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### Articulating silence in the postcolonial Indian novel

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# Articulating Silence in the Postcolonial Indian Novel

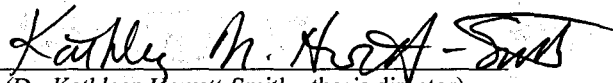
Kaelin O'Connell

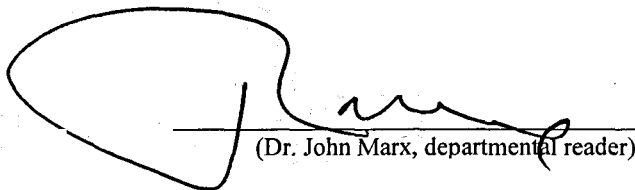
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Dr. Kathleen Hewett-Smith, Thesis Director


Spring 2006

The signatures below certify that with this essay Kaelin O'Connell has satisfied the thesis requirement for Honors in English.

  
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Whatever is worth seeing or hearing in India can be expressed in writing. As soon as everything of importance is expressed in writing, a man who is duly qualified may obtain more knowledge of India in one year, in his closet in England, than he could obtain during the course of the longest life, by the use of his eyes and ears in India.

– James Mill, *The History of British India, 1817*.

This quotation, from the first philosophical history of India, posits the common British colonial notion that language, specifically the written word, might capture all that is “worth seeing or hearing in India.” Such a claim articulates both the problem and solution to this paper’s study of the theme of silence in South Asian literature. As this paper will prove, the decision to *write* silence lies in Indian authors’ application of Mill’s logic to their own English-linguaged stories. The feeling that “everything of importance” not only can but should be written down serves as an important impetus behind much Anglo-Indian writing and finds testimony in the genre’s obsession with recording. While the desire to record is not a strictly Indian phenomenon, author Salman Rushdie suggests that Indian authors take this practice to the extreme, asking, “Is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality? Worse: am I infected too.”<sup>1</sup> An analysis of his novel *Midnight’s Children* reveals that Rushdie, as a postcolonial Indian author, is in fact “infected.”

Saleem constantly refers to the need to write down his entire life story before his impending annihilation. He states:

I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 82.

crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious, dust. This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget. (We are a nation of forgetters.) ... I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks.<sup>2</sup>

Saleem's eagerness to record his story through writing often causes him to race ahead in his own narration. In these moments, Saleem forces himself to focus, as evidenced in asides such as "(I must describe those lips, too—but later, because now ...)."<sup>3</sup> Sara Suleri notes in her reading of Rushdie's *Shame* that the "anxiety to tell untold stories leads him [Rushdie] to overcomplete and overexplain."<sup>4</sup> This tendency reveals itself in the frequent use of such asides, but also through an obsession with detail. Saleem is self-consciously meticulous with his storytelling, stating, "I was born in Doctor Marlikar's Nursing Home on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947.... No, it's important to be more ... On the stroke of midnight ... Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence."<sup>5</sup>

Through such examples readers recognize the driving presence of the need to record, but Rushdie further exploits this drive through the unique (and, as this paper suggests, Indian) tendency to explore the silences in his story and record them as well.

He writes:

I sit like an empty pickle-jar in a pool of Anglepoised light, visited by this

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<sup>2</sup> Rushdie, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Rushdie, 96.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 185.

<sup>5</sup> Rushdie, 3.

vision of my grandfather sixty-three years ago, which demands to be recorded, ... Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail, ... everything, and not just the few clues one stumbles across.<sup>6</sup>

While sitting in an “Anglopoised light,” Saleem introduces this motif of “gaps.” Often these gaps, which Saleem frequently calls attention to for his readers, have meanings that contradict the language which surrounds them. In one such instance, when writing of his family’s reaction to the revelation that he is not their biological son, Saleem states:

But there was a distance behind her gentleness, as though she were trying to persuade herself ... a distance, too, in the Monkey’s midnight whispers of, “Hey, brother, why don’t we go and pour water over Zaraf—they’ll only think he’s wet his bed?”—and it was my sense of this gap which showed me that, despite their use of *son* and *brother*, their imaginations were working hard to assimilate Mary’s confession.<sup>7</sup>

These gaps point to a fundamental problem facing Indian authors who accept Mill’s argument. Because these authors are writing for a Western audience (the “Englishman in the closet”) they must write *all* aspects of their culture that they wish to legitimize as being “of importance”—including the gaps.

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<sup>6</sup> Rushdie, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Rushdie, 329.

The pressures felt by these authors to find validation from Western audiences is better understood in light of the Western perceptions of Indian culture as expressed in these texts. In *Midnight's Children*, Aadam Aziz learns of the Western conceptions of India while studying medicine in Germany:

Heidelberg, in which, along with medicine and politics, he learned that India – like radium—had been “discovered” by the Europeans; even Oskar was filled with admiration for Vasco da Gama, and this was what finally separated Aadam Aziz from his friends, this belief of theirs that he was somehow the invention of their ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

What manifests in these feelings of discouragement in Aadam result in feelings of anger in Roy's Ammu. Frustrated with the British Margaret Kochamma's observations of India, Ammu frustratingly exclaiming “Must we behave like some damn godforsaken tribe that's just been discovered?”<sup>9</sup> From these moments in the texts readers see that the Western conceptions of India are a strain on Indian authors. Thus, the challenge of these authors is not merely to add new insight to the Indian culture, but rather to reshape preexisting conceptions of the subcontinent.

