

# Eloquent Silence: A Study of Communicative Instances in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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**Abstract**—Silence is one of the distinguishing features of human speech and has been an interesting object of study across disciplines. Early structural linguistics focused on isolated instances of language devoid of contextual information where silence did not feature at all. Conversation Analysts focused on silence but failed to accommodate meaning into it. With the 'linguistic turn' in the early Twentieth century, the discipline of Philosophy addressed silence in more ways than one. In this paper instances of absence of verbal language which consciously include both 'silence' and 'gestures' in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* have been studied closely. This paper aims to argue that 'silence', though apparently devoid of a form, functions as successful communicative instances emerging as eloquent and revealing different forms of function depending on the situation and relationship between interlocutors.

**Index Terms**—Communication, eloquent silence, gestures, silence.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The God of Small Things* [1] is a significant work in the genre of Indian English Writing not only because it brought home the first Booker but also because of its unusual narrative structure and the way the English language has been used. In the wake of the Novel's success several critical writings on the novel have appeared in print. Various studies [2], [3] deal with disparate aspects of the novel –political, social and sexual. However, the works could be broadly categorized into works on social, interpersonal, intercultural, organized electoral politics and works on language and politics of the same. Writings on the social/political deal with the caste system, economic tier, and how organized electoral politics is interlinked. Interpersonal identities formed out of politics like the politics of family hierarchy, politics of gender. Language politics include the choice of language by the characters and author, work has also been done on the stylistic aspects of the language. To understand social dynamics we need to understand language, the choice and use of language and even the absence or presence of verbal language. The Indian political history is manifested in each of the character's usage of language. The presence and absence of language help us to understand the social dynamics in the novel. This paper aims to argue that the absence of verbal language also upholds successful communicative instances. The absence of verbal language will henceforth be termed as 'silence' or 'gestures' wherever applicable. In this study, 'silence' is looked upon as the presence of language. How

'silence' emerges as eloquent in the very text which is not only a story but a treatise on socio-political issues of the state of Kerala. Though this 'silence' lacks form, its functions and meanings vary according to the situation and factors of the interlocutors. The novel shifts back and forth between two decades that form the milieu of the novel and major political changes happen during the two decades in the South Indian state of Kerala. The changing political scenario and hierarchical power structure of society based on factors like caste, gender, age, ethnicity regulates the use of language. Usually verbal language is accessible to the people higher up in the hierarchical ladder where as people in the lower rung of the hierarchical ladder are denied verbal language. However, it is interesting to note how the ones who are denied verbal language, use language itself as a tool for subversion, be it in the form of silence, gestures or by breaking the norms of language. It is also interesting to note how the author graphologically represents language in the text which of course is beyond the scope of this paper. Each instance of silence in the text is considered as an occurrence of discourse and will be analysed as such. Instances of discourse are controlled by the societal power relations and functions within the matrix of the power structure. This inherent power structure helps us identify subversive discourses that are manifested through silence in this particular text.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Silence is an important manifestation of language in this novel and will be dealt in detail as to what constitutes silence. In Linguistics, silence was studied by Conversation-Analysts who gave importance to silence which is an integral part of any kind of conversation. They looked at silence as an important aspect of interaction. In any kind of interactional discourse, silence occurs in the transitions between one speaker and the next. This kind of transition known as turn-taking is controlled by a set of ordered rules and is repeated till the conversation ends. The rules decide how the next speaker is chosen- chosen by the current speaker, self-selection, current speaker continues speaking. The different types of silences proposed by the Conversation Analysts are gap, pause, lapse, interval. These silences, though important part of conversational discourse, are devoid of any kind of meaning and only occur in between turn-taking. Silence is only anticipation for the performance of the following speaker [4]. Later, these silences developed into what is called 'discourse markers' of turn-taking [5]. The silences dealt by Conversation Analysts are non-communicative silence. Though an important part of language or communication, silence as studied by the

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Conversation Analysts failed to accommodate meaningful silence.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Century in the west could be viewed as an age of repression where talking about sex or naming it was increasingly difficult. This prohibition led theorists to find ways to talk about sex in all forms. As a result, in order to gain complete control over the topic, it was almost reduced or 'subjugated' to the level of language and then regulate its 'free circulation in speech' and remove all kinds of meanings associated with it and also consciously scrap off the words that make it more visible. However, even these prohibitions ensured that one does not speak about sex, resulting in silence. Later of course there was a 'discursive explosion' concerning the topic of sex and led to a very rigorous process of censorship of vocabulary pertaining to sex. New set of rules of prohibitions were set. Mere silence became much more strictly defined and was measured according to social situations, circumstances, interlocutors and their power equation. Complete silence was transformed into discreet silence. The power hierarchy was embedded in the 'politics of language and speech' [6]. Thus, Foucault establishes a relationship between silence and discourse:

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses [6].

