those who have no other way to live but by moving on. He thus recuperates from the silences of history, the stories of those migrant workers or bonded labourers who live in the peripheries of civilisation, yet contribute so much to the global economy.

His fascination for language is also evident in most of his works, especially in the way he is concerned about the translatability of a word across cultures. He also probes into the etymology of several words to suggest that naming is not often an innocent activity. For an Indian author writing in English, the act of writing itself involves an act of translation. Language thus is an important concern for a multi-lingual author like Ghosh, who seeks to represent one culture in terms of a different language and often in terms of a different epistemology. Writing thus becomes self-critical and self-reflexive, so that no one version or no one story is privileged over the rest. Thus his novel desperately seeks to escape from the barriers of a monolithic representation and a binary world-view.

His novels are extremely well-researched and are informed by his own academic background. The starting point of most of his novels is history:

Unless people’s stories are interesting, the history itself doesn’t matter at all, it’s only a backdrop. History is interesting to me because it creates specific predicaments, that are particular to that moment in time and nowhere else. So I’m interested in history to the point that I can represent that predicament truthfully and accurately. But beyond that, history for the sake of history doesn’t interest me. And I would say the same about research. It’s a beginning, it
gives me ideas about what’s in the world, it starts me off, that’s all.\textsuperscript{35}

It is history that provides him with the stories at first, and then the stories themselves take over by creating a sort of fusion between histories and personal memories. Ghosh has himself stated his preference for the fictional form, as he feels that the novel has been “vigorously international from the start”\textsuperscript{36}, and having born amidst cross-cultural reading habits, allows for the possibilities of fusion of different ideas and style. It is also founded on the “myth of parochiality”\textsuperscript{37} in that it needs to be located in a particular place. A novel requires a setting: the sense of place is important for a writer who is concerned with history. It can also be argued that it is the sense of place that renders the novel interesting.

At that point in time the idea of a novel was very much to do with the sense of place, the sense of rootedness—be it a Bengali novel or an English novel. The idea is that the novel is fundamentally about one place, one moment, one time. I think it is actually interesting if you explore this whole notion of placedness in the novel, how deep it is, how much it incorporates.\textsuperscript{38}

The novel is not obsessed with making truth claims. The novel allows for the possibility of representing multiple view-points. The novel is not monolithic like history or social sciences, which claim to be ‘objective’ in nature. Ghosh also brings in the aspect of historical novel. His own disciplinary background informs his novel, so that history, anthropology, photography, cetology etc. make his novels extremely interesting.


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 294.

\textsuperscript{38} Appendix 1.
In his novels, the generic boundaries often collapse and this is the freedom that the fictional form provides to a writer. Ghosh thus does history in most of his novels. In *In an Antique Land*, he incorporates ethnographic field-work in fiction. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, we have a science fiction projecting not to the future, but to the past. The past, in Ghosh’s works, assume great importance. The future, as we find it in *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, is about coming to terms with the past. In 2001, *The Glass Palace* was declared the Eurasia Regional Winner of the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize and a finalist for the overall award. Ghosh had declined the honour respectfully by writing a letter to the contest administrators stating that:

> The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of “the Commonwealth”. I therefore ask that I be permitted to withdraw *The Glass Palace* from your competition.39

His primary objections were that the rubric ‘Commonwealth’ is based on a disputed aspect of the past. It is an odd choice of literary categorisation and it also ignores the regional literature that sustains the literary life of these countries. Ghosh thus prefers to remember the past not just as a reminder of the brute facts of the empire, but rather as a matter of choice, reflection and judgement. This aspect of the memorialisation of the past is what makes Ghosh weave memory and history together in fiction. The fact that he rejected the award also raises the issue of the author’s responsibility towards his writing as well as that towards his society.