The significance of this task is not lost on those who undertake it. In her essay “Edmund Burke and the Indian Sublime,” Sara Suleri argues that the British misunderstanding of India results from the British attempt to comprehend India in English terms. Suleri writes that Burke, who had to explain India to the British, had to “come to terms with the central representational unavailability that Indian cultures and

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<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Roy, 171.

histories, even its sheer geography, must pose to the colonizing eye.”<sup>10</sup> To make the cultures available to the English, then, the British fragmented India into a collection of maps and numbers, physical descriptions and census counts. Because they only examined the country in segments but never as a synergy, Suleri argues, the British forever lost the ability to grasp India completely.

This theme of misinterpretation that results from only seeing part of a whole is mirrored in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, most specifically in the story of Aadam Aziz and his wife, Naseem Ghani. Naseem’s father calls on Aziz to medically examine his daughter, yet he does not allow Aziz to see her. Instead, Aziz can only look at Naseem’s injured body parts through a perforated sheet. Over the years, Aziz sees all of Naseem’s body, but only one piece at a time. Rushdie writes, “So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts.”<sup>11</sup> Naseem as a whole, though, was entirely different than the “glued together” woman in Aziz’s mind; Aziz learned he had not known her at all.

This rejection of the idea that one can access actual meaning through a piecemeal study further explains the Indian obsession with recording the *whole* story. Representations of Indian culture that ignore the “gaps” are fallible, and silent moments are emphasized as a necessary part of a story’s communication.

The focus on these “gaps” and the larger theme of silence in Indian literature cannot be solely attributed to the need to record everything. Rather, it results from the pairing of that need with the genre’s basic frustrations with the communicative capacities of the English language, that is, the words’ ability to capture an author’s meaning, when

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<sup>10</sup> Suleri, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Rushdie, 22



applied to Indian culture. Anglo-Indian authors' intention (validation through writing) and their vehicle (language) are at odds, for in order to communicate with a Western audience Indian authors must write in the English language, a concession that is laden with opportunities for miscommunication. Time and again readers see a character's inability to communicate or a narrator's inability to articulate his precise meaning, and each example points to the inadequacies of the English language in these Indian texts. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is perhaps the best example of this frustration.

Roy, attempting to fit Indian culture into the rigidity of English words, first alludes to the language's inadequacies when discussing banana jam.

They used to make pickles, squashes, jams, curry powders and canned pineapples. And banana jam (illegally) after the FPO (Food Products Organization) banned it because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said. As per their books. Looking back now, to Rahel it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question.<sup>12</sup>

Similar struggles with the inadequacies of language surface again when Rahel discusses the Earth Woman with Chacko, her uncle. Chacko argues:

And we, my dears, everything we are and ever will be are just a twinkle in her eye," Chacko said grandly, lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling ...

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<sup>12</sup> Roy, 30-31.

Later, in the light of all that happened, *twinkle* seemed completely the wrong word to describe the expression in the Earth Woman's eye.

*Twinkle* was a word with crinkled, happy edges.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, when Chacko uses the word "twinkle" he is speaking in what the twins call his "Reading Aloud voice." Chacko, who received a fully anglicized education at Oxford University, "didn't care whether or not they had understood what he was saying. Ammu called them his Oxford Moods."<sup>14</sup> Roy's insistence upon drawing attention to Chacko's English education at the same moment he chooses the "wrong word" further emphasizes the inadequacies of the English language to effectively capture this story.

Interestingly, one of Roy's clearest examples of the strain of fitting Indian culture into the English language can be found in a discussion of the logic of the very body she had been criticizing. When the twins learn the definition of "cuff-link," they were "thrilled by this morsel of logic in what had so far seemed an illogical language. *Cuff+link=cuff-link.*" Roy writes, "This, to them, rivaled the precision and logic of mathematics. *Cuff-links* gave them an inordinate (if exaggerated) satisfaction, and a real affection for the English language."<sup>15</sup> Cuff-links, however, have no place in Indian culture. Roy writes that when Chacko's and Ammu's father died, he left behind a "chocolate box full of cuff-links that Chacko distributed among the taxi drivers in Kottayam." The taxi drivers, having no use for something so English in Ayemenem, transformed the cuff-links into "rings and pendants for unmarried daughters' dowries."<sup>16</sup> Roy's point, then, is clear: the English language is only logical when applied to the

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<sup>13</sup> Roy, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Roy, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Roy, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Roy, 50.

English culture; when brought into the Indian culture it needs to be transformed in order to have any purpose.

Roy's frustrations with applying the inadequacies of a strictly English language to her Indian story are personified when she writes of problems that arise out of native accents and translation barriers. English words are transformed both literally and figuratively when said by Indian tongues, as Roy illustrates with "divorced." She writes of an encounter the adult Rahel has with Comrade Pillai, an old acquaintance from her childhood,

"We're divorced." Rahel hoped to shock him into silence.

"Die-vorced?" His voice rose to such a high register that it cracked on the question mark.

He even pronounced the word as though it were a form of death.<sup>17</sup>

Roy contrasts Rahel's English "divorced" with Comrade Pillai's English-Indian "Die-vorced," illustrating that the word not only sounds different when embraced by a native, but it also adopts an alternate, deathly meaning.

Roy spells out these implications even more obviously in a conversation between Velutha and the 8-year-old Rahel. Rahel, who claims she saw Velutha at a communist march, sees his smile as a crack in his defense that he wasn't there. She shouts, "See, you're smiling! ... That means it was you. Smiling means 'It was you.'" Velutha replies, "That's only in English! ... In Malayalam my teacher always said that 'Smiling

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<sup>17</sup> Roy, 124.

means it wasn't me.”<sup>18</sup> Though readers cannot take Velutha's answer literally, his comment still speaks to deeper issues in the text, as he says that the same thing has opposite meanings in the two cultures. Again Roy points to the inadequacies of using only one nation's language to tell a story that so clearly breaches two cultures; when sticking strictly with English, we end up with an inaccurate reading.