Foucault's view on silence was inherently linked to discourse and its laws of prohibition or exclusion. The constant struggle to establish a discourse comes hand in hand with certain forms of silence. Though complete silence was seen as a form of oppression as a result of power structures, it cannot be denied that it is the driving force behind the establishment of any kind of discourse. Though there was a relationship between silence and discourse, Foucault's silence was yet to be established as discourse.

Bakhtin's theory on language on the other hand might be able to bridge the gap between the models discussed earlier and would be very useful in analysing instances of silence in the chosen text because for him language and silence were not in opposition. Bakhtin viewed 'utterance' to be the central unit of meaning and formed through a speaker's relation to 'otherness' which includes place, point of view or person. 'Utterance' for Bakhtin is of course oriented towards the listener and has the feature of 'addressivity' and is dialogic in nature because every 'utterance' is a response to pre-existing utterance. String of utterances form discourse and has similar features of 'addressivity' and dialogue. Bakhtin was of the view that utterances could not be limited to word only, it obviously extends itself to 'expressive

intonation' which has no apparent form but adds to the meaning of utterance and functions as successful communication [7]. Though Bakhtin did not deal with silence in greater detail, he considered silence as a manifestation of utterance. Utterance according to him had a 'referentially semantic content' and also an 'expressive' aspect [7] and hence does not necessarily have to have a form but a function. Silence thus qualifies as an utterance from the Bakhtinian perspective. Silence, word and pause together forms an unfinalizable 'unified and continuous structure' of significance [7] which is in dialogue with pre-existing discourse. Hence, silence is reinforced as a form of utterance. While Bakhtin criticized the convergence of languages into one 'unitary language', he on the other hand, celebrated multiple forms of language. Denying silence the status of utterance might reinforce the rigid monologic form of language which Bakhtin repeatedly criticized. Discourse is inherently dialogic and silence being a continuation of discourse is dialogic too.

The internal bifurcation (double-voicing) of discourse, sufficient to a single and unitary language and to a consistently monologic style, can never be a fundamental form of discourse: it is merely a game, a tempest in a teapot.

The double-voicedness one finds in prose is of another sort altogether. There—on the rich soil of novelistic prose—double-voicedness draws its energy, its dialogized ambiguity, not from individual dissonances, misunderstandings or contradictions (however tragic, however firmly grounded in individual destinies) in the novel, this double-voicedness sinks its roots deep into a fundamental, socio-linguistic speech diversity and multi-linguagedness [8].

### III. IN THE NOVEL

Silence is a very important and significant tool in this novel to convey marginalization, unequal access to language and speech, protest or cases and instances of deliberate non-communication, and succumbing to power or acquiescence with power. The difference in discourses between people in a society does not allow everyone to be able to convey in a language that is mutually intelligible, often leading to silence. Silence often is deliberately chosen by the interlocutors as a form of protest. This form of protest with silence is often more eloquent than verbal protest. Transgression occurs both when the marginalized protest using the tool of silence and at the same time crossing boundaries of the concept of the language of protest which usually is verbal. Transgressors deliberately use silence to convey certain kind of disapproval to any kind of impositions. Again, the marginalized succumb to silence often as a result of fear or as a mere acceptance of the existence of power. However, it is important to note that these categories of forms of silence are not watertight categories but these are overlapping. Silence due to unequal access to language could also simultaneously be due to succumbing to power. The interlocutor who doesn't have access to language might also

be silent as a result of succumbing to power. Again, the interlocutor who is marginalized and conveys certain facets of marginalization through language, also can use silence as a form of protest in a way transgressing boundaries of language use and subverting established norms of power structure involving language. These functional aspects of silence are demarcated from one another on the basis of context and societal expectations surrounding language use among the interlocutors. Marginalization and succumbing to power is often a result of age old cultural history of power struggle and sometimes as a result of immediate incident. However, it is not that immediate incident does not have a historicity. However for the sake of convenience of the analysis of data, causal immediate incidents of silence are dealt with in details in order to understand the setting of the speech instances. Analysis of these micro instances gives us a broader perspective of discourse. The narrative profusely hints at the fact that it is assumed to be the norm that the marginalized should be silent. People from the lower caste, like Velutha or women are assumed to be silent whereas, Estha's silencing is a result of the immediate instance of sexual violence which he was unable to convey to his mother. While the narrative does not explain the silence of Velutha or for that matter of Ammu or Rahel, the narrative elaborately explains the silencing process of Estha. The silencing process of Estha must have been given more importance in the text maybe because Estha's marginalization was not only dependent on social factors but also because of manipulation of his 'language'.