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The most refreshing aspect of Ghosh’s writing is the way in which academic scholarship, creative writing and political and social engagements are fused together in his works. The notion of representation and responsibility are important aspects that writers seek to address or need to address, when they are writing about South Asia, since South Asia’s tryst with the concept of the nation has been a violent and traumatic journey. The riots that took place in 1984 in Delhi had, in a way, shaken up the young nation’s complacency and assumption that certain things have been left behind and forgotten. The assumption that the ghosts of Partition would never come back and haunt us had proved to be false. The ghosts have not been buried or silenced, and they continue to haunt us, as we continuously engage with the concept of the nation and the concept of modernity. On the 1st of November, 1984, Mrs. Indira Ghandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh. Thirty bullets had pierced her body. The national dailies had given a high moral tone to the death of Mrs. Gandhi and it was treated as the violation of the mother. The motif was clear from the outset. It was an act of religious revenge, as four months earlier she had ordered an invasion of the holiest of Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple in Amritsar. In the next couple of days, what followed in Delhi and certain other cities in India suggested that the Frankenstein born during the Partition was never actually dead. There was a large scale massacre in the streets of Delhi: the Hindu mob backed by the ruling party had killed several Sikhs, and had burnt and destroyed their properties. The communal nature of the violence and the complicity of the state in that violence shook the foundations of what appeared to be a cosmopolitan city. It is the events of 1984 which provides the frame towards the understanding of *The Shadow Lines*. Ghosh began writing *The Shadow
Lines immediately after the tragedy of 1984. I will deal with this aspect in my Chapter titled “Silence and Violence” in this dissertation, where I will try to examine how a writer tries to come to terms with such violence, and yet succeeds in not valorising it. How does the act of writing negotiate with the notion of violence? How does writing counter the silences of history and also often the willed collective amnesia that such events usually generate? The newspapers are occupied always with a sense of immediacy, so that the continuity in time between events required to arrive at meaning is a difficult thing to achieve. History, on the other hand, looks at the events from the perspective of the meta-narratives of nation and global politics. It is difficult to think in terms of a narrative that would deal with the stories of those who died as well as the stories of those who survived. How to write about such stories without in any way valorising them or demeaning them? The author is left with a difficult balancing act between representation and responsibility. In his article, “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi”\textsuperscript{40}, Ghosh talks about his literary predecessor and the person whom he admires greatly, V.S. Naipaul. Ghosh had felt the urge and the necessity to join the protest marches against the riots that took place in Delhi. Naipaul had once felt the same urge, but had decided that it is not in the nature of the writer to join crowds. This sense of responsibility is what makes his works so endearing to the readers. The decision to perceive everything as aesthetic is the urge that Ghosh is trying desperately to fight. It is this urge that often leads to indifference.

As a writer, I had only one obvious subject: the violence… But it is worth asking if the very obviousness of this subject arises out of our modern conventions of representation; within the dominant aesthetic of our time— of our time the aesthetic of what Karahasan calls ‘indifference’— it is all too easy to present violence as an apocalyptic spectacle,

while the resistance to it can easily figure as mere sentimentality, or, worse, as pathetic or absurd.  

The dilemma that a writer faces is how to negotiate violence in terms of the narrative. The dilemma also lies in between being a writer and being a citizen, or between the scholar and the activist. Can writing be a mediating act that can bridge the distance between the telling and the action? Can writing be a redemptive act where the attempt is made to understand the nature of violence? Writing can be redemptive as well as ameliorative, if it can tell the silent stories of individual courage and fortitude against the grotesque nature of violence, thereby preserving the memories that will help us to redeem something even from utter savagery. To redeem even from the “horror of violence” the “affirmation of humanity” is the purpose of writing, for Ghosh. There might not be any critical consensus in the representation of such narratives; and yet they need a telling so that the readers can decide which stories to remember and which to forget. The responsibility of the author should be of utmost priority in representing such a sensitive narrative “…in such incendiary circumstances, words cost lives, and it is only appropriate that those who deal in words should pay scrupulous attention to what they say.” The meticulous research that Ghosh undertakes in each of his novels arises from this sense of responsibility. In his novels, we thus find representation of narratives, like the riots, the aftermath of the Partition, the Morichjhãpi incident, the violence in Burma, being narrated from different perspectives. He also expresses in his works several concerns for mankind in general: concern for man in relation to his environment, as we find in The

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41 Ghosh, Imam and the Indian, 61.
42 Ibid. 61.
43 Ibid. 61.
Hungry Tide\textsuperscript{44} where he has dealt with the aspect of ecology, his concern for the creation and proliferation of nuclear weapons in South Asia, and the consequent threat perception, as has been vividly portrayed in his non-fictional work, \textit{Countdown}\textsuperscript{45}, his continued concern for the people of Myanmar who are desperately trying to cope up with the suppressive military regime of the Junta, which find place both in his fictional work, \textit{The Glass Palace}, and in his non-fictional work, \textit{At Large in Burma}\textsuperscript{46}. His concern also gets reflected in his essays on the plight of the Tsunami victims and his attempts to help them. With Ghosh, meaning never seems to escape his writing.

In this dissertation, I will try to explore how Ghosh represents the several nuances of silence both from the thematic and from the formative aspects. Silence appears to embody an entire metaphysics in his works, as the different facets of silence become a constant preoccupation with him and his characters.

\textsuperscript{44} Amitav Ghosh, \textit{The Hungry Tide} (New Delhi: HarperCollins, India Today Group, 2005).
\textsuperscript{45} Amitav Ghosh. \textit{Countdown} (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, Orient Longman, 1999).
\textsuperscript{46} Amitav Ghosh, \textit{Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma} (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998).