Through these examples readers can see that Roy is dissatisfied with the English language. Such dissatisfaction accounts for her decision to change that language to suit her needs throughout the novel in the hopes that such manipulations can enhance the communicative abilities of the words. One such instance appears in her tendency to merge two, three or even four words into one. Roy writes of legs being crossed “Thiswayandthat”<sup>19</sup> and later of feet walking “lef,lef,lefrightlef.”<sup>20</sup>

Roy capitalizes where grammar dictates she should not, and she strategically lower cases when a capital letter is in order. Doing so not only adds emphasis to desired words, it actually invigorates the English words with new meanings. For example, Roy writes, “The Loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive,”<sup>21</sup> and through this capitalization she reifies “the Loss of Sophie Mol,” turning it into a tangible thing rather than an elusive feeling. Roy does this again when she states, “Everybody agreed that it was best to just Let Her Be.”<sup>22</sup> Through capitalization, Roy changes “letting her be” from a passive abstention into an active choice.

Roy emphasizes the importance of these capitalized words through the ease with which her characters use them. When Rahel first returns to Ayemenem, she has trouble

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<sup>18</sup> Roy, 169.

<sup>19</sup> Roy, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Roy, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Roy, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Roy, 44.

communicating. Roy writes, “Rahel tried to say something. It cam out jagged.”<sup>23</sup>

Rahel’s failed attempt at communication is contrasted with an encounter she has with Estha not long after. Rahel finds a rosary she had hidden as a child, stating, “Imagine. It’s still here. I stole it. After you were Returned.” Roy writes, “That word slipped out easily. *Returned*.”<sup>24</sup> The “Returned” that Roy uses here is not the “returned” of standard English, it is one of the twins’ own words, a part of their separate language, and it is that language, not the jagged English, through which Rahel is able to communicate.

Roy continues her challenges to the English language throughout the novel.

Instead of writing “later” she uses “Lay ter,” a choice which goes outside language and yet still acts as an effective communicator. And Roy does not limit her exploration of words to her diction; she further provokes readers to consider these questions of language through italics and word placement. She writes of how Estha, Rahel and Sophie Mol spent an entire day saying “Nictitating membrane,” and then represents this repetition writing :

*“Nictitating  
ictitating  
titating  
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tating  
ating  
ting  
ing”*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Roy, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Roy, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Roy, 180.

Roy strays from the standards of sentence structure, type, word choice and even visual representation on the page to which readers are so accustomed in order to express that which the structured Anglo-English language cannot.

Considering this problem in light of Suleri's "The Rhetoric of English India" helps readers realize the foundation of these significant trends of Indian literature. Suleri suggests that:

The postcolonial condition is neither territorially bound nor more the property of one people than of the other: instead, its inevitably retroactive narrative allows for the inclusion both of its colonial past and of the function of criticism at the present time as necessary corollaries to the telling of its stories.<sup>26</sup>

Suleri argues that by asserting dominance over the subcontinent, the British tried to control the shape of Indian culture. However, instead of resulting in the total domination of one culture over another, in clear lines between the colonizer and the colonized, this period rather resulted with the emergence of English India. She explains:

In the context of colonialism, English India represents an ambivalence that addresses the turning point of such necessary imbrications as those between the languages of history and culture; of difference and fear. As a consequence, its trajectory is extensive enough to include both imperial and subaltern materials and in the process demonstrates their radical

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<sup>26</sup> Suleri, 22.

inseparability.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, when Britain conquered India, Suleri argues, it did not simply transfer its national identity onto India. Instead, the two cultures wrestled back and forth and, in the end, took aspects from each other to create a unique national identity that was neither wholly Indian nor wholly British. She writes, "The idiom of postcolonialism is necessarily reactive and, unless it is to be lost in its own novelty, must engage in the multiplicity of histories that are implicated in its emergence."<sup>28</sup> Applying Suleri's reading of the cultural outcome of colonialism to language, then, it stands to reason that problems would arise, for the cultural hybridization of English-India is lost in stories that tell Indian tales in the English language. They only use the language of one culture, ignoring the influence of the other.

### **Western Philosophy**

Feelings of frustration over the inadequacies of language are neither new nor purely Indian. What is notable about the Indian frustration with language, however, is the unique reaction of these writers to the familiar problem of language failures. For, as this paper will prove, rather than shunning language when faced with its inadequacies, Indian literature embraces and manipulates those inadequacies in order to achieve new means of communication. As proven above, the Indian textual frustrations arise out of problems with both writing in the English language and writing for an English audience. Because Western culture lies at the root of the problems of Indian authors, it is valuable to consider that same Western culture as it relates to the solution, silence, as well. The

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<sup>27</sup> Suleri, 2-3.

<sup>28</sup> Suleri, 21.

thematization of silence, like frustrations with language, is not uncommon in English literatures either, especially in that literature which addresses ethnicity. Rather than choosing conventional methods of metaphorical silences in their texts, however, Indian authors employ literal silence—the actual articulation of silent moments, the creation of characters who physically do not speak, the powerful descriptions of silence as a tangible force—to address such issues.

An analysis of silence's role in Western literary theory will prove that the prevailing Western thought on silence is that its articulation is impossible, arguing that as soon as language touches silence, thus making it the spoken, that silence is destroyed. Indian authors treat this theory in the same way that they treat language – they transform it to suit their own particular needs. Because an encompassing communication of Indian stories depends upon the writing of “gaps,” Indian authors necessarily reject this Western hegemony and, despite Western warnings, attempt to join language and silence in their texts. Significantly, it is only through the simultaneous rejection of these Western tenets (language and language theory) that Indian authors can successfully articulate language. To understand how Indian literature defies Western theories of silence, however, it is first necessary to outline what these prevailing theories argue.