#### IV. INTERLOCUTORS AND RELEVANCE OF THIS STUDY

Some of the protagonists in the novel express the phenomenon of silence more than the others. The term protagonist has been consciously used to refer to the interlocutors of the speech instances. Each of the protagonists has an important contribution to the development of speech instances in the novel. Some of the protagonists who express eloquent silence in the text are

1. Estha
2. Rahel
3. Velutha
4. Kalyani Pillai and Comrade Pillai
5. Sophie Mol
6. Baby Kochamma

Each of the data when discussed we will see how the act of silence expressed by some of the protagonists will reveal the simultaneous existence of marginalization, silencing and tool for transgression. This discussion explores the relevance of silence as an integral part of the communicative process to present a more comprehensive understanding of communication by attempting to account for both the presence and absence of verbal symbols. And, at the same time we can make a meta level understanding of the role of silence in linguistic communication. Why and how silence becomes an integral and functional part of linguistic communication when we try to understand discourse.

#### V. DATA AND ANALYSIS

##### A. Absence of Verbal Language: Silence

###### Silence as successful communication

1	<b>Chapter</b>	4. Abhilash Talkies
	<b>Page No.</b>	111
	<b>Participant(s)</b>	Estha and Rahel
	<i>Estha pressed his Parry's sweets into her hand and she felt his fever hot fingers whose tips were as cold as death [1].</i>	

This instance of communication is between Rahel and Estha. This happens at the Abhilash talkies where Rahel, Estha, Baby Kochamma and Ammu had gone to watch *The Sound of Music*. Estha had come out during the film and had an interaction with the man selling orange and lemon drinks. The man took the chance of Estha being alone and being a docile kid and served his purpose by sexually abusing Estha. This sexual abuse traumatized Estha to such an extent that he could not sit throughout the film and Ammu took out both Estha and Rahel out of the theatre. When they came out of the hall, they met the orangedrink lemondrink man who exchanged greetings with Ammu and enquired about Rahel. He also went on to offer a sweet to Rahel. Estha who already had an unhappy experience with the man, did not want Rahel to go near him. However, Rahel had already started towards him but his 'portable piano smile' and steady gaze made her uneasy. She turned around to look at Estha and shrunk away from the man. Estha did not say anything verbally but pressed the sweet into Rahel's hand and Rahel could feel that something was wrong. While Estha tried to communicate to Ammu that he was not comfortable going near the Orangedrink Lemondrink man. While the man said 'Come and sit with me on a high stool', Estha tried saying 'No, Ammu! No, Ammu, no! I want to come with you!'. Ammu was more than surprised at his shrill insistence but did not realize his uneasiness. So, it is with silence that Estha successfully conveyed his discomfort to Rahel, while his verbal exchange with Ammu kept her in oblivion about her son's discomfort with the man. Eloquent silence here may or may not be interlocutor specific because in this particular instance the forms of communication are different in case of the different interlocutors but of course is context dependent and also dependent on the relationship between the interlocutors.

###### Silence as a form of protest

2.	<b>Chapter</b>	1. Paradise Pickles & Preserves
	<b>Page No.</b>	14
	<b>Participant(s)</b>	Comrade Pillai and Estha
	<i>'Estha Mon!' he would call out, in his high, piping voice, frayed and fibrous now, like sugarcane stripped of its bark. 'Good morning! Your daily constitutional?'</i> <i>Estha would walk past, not rude, not polite. Just quiet [1].</i>	

This instance is a communicative exchange between comrade Pillai and Estha. This was much later after Estha stopped talking completely and had grown into an adult. This

was a time when no one could manipulate him to say something. There is no forceful suppression of his voice and replacing it with some other voice. Here, Estha's silence is his own, deliberately chosen by him. One day while Estha goes out for a walk, comrade Pillai calls out to him and tries to establish a conversation with him. Pillai asks Estha whether he is out for his daily walk, however Estha does not respond to his question and walks past 'just quiet'. The quietness of Estha becomes eloquent here because it conveys to the addressee, Comrade Pillai that he is not interested in establishing a conversation with him. His quietness is a part of his protest to the people who were a part of the misfortune that fell on him. Comrade Pillai was an intrinsic part of the misfortune where he chose to deliberately suppress information about Velutha which doomed him directly and effected Ammu, Rahel and Estha.