One of the writers most seminal to western theoretical discourse on the limitations of human language is St. Augustine. Interestingly, in his attempt to articulate the ineffable (God) in *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine demonstrates a frustration later embraced by Indian writers. Indeed, at one point in the midst of his lengthy and important discussion of the nature of God, Augustine rather abruptly interrupts himself and asks:



Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say.... And so God is not even to be called unspeakable,<sup>29</sup> because to say even this is to speak of Him. Thus there arises a curious contradiction of words, because if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. And this opposition of words is rather to be avoided by silence than to be explained away by speech.<sup>29</sup>

Augustine's particular point of contention is with the word "unspeakable." He first satisfies himself with calling God unspeakable, but then realizes that even stating God's ineffability characterizes and limits Him within language. Here, Augustine's word choice, which speaks explicitly of "syllables," "speech" and a "contradiction of words," communicates Augustine's attention to language. Augustine, then, is faced with the same problem that Roy and other South Asian authors encounter: Words are inadequate to express his meaning.

Augustine's justification for his silence speaks directly to the issues facing Indian authors. Augustine explains that he does not need to express God's ineffability because the word *Deus* inherently implies this quality. He writes, "Although he is not recognized in the noise of these two syllables, all those who know the Latin language, when this sound [Deus] reaches their ears, are moved to think of a certain most excellent immortal

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<sup>29</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), 11-12.

nature.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Augustine is only able to remain silent because he can depend upon the inherent meanings of a shared language to communicate for him; he knows his audience will still understand the “most excellent immortal nature” even without an explicit, written explanation of it. Indian authors, however, who cannot partake in the benefits of such a shared language when writing for a foreign audience, are forced to find a more aggressive solution to articulating the unspeakable.

In many ways, Augustine’s assessment of the failure of language is echoed later by post-structuralism. Michel Foucault, for example, argues, like Augustine, that language is an inadequate communicator. Foucault’s response to this dilemma, however, is quite different. While Augustine claims that language’s inadequacies demand silent assent, Foucault assumes the opposite position, arguing that those very inadequacies are all the more reason to open a discussion. Indeed, Foucault is insistent in his efforts to expose/explore silence in his writing.

The analysis of statements can never confine its attention to the things said, to the sentences that were actually spoken or written, to the ‘signifying’ elements that were traced or pronounced—and, ... it cannot concern only realized verbal performances.<sup>31</sup>

It is Foucault’s differing view of language that leads him to a conclusion so wholly opposite Augustine’s. Augustine sees words as conveying set, inherent meanings; *Deus* can convey the ineffability of God because it encapsulates that message in its meaning.

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<sup>30</sup> Augustine, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 109.

Consequently, then, Augustine implies that words' meanings are unchanging; every time one uses *Deus* (in conversation, in writing, in prayer) it communicates the same implications. Foucault, on the other hand, sees language as much more elusive. He writes:

We know—and this has probably been the case ever since men began to speak – that one thing is often said in place of another; that one sentence may have two meaning at once; that an obvious meaning, understood without difficulty by everyone, may conceal a second esoteric or prophetic meaning that a more subtle deciphering, or perhaps only the erosion of time, will finally reveal.<sup>32</sup>

The problems that Indian authors have with the English language, then, Foucault has with *all* language, as he sees it as an inadequate mode of expression. He defines the elusiveness of language in his text, writing, “here and there, in relations to possible domains of objects and subjects, in relation to other possible formulations and re-uses, there is *language*.”<sup>33</sup> The articulated segment of *language*, therefore, only captures one part of a much larger discourse.<sup>34</sup> According to Foucault:

The statement cannot be regarded as the cumulative result or the crystallization of several fluctuating, scarcely articulated, and mutually opposed statements. The statement is not haunted by the secret presence

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<sup>32</sup> Foucault, 109-110.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, 17.

of the unsaid, of hidden meanings, of suppressions; on the contrary, the way in which these hidden elements function, and in which they can be restored, depends on the enunciative modality itself: we know that the ‘unsaid’, the ‘supressed’, is not the same—either in its structure or in its effect—in the case of a mathematical statement, a statement in economics, an autobiography, or the account of a dream.<sup>35</sup>

Foucault argues that meaning is not inherent in language, but rather it comes from the “enunciative modality,” and thus every statement is unique – even if two statements comprise identical words, they can never share identical enunciative modalities. This point implies, then, that it would be impossible to ever express silence through language. If, as Foucault suggests, this applies to both said and unsaid statements, then the “meaning” of an unsaid statement would immediately be destroyed as it was replaced with that of the said statement.

Scholar Darren Hynes addresses Foucault’s fundamental frustrations with language’s ability to articulate meaning beyond that initially found in its first enunciation:

For Foucault, words are always sliding from one referent to another, so all we are left with is language, which is never really adequate to explain itself. This is why he is so hard to understand; he never explains clearly and distinctly what he means, but that is his point, words are inadequate in expression, especially if one is trying to express the inexpressible - death, the void, or unreason.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Foucault, 110.

In spite of language's inability to expressly communicate the meaning of silences, Foucault nonetheless suggests that an effort to fully articulate a silenced subject, though that effort is plagued by linguistic limitations of language, is better than no attempt at all. Rather than advocating the articulation of that which has remained silent (as Augustine addressed), Foucault promotes discussion about these silences that determine why they, as opposed to related statements, were not enunciated. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, he writes:

One should not object to linguistic methods or logical analyses: '...Do you know that you have described only a few of the characteristics of a language (*langage*) whose emergence and mode of being are entirely irreducible to your analyses?' Such objections must be set aside: for if it is true that there is a dimension there that belongs neither to logic nor to linguistics, ... Language, in its appearance and mode of being, is the statement; as such, it belongs to a description that is neither transcendental nor anthropological....The possibility of an enunciative analysis, if it is established, must make it possible to raise the transcendental obstacle that a certain form of philosophical discourse opposes to all analyses of language, in the name of the being of that language and of the ground from which it should derive its origin.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Darren Hynes, "Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge (Memorial University of Newfoundland [Online] available from <http://www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc1.html>); accessed 14 December 2005; Internet.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault, 113.

Thus, while Foucault deems the actual articulation of silent moments as impossible, he argues that there is still a possibility of entertaining a successful discussion about those silent moments without destroying those moments with language.

Readers see the realization of this outlined approach in Foucault's discussion of madness in *Folie et deraison: Histoire de la folie a l'age classique*. He reflects on this endeavor in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, writing "The studies of madness and the beginnings of psychology . . . gradually became more clear . . . because they discovered—in this debate on humanism and anthropology—the point of its historical possibility."<sup>38</sup> Foucault argues, "The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason *on* madness, could be established only on the basis of such a silence. I have not tried to write the history of that language but, rather, the archaeology of that silence."<sup>39</sup>

Jacques Derrida responds to Foucault's discussion of madness in "Cogito and the History of Madness," expressing strong disagreement with Foucault's efforts. Derrida criticizes the attempt:

*Nothing* within this language, and *no one* among those who speak it, can escape the historical guilt—if there is one, and if it is historical in a classical sense—which Foucault apparently wishes to put on trial. But such a trial may be impossible, for by the simple fact of their articulation the proceedings and the verdict unceasingly reiterate the crime.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 34.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, 35.

Derrida's argument is a familiar one, for it echoes Augustine's discussion of God's "unspeakability." Augustine silences his own attempts to discuss God's ineffability, thus refusing to "reiterate the crime" of speaking the unspeakable. Derrida seems, at first, simply to be taking a more loquacious route to Augustine's conclusion. He states that as soon as madness is called "mad" or silence is voiced as "silent," the terms forfeit their original meanings. Derrida's concern over this notion of destruction upon definition or realization reflects both Augustine's refusal to speak of God and Foucault's understanding of language. Unlike the other two Western theorists, however, Derrida does not completely discount the possibility of an articulation of silence, and it is his unique solution which provides the arena in which Indian authors can achieve that which Western philosophy had deemed impossible. For, Derrida argues that if there is any chance for the silent to be articulated, that opportunity will develop in literature. Derrida notes, "One could perhaps say that the resolution of this difficulty [“the simple problem of articulation”] is *practiced* rather than *formulated*.”<sup>41</sup> Derrida draws a clear connection between the articulation of silence and literature when he argues:

There is in literature, in the *exemplary* secret of literature, a chance of saying everything without touching upon the secret ... Literature is a modern invention, inscribed in conventions and institutions which, to hold on to just this trait, secures in principle its *right to say everything*.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Derrida, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Cogito, 23.

This “right” is crucial to literature’s relationship with silence. Of course a work of fiction would not go into a detailed analysis of what silence is and how it works in the novel, but it can paint a picture of a relationship that develops silently or can, through third person narration, detail communication between characters that does not include words. These scenarios articulate silence as effectively as might a full blown philosophical analysis. Literature’s ability to show and not tell complicates the notion of silence’s articulation, for it is exactly this showing—not the telling—that ultimately communicates whatever is behind the silence.

“Showing” is especially relevant to Indian texts. Because South Asian authors’ ability to simply “tell” is handicapped by the English language’s inadequacies when applied to their culture, Indian authors, more so than authors of other genres, must “show” in order to communicate. There is a common trait of inaccessibility, then, between silence in Western texts and accurate cultural representations in South Asian texts. That commonality makes silence the ideal place to work out South Asian literature’s problematic relationship with language and representation. By accessing the inaccessibilities of silence, this paper argues, South Asian authors are subsequently able to access the parallel inaccessibilities of their own cultural representation; in the articulation of one problematic relationship, they can achieve communication of the other.

### **Articulations of Silence in South Asian Texts**

The value of articulating silence is crucial to these texts which, as proven above, hold “gaps” and silences as valuable communicators. As seen in *Midnight’s Children*, these authors can, at times, even privilege silence above verbal language. When



discussing the Midnight Children's Conferences, telepathic discussions the protagonist holds in his head, Saleem notes:

I understood only a fraction of the things being said within the walls of my skull. Only later, when I began to probe, did I learn that below the surface transmission – the front-of-mind stuff which is what I'd originally been picking up – language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words.<sup>43</sup>

Saleem demotes the value of spoken language and thus heightens the importance of such "thought-forms" throughout the novel, stating, "In order to communicate with, and understand, my colleagues in the Midnight Children's Conference, it was necessary for me quickly to advance beyond the verbal stage,"<sup>44</sup> and later, "I say: maybe not in these words; maybe not in words at all, but in the purer language of thought; but yes, certainly, this is what was at the bottom of it all."<sup>45</sup> It is the fact that these "thought-forms" are silent – and thus free from the cultural, political and national ties that plague language – that makes them communicative. It is these very attributes that prompt Indian authors to go beyond representing silence and attempt its actual articulation in their texts. Close readings of silent moments in both *The God of Small Things* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* will prove that the texts achieve these articulations, thus communicating through literature that which Western literary theory classified as outside of language.

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<sup>43</sup> Rushdie, 193.

<sup>44</sup> Rushdie 251.

<sup>45</sup> Rushdie, 293.