*Deliberate silence to avoid confrontation*

3.	<b>Chapter</b>	2.Pappachi's Moth
	<b>Page No.</b>	71
	<b>Participant(s)</b>	Rahel and Velutha
	<p><i>Just then Rahel saw Velutha. Vellya Papen's son, Velutha. Her most beloved friend Velutha. Velutha marching with a red flag. In a white shirt and mundu with angry veins in his neck. He never usually wore a shirt.</i></p> <p><i>Rahel rolled down her window in a flash.</i></p> <p><i>'Velutha! Velutha!' she called to him...He stepped sideways and disappeared deftly into the angriness around him [1].</i></p>	

This is an instance that happens when the entire family is on their way to watch a film. They were all travelling in a blue Plymouth car. On their way they got stuck at the railway crossing and encounter a political protest march of thousands of party workers, students and labourers who were displeased by the then government. Some of the protesters find the members of the family sitting snug inside the car as easy targets and harass them while the others in the angry mass chant slogans and some fist their angriness on passing cars. Amidst all the chaos, Rahel noticed Velutha holding a flag in the march and the veins in his neck were prominent from shouting out the slogans. Rahel called out to him from the car repeatedly but Velutha does not respond to her cries. He however froze for a moment but later very cautiously blended into the crowd. Knowing from the instances in the text, Rahel and Velutha shared a very special bond and it was but unlikely that Velutha does not respond to Rahel. In this instance from the text, Velutha chooses to remain silent when Rahel calls out to him. This must have been a strategy by Velutha to not get noticed by the Ipe family. The addressor here is Rahel and the addressee is Velutha whose silence breaks the communicative exchange and the silence chosen by the addressee stands out as being eloquent as he is successful in communicating his intention of avoiding confrontation.

*Death does not lead to the absolute absence of communicative agency*

4.	<b>Chapter</b>	1. Paradise Pickles & Preserves
	<b>Page No.</b>	5-6

	<b>Participant(s)</b>	Sophie Mol and Rahel
	<p><i>She noticed that Sophie Mol was awake for her funeral. She showed Rahel Two Things. Thing One was the newly painted high dome of the yellow church that Rahel hadn't ever looked at from the inside. It was painted blue like the sky, with drifting clouds and tiny whizzing jet planes with white trails that crisscrossed in the clouds...Thing Two that Sophie Mol showed Rahel was the bat baby [1].</i></p>	

This instance happens at the church at the funeral of Sophie Mol. Sophie Mol is the half-British cousin of Rahel and Estha who had come to visit her biological father, Chacko after the death of her step father, Joe, in a car accident. Sophie Mol had accompanied her mother, Margaret to the Ayemenem household during Christmas. The entire family was excited to meet Sophie Mol and prepared for a week to welcome her in to the household. However, before the turn of events, Sophie Mol drowns in the river while playing with Rahel and Estha and dies. In this particular instance we see Rahel trying to interact with the dead body of Sophie Mol. Though it could be interpreted as Rahel's perception, Rahel thinks that death does not necessarily mean the death of the communicative agent and considers the dead Sophie Mol as the addresser and herself as the addressee. It is because of the position in which the dead body of Sophie Mol is kept that Rahel understands that the addresser Sophie Mol is trying to show her two things one being the newly painted dome of the church and two being the bat baby. Rahel on the other hand would not have noticed the dome of the church had it not been the position of dead Sophie Mol who lied down with her eyes towards the dome of the church. Here a successful communication takes place between Sophie Mol and Rahel though not verbally. Death surpasses the communication that takes place between the two.

*B. Absence of Verbal Language: Gestures*

*Transgressive gesture*

5.	<b>Chapter</b>	1. Paradise Pickles & Preserves
	<b>Page No.</b>	19
	<b>Participant(s)</b>	Rahel and Larry McCaslin
	<p><i>But when they made love he was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else [1].</i></p>	