On a very basic level, the entire text of *Midnight's Children* communicates a silence, for the version of history expressed by the narrator, Saleem, has previously been silenced. After describing an incident in which Saleem's uncle threatened to cut his tongue out if he disobeyed him, Saleem states, "Threatened by policemen, I have remained silent for two decades; but no longer. Now, everything has to come out."<sup>46</sup> Thus, Saleem races against his own clock to finish writing down an exhaustive history of his life and his family. Some of the aspects of Saleem's story, such as his records of the Midnight Children's Conference, or the MCC, have never even been put into language – neither spoken nor written – before this narrative. Thus when Saleem tells about the conversations of the MCC he is actually articulating that which had been silent. Rushdie gets as close to spoken language as possible when relating details of the MCC by using quoted dialogue to recount these conversations, bringing even more emphasis to his act of articulation. He writes:

Among the philosophies and aims suggested were collectivism – "We should all get together and live somewhere, no? What would we need from anyone else?" – and individualism – "you say we; but we together are unimportant; what matters is that each of us has a gift to use for his or her own good" – filial duty – "However we can help our father-mother, that is what it is for us to do."<sup>47</sup>

This type of dialogue continues for almost an entire page, and the effect is notable: what had once been silent is now an overflow of language. Rushdie further emphasizes the

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<sup>46</sup> Rushdie, 283.

<sup>47</sup> Rushdie, 261.

irony of this silent conference by describing it as a “lok sabha or parliament of [Saleem’s] brain.”<sup>48</sup> He continues by describing the conferences as “One hour of top-volume yelling jabbering arguing giggling,”<sup>49</sup> a description that not only invokes loud verbal associations but, through its lack of commas, gives readers the sensation of a mighty buildup of noise. Through such techniques, Rushdie is not only voicing the silent, he is doing so loudly and pointedly through a conversation of 581 voices. Saleem goes so far as to say that midnight is “our private, silent hour.”<sup>50</sup>

Beyond these obvious examples, Rushdie also displays much more pointed articulations of silence in his novel. A prime example of these occurs when Rushdie writes of an exchange between the lawyer Ismail Ibrahim and the personified public opinion. He writes, “The prosecution said, ‘Here is an open and shut case.... And public opinion: ‘Such a good man, Allah!’ Ismail Ibrahim said: ‘This is a case of attempted suicide.’ To which, public opinion: “?????????”<sup>51</sup> Instead of narrating that public opinion was undecided on the suicide, or more useful to this paper, that it had remained silent, Rushdie represents this nonresponse with a series of question marks in quotations. This written silence is even more striking since it comes in the midst of a rapid dialogue. The decision to use quotations marks – a signal of spoken words – around the unspeakable question marks is significant, for it exemplifies an articulation of silence that can only exist in literature.

When Augustine discusses the “ineffable,” he says that such topics can either be “avoided by silence” or “explained away by speech.” Here, Rushdie does neither. The

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<sup>48</sup> Rushdie, 259.

<sup>49</sup> Rushdie, 259-260.

<sup>50</sup> Rushdie, 243.

<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, 301.

act of writing about this public opinion in itself prevents it from maintaining absolute silence, and the choice to represent that public opinion through quoted question marks, which spoken words cannot capture, preserves the silence from destruction by speech. Rushdie's "?????????" is both outside and inside language, then, because it can only exist in literature. This text represents silence, as Derrida suggests, by showing – not telling— it to readers.

Readers see the same approach taken with these questions marks surface frequently in the two novels in the form of ellipses. When characters are speaking and a silent moment passes between them, Roy uses ellipses to convey these silences:

‘Oh ... a little old churchgoing ammooma, quiet and clean ... idi appams for breakfast, kanji and meen for lunch. Minding her own business. Not looking right or left’. ‘And she’s really a ... ?’

‘Really a wild thing ... I can hear her at night—rushing past in the moonlight, always in a hurry. You must be careful of her.

And what does she really eat?’

‘Really eat? Oh ... Stoo ... and ...’ He cast about for something English for the evil river to eat.

‘Pineapple slices ...’ Rahel suggested.(162)

Roy makes it clear through her narration that the twins are pausing as they talk (“He cast about”), yet she takes this extra step of writing out the ellipses as well. Roy’s ellipses, like Rushdie’s question marks, are quoted in the text. In the same way that Rushdie merged the unspeakable with a symbol for the spoken, Roy, too, expresses the

unutterable ellipses in a context of spoken language. In doing so, she finds a way to represent these silences in a mode that can only exist in literature.

While Rushdie, too, uses ellipses in the spoken dialogue of his text, he expands on the practice, using ellipses in the prose narration as well. Rushdie writes, “The Children, listening fascinatedly as we fought ... or perhaps not, perhaps even our dialogue failed to hold their interest.”<sup>52</sup> Such instances occur incessantly in the text, conspicuously inserting silent, paused moments into what is otherwise a fast-paced, free-flowing narrative.

One of the most interesting articulations of silence that appears in these texts occurs in *The God of Small Things* when Rahel is singing about Estha. She sings,

*I'm Popeye the sailor man dum dum*

*I live in a cara-van dum dum*

*I op-en the door*

*And fall-on the floor*

*I'm Popeye the sailor man dum dum.*<sup>53</sup>

Because of the rhythm of the prose here, readers understand that “dum dum” is meant to represent the silent beats of the song. Having established this connection between “dum dum” and a silent moment, then, Roy uses the phrase again in regular prose to emphasize important moments. In one such example, she writes, “‘Rahel,’ Ammu said, ‘you haven’t Learned your Lesson yet. Have you?’ Rahel had: *Excitement Always Leads to Tears.*”

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<sup>52</sup> Rushdie, 293.

<sup>53</sup> Roy, 94.

Dum dum.”<sup>54</sup> Here, “dum dum” no longer functions as a logical substitution (as it does for the musical beats when sung), but it now becomes an articulation of silence – one that actually employs words to express the unspoken. This articulation of silence is perhaps the most impressive found in these texts, for it, unlike question marks and ellipses, is not wholly dependent upon literature. Roy’s articulation can actually cross over from the written word into an utterance. And while the Western theories outlined earlier suggest that this constitutes the silent moment “passing over to the side of the enemy,”<sup>55</sup> it actually does not. For, in this case, the enemy is the logic of the English language, and “dum dum” can hardly be classified as such. The utterance does not make sense when standing on its own; it is only when thinking of “dum dum” as a silence that it makes sense in the larger context of language.

### **Silence as a tool to comment on cultural issues**

In this marriage of a drive to record everything and a need to communicate outside the English language, South Asian authors sought out these effective ways of expressing silence. They have accessed this discourse more effectively than other authors and have managed to express that which Western literary theory labeled inexpressible, through both symbols and words. Roy and Rushdie use this success to segue into a bigger challenge: accurately communicating about the Indian culture through the English language. Not surprisingly, Roy and Rushdie use the theme of silence to help them make such communications. By making silent characters and silent moments the most significant indicators of Indian culture in the novels, the authors remove themselves

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<sup>54</sup> Roy, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, 36.

from the constraints of the English language and thus can express themselves freely, without the inadequacies of language or the implications of English weighing down their prose.

Returning to *The God of Small Things*, readers find an ideal place to open this discussion of cultural representations through the theme of silence in Roy's Estha. Estha gets to the point, gets his message across and gets along with everyone. Estha perceives the subtleties that other characters miss, yet he is not so focused on these that he misses the Big Things either. Certainly Estha connects with the other characters (he is even one half of the novel's most complex yet beautiful relationship), but he also connects with readers, and he does so in a personal and powerful way. What Estha does not do, however, is talk; he becomes silent in adulthood.

In the same way that Estha is a great communicator to the other characters in the book, he is also a great communicator to readers, as he – more specifically *his silence* – is the vehicle through which Roy comments on English Indian culture. To fully understand Estha's connection to colonialism in the novel, though, one must first consider Suleri's points about masculinity in English India.

Suleri states that Britain tried to feminize India, thus emasculating itself by default and representing India as a country that is easily dominated.

In such a history as Robert Orme's, for example, the 'strength' of the colonizer is always delineated against the curious attractions of the colonized race's 'weakness': 'Breathing in the softest climates, having so few wants and receiving even the luxuries of other nations with little

labour from their own soil, the Indian must have become *the most effeminate inhabitant of the globe* (emphasis added).<sup>56</sup> This discourse of effeminacy provides an obvious but nonetheless useful method of ungendering imperial tropologies, since it makes evident that the colonial gaze is not directed to the inscrutability of an Eastern bride but to the greater sexual ambivalence of the effeminate groom.<sup>56</sup>

India, however, did not simply accept its assigned role of the “effeminate groom,” Suleri argues. She states that the country’s unwillingness to play such a submissive role resulted in even more eagerness to subordinate India, as well as a heightened emphasis on ideas of masculinity.

The hysteria and cultural terror embodied by these ‘strong men’ are amply documented in the histories of the colonization of India, and suggest a bewildering suspension of power far more complicated than any conventional interpretation of the confrontation between a dominating and a subordinated culture ... thus indicating the gender imbrication implicit in the classification of culture as an anxious provenance partitioned between the weakness and strength of men.<sup>57</sup>

Considering the stress placed on masculinity in the cultural questions surrounding English India, then, the interplay between silence (a typically feminine discourse) and

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<sup>56</sup> Suleri, 16.

<sup>57</sup> Suleri, 17.



men becomes significant, an emphasis Roy was certainly aware of when she decided to make Estha silent.

After the death of the twins' cousin, Sophie Mol, Estha began to slip into silence:

He had stopped talking. Stopped talking altogether, that is. The fact is that there wasn't an 'exactly when' It had been a gradual winding down and closing shop. A barely noticeable quietening. As though he had simply run out of conversation and had nothing left to say. Yet Estha's silence was never awkward. Never intrusive. Never noise.<sup>58</sup>

If, as Gloria Anzaldé stated, "Language is a male discourse,"<sup>59</sup> then one could argue by this reasoning that silence is a female discourse. Making Estha silent, then, effectively removes his masculinity, and this allows Roy to embrace the stereotype of the "effeminate groom" so that she might control it. By creating a silent, male character, Roy personifies India as it is seen to the British.

This effeminizing is more effective when considering that Roy parallels her silent male with a non-silent female, and thus subordinates Estha's masculinity even below of a woman. Rahel, Estha's twin sister, does not live life noisily, but she does draw attention to herself. At the same time Estha was gradually slipping into his silence, Ral got expelled from three schools. When Larry McCaslin, Rahel's ex-husband, first saw her, he thought, "There goes a jazz tune;"<sup>60</sup> Roy contrasts this with the impression Estha leaves on people, writing, "It usually took strangers awhile to notice him even when they

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<sup>58</sup> Roy, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Patti Duncan, *Tell this Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (University of Iowa Press, 2003),

<sup>60</sup> Roy, 19.

were in the same room with him.”<sup>61</sup> Even more surprising is the fact that the female Rahel is the only thing that can bring sound of any sort to the silent, male Estha. Roy writes, “It had been quiet in Estha’s head until Rahel came. But with her she had brought the sound of passing trains ... The world, locked out for years, suddenly flooded in, and now Estha couldn’t hear himself in the noise.”<sup>62</sup>

Estha’s silence and Rahel’s sound are especially significant when considering that the twins had always been the same in almost every aspect. Roy writes, “Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities.”<sup>63</sup> By making the male half of that joint identity the silent one rather than the typical female, Roy is obviously breaking expectations. Considering this choice in reference to Suleri’s point brings even more importance to the distinction, for she goes out of her way to give readers a supposed “effeminate groom” when it would have been just as easy to supply an “Eastern bride.”