This instance of communication is between Larry McCaslin, Rahel's husband, and Rahel herself. Rahel met Larry McCaslin while she was studying at the School of Architecture in Delhi. Larry was in Delhi to collect material for his doctoral thesis. They met a couple of times at the school library and Khan Market. Larry MacCaslin also followed Rahel to a bookshop where they looked at each other instead of books. Eventually, they got married and moved to Boston. Rahel got married more out of a necessity of settling down whereas; Larry MacCaslin was in love with Rahel. He was very caring towards Rahel. Whenever he held Rahel in his arms, he held her with utmost care as if she was a gift that was 'unbearably precious'. However, Rahel's husband was offended by the look of her eyes while they made love. He was exasperated because he was not sure what that look actually meant. He was confused between

despair and indifference. Rahel, as the addressor, is successful in conveying her indifference towards Larry MacCaslin by her deliberate non-communication during sex. Rahel does not communicate verbally her indifference towards her husband but a successful communication between herself and her husband happens just by the look of her eyes. Though it is not very clear what was Rahel's intention from the instance but something is communicated to her husband by the lack of expression of passion in her eyes. Larry MacCaslin interpreted the look in her eyes as something in between indifference and despair initially but later concluded that it was not despair at all but a sort of 'enforced optimism' and a 'hollow' or 'emptiness' which was only a version of the quietness of Estha which of course he was not expected to understand. Eventually Larry Mac Caslin and Rahel got divorced. After they got divorced, Rahel tried to survive in America by working as a waitress and a night-clerk in a gas station. Sooner she received a letter from Baby Kochamma about Estha being sent back to Ayemenem, she left her job and left America gladly to go back to Estha.

*Conforming to power structure through gesture*

6.	<b>Chapter</b>	14. <i>Work is Struggle</i>
	<b>Page No.</b>	272
	<b>Participant(s)</b>	Kalyani Pillai and Comrade Pillai
	Comrade Pillai took off his shirt, rolled it into a ball and wiped his armpits with it. When he finished, Kalyani took it from him and held it as though it was a gift [1].	

This instance takes place at the house of Comrade Pillai when Chacko had come to their house. Kalyani Pillai, the wife of Comrade Pillai was marginalized on the basis of gender. Kalyani Pillai was one of those characters in the text who in spite of being marginalized was the upholder of patriarchy. She is seen as a docile wife throughout the scene. Comrade Pillai on the other hand was the member of the communist party and apparently believed in equality but at the same time practiced unequal power relations in reality. In this instance we see that both the addressor and addressee namely Comrade Pillai and Kalyani Pillai are silent but their use of gestures gives the readers an understanding that both of them conform to the power relations and do not transgress. In this particular instance we see that Comrade Pillai took off his shirt and wiped his armpits with it and as soon as he finished, Kalyani took it from him and held it as a gift that he got from her husband. This gesture goes on to prove how Kalyani conforms to patriarchy and glorifies it.

*Gestures used to successfully manipulate someone*

7.	<b>Chapter</b>	14. <i>Work is Struggle</i>
	<b>Page No.</b>	284
	<b>Participant(s)</b>	Baby Kochamma and Mammachi
	Baby Kochamma stayed close to Mammachi. She said nothing, but used her hands to modulate Mammachi's fury, to stoke it anew. An encouraging pat on the back. A reassuring arm around the shoulders. Mammachi was completely unaware of the manipulation [1].	

This was an instance that happened in the Ayemenem house after Velutha's father visited Mammachi. Velutha was a paravan who fell in love with Ammu, the daughter of Mammachi. Ammu, a divorcee and a mother of two kids came back to the Ayemenem household after her failed marriage. Velutha's father was indebted to the Ipe family of the Ayemenem household because of all that they have done for him by providing employment to his son as a carpenter. Velutha's father came to know about his affair with Ammu and had come to the Ayemenem household to reveal to Mammachi the secret while Velutha was away. After his visit, Mammachi was furious and called for Velutha after he was back Kottayam. In this particular instance, the three people present were Mammachi, Velutha and Baby Kochamma. Mammachi kept shouting at Velutha where as Baby Kochamma stood by her side without uttering a single word. However, she kept using her hands in a way that regulated Mammachi's anger to a higher notch, at times she patted her back and also put her arms across Mammachi's shoulders in support. This entire act of Baby Kochamma where she used only gestures to modulate Mammachi's fury is an interesting episode of eloquent silence. Baby Kochamma does not take refuge in the convincing power of verbal language and chooses to communicate or manipulate Mammachi with mere gestures and it turns out to be more powerful than verbal language without the addressee being aware of the manipulation.

VI. CONCLUSION

The discussions on some of the speech instances in the chosen text corroborate our assumption that the absence of verbal language does not altogether disregard the presence of discourse. It all the more reinforces the fact that 'silence' and 'gestures' are functional, and establish themselves as successful communicative instances. However, it is quite evident from the analysis that 'silence' and 'gestures' have different functions in different instances and is of course contextually regulated. The simultaneous existence of marginalization, tools of transgression, regulatedness, and protest are some of the different functional aspects of silence (and gestures) in the text. Each of the instances discussed typically traces the emergence of silence (and gestures) as eloquent.

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