Understanding Estha as an “effeminate groom” helps readers to understand other parts of the novel in the context of colonialism as well. For example, Roy writes, “Chacko said that going to see *The Sound of Music* was an extended exercise in Anglophilia.”<sup>64</sup> When thinking about it as such, then, and considering Estha’s role as the Indian, effeminate groom, Estha’s molestation by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man at the theater warrants an alternate reading. Roy is clearly making a comment on

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<sup>61</sup> Roy, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Roy, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Roy, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Roy, 54.

colonialism through this scenario in which one man rapes another while attending an “extended exercise in Anglophilia.”

Though Roy establishes Estha as the effeminate groom, and thus embraces the stereotype, she challenges this same stereotype by making Estha the best communicator in the novel. Significantly, it is Estha’s silence which allows him to be such. Roy makes silence active and powerful and, in doing so, transfers those qualities onto Estha. By emasculating silence and subsequently silencing men, then, Roy completely destroys Orme’s stereotype of India.

Roy describes Estha as “Estha-the-Accurate,”<sup>65</sup> and later writes that he was “the more practical of the two [twins]. The more tractable. The more farsighted. The more responsible.”<sup>66</sup> This is illustrated to readers repeatedly during times when Rahel lets herself get carried away with childishness, yet Estha – even though he, too, is a child – remains level-headed.

When the twins see Velutha at the police station after he had been beaten, Rahel whispers to Estha that the bloody man that they saw was not actually Velutha, but his twin brother, Urumban, instead. Estha, however, refuses to agree. Roy writes, “Unwilling to seek refuge in fiction, Estha said nothing.”<sup>67</sup> Even as an 8-year-old child, Estha recognizes and faces the truth. And, significantly, he gives testimony to that truth through his silence. Far from showing signs of effeminacy, then, Estha’s silence actually displays maturity and wisdom.

Estha is capable of understanding not only practical truths, but those that require finer perception as well. When Velutha lays beaten in the station and looks up to see

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<sup>65</sup> Roy, 207.

<sup>66</sup> Roy, 302.

<sup>67</sup> Roy, 295.

Estha, “Estha imagined that something in him smiled. Not his mouth, but some other unhurt part of him. His elbow perhaps. Or shoulder.”<sup>68</sup> This (unlike Rahel’s observation that Velutha’s twin had taken his place) was not the work of a child’s imagination but rather that of a keen sense of understanding and a powerful, transcendent form of silent communication. Estha further demonstrates his maturity of thought by the fact that he is the character who first pinpoints the two guiding lessons of the novel: “(a) Anything can happen to Anyone. and (b) It’s best to be prepared,” (186). As the story progresses, every character comes to these realizations on his own, yet Estha is the one who understands them first.

A close analysis of Estha’s silence, then, reveals that it is not simply the choice of someone who “has the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was.”<sup>69</sup> By contrast, Estha’s silence differentiates him from the other characters, making his perception and wisdom stand out. Such traits are realized in the fact that Estha shares in some of the most profound, revealing relationships of the novel. This is best illustrated in the love scene between Estha and Rahel. When the “two-egg twins” have sex, there is no dialogue. The only thing spoken between them is Rahel’s endearment of her brother “Esthapappychachen Kuttappen Peter Mon;”<sup>70</sup> again, Estha is silent. Interestingly, this single utterance during the love scene is not even an English word, but rather one from the twins’ separate language – a word that grew out of English-India. By using only this word and silence during this crucial scene, Roy takes readers even further away from the constructs of the English language. Not only does Roy exclude dialogue from the scene,

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<sup>68</sup> Roy, 303.

<sup>69</sup> Roy, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Roy, 312.

but she makes a special point of explaining that the twins' experience is actually beyond the capacity of words:

There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi's book) would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings.

Except perhaps that no Watcher watched through Rahel's eyes. No one stared out of a window at the sea. Or a boat in the river. Of a passerby in the mist in a hat. Except perhaps that it was perhaps a little cold. A little wet. But very quiet. The Air," (310).

Here, Roy makes it clear that the silence certainly does not take away from the level of communication or the intense connection. In fact, words would have hindered the experience for Rahel and Estha. For, as Roy states, only the Small Things are able to be discussed; the Big Things always go unsaid.

## Conclusion

Roy's thematic statement serves as an interesting and appropriate place to end this discussion of the communicative abilities of silence in Indian literature. Roy repeats throughout the novel the sentiment that "the Air was full of Thoughts and Things to Say But at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. The Big Things lurk unsaid inside."<sup>71</sup> Literature that expresses silence, however, such as the texts explored in this paper, complicate this notion, for as Derrida argues literature offers "a chance of saying

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<sup>71</sup> Roy, 136

everything without touching upon the secret” –even the Big Things. This trait of literature creates the strange haziness between the said and the unsaid, the silent and the articulated, and it brings us as close to a meaningful articulation of silence as anyone has yet to achieve. Faced with the choice of communicating through silence or suffering failed expressions through the English language, Indian authors resourcefully chose articulation. By going outside the confines of language and innovatively creating alternate modes of expression, these authors produced representative accounts of Indian culture and afforded themselves a forum in which to comment on colonization to a Western audience while perched beyond the English language. Returning to Mill’s idea that introduced this paper, the Indian authors heightened silence to be included among “everything of importance” that Mill says can and must be expressed in writing.

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