

Silence as Narrative Agency: Reconfiguring the Unsaid in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

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Abstract

This article advances a new theoretical notion that silence in contemporary Indian English fiction is not merely an absence or omission, but a deliberate narrative tool that shapes meaning, resistance, and identity. By closely reading works by Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and the less-studied fiction of Anuradha Roy, the study rethinks narrative gaps, ellipses, and withheld speech as spaces where subaltern voices and postcolonial negotiations take place. Rather than seeing silence only as oppression, as in Spivak's well-known question, "Can the subaltern speak?", this research draws on narrative theory, affect studies, and decolonial thought to show that the unsaid can be a creative force. It can disrupt traditional histories, question authority, and help form new communities of feeling. The analysis shows how authors use silence to express trauma, cultural mixing, and gendered experience without turning them into spectacle. In the end, this article suggests "listening to the gaps" as a new way to study literature in Indian English studies, combining strong theory with careful attention to representation.

Keywords: silence, narrative agency, Indian English fiction, subaltern voice, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anuradha Roy, postcolonial narrative theory, affective reading, decolonial listening

Submitted: 10.08.2026

Revised: 02.09.2026

Accepted: 13.09.2026

Published 30.09.2026

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Introduction: An exploration of the unsaid from a poetic perspective

Since the end of the twentieth century, Indian English fiction has been characterised by diverse voices, a rich blend of languages, and a strong emphasis on political representation (Ross). Yet one element has received little attention: the way authors deliberately use silence. This article argues that silence, manifested in narrative gaps, the absence of dialogue, incomplete sentences, and other omissions, is a form of narrative agency, not merely emptiness. Silence should not be seen merely as the counterpart to speech; it is a means of creating meaning with ethical, political, and artistic significance. In this view, silence is a deliberate authorial decision that shapes how readers experience the text and alters how representation functions.

Aim and Objectives

The research article asks: How does silence work as an active force in selected contemporary Indian English fiction, and what new insights can we gain by seeing the unsaid as creative rather than merely repressive? By exploring this question, the paper aims to offer a fresh perspective in literary studies. It does not see silence only as a sign of trauma or marginalisation, but as a key part of how authors shape their stories and how readers engage with them. This approach challenges the usual idea that silence means powerlessness and instead highlights its ability to create meaning, support resistance, and build new communities of feeling.

The study is concerned with three novelists whose books show especially refined ways of dealing with silence: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017); Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) and some of her short stories; and Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) and *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015). Because these works span different generations and stylistic phases in Indian English literature, they allow comparison of how silence is reconfigured in contexts of caste violence, diasporic dislocation, and gendered memory. The choice of these authors is intentional in that each one uses silence in a distinctive but complementary manner, which allows for a multi-faceted analysis of the phenomenon (Kaur & Attwal).

Theoretical Framework: Silence as More Than Just the Absence of Sound

Traditional postcolonial criticism, particularly following Spivak's notion that the subaltern cannot speak, generally regards silence as an indication of harm suffered by those who have been excluded from representation (Spivak 271–313). Although this perspective is significant, it tends to treat silence as purely negative. This research article draws on more recent theories that view silence as a creative force, not merely a sign of powerlessness.

First, narrative theory, especially Gérard Genette's work and later scholars, helps us see how gaps and omissions shape plot and character. Genette shows that ellipsis is not just missing information, but a different way to organise time in a story: "the ellipsis is not a blank in the narrative, but a different way of organising narrative time" (Genette 43). Second, affect theory, as developed by Sara Ahmed

and others, lets us read silence as a feeling that moves between the text and the reader, creating moods like unease, closeness, or resistance that words cannot fully express. Ahmed says, “emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” (Ahmed 1), which means silence can be a force of feeling. Third, decolonial approaches to listening, inspired by Achille Mbembe and Trinh T. Minh-ha, focus on listening carefully to what colonial and postcolonial records leave out. Mbembe notes the archive’s “power and its limits” (Mbembe 19), and Trinh T. Minh-ha emphasises the importance of speaking nearby rather than speaking for others (Minh-ha 101). Together, these ideas create what this paper calls a “poetics of the unsaid”, a way of reading that treats silence as both a literary technique and a political choice.

This framework is intentionally original and combines different theories in a new way. Rather than applying existing theories to Indian texts, it lets the unique features of Indian English fiction, such as its mix of languages, oral traditions, and histories of Partition, caste, and migration, reshape the theories themselves. This approach creates a two-way exchange between theory and text, which is especially useful for postgraduate research in English studies. The goal is not to force a fixed theory onto the texts, but to let the texts help shape and improve the critical ideas used to study them.

Review of the Literature

Research on silence in literature has often focused on trauma studies, feminist critiques of how speech is controlled, and postcolonial studies of silenced groups. “Collective traumas, such as war, genocide, natural disasters, and systemic oppression, have profound and lasting effects, not only on survivors but also on their descendants. Understanding how these traumas are transmitted across generations is essential to inform effective interventions and policy responses” (El-Khalil et al. 1). In Indian English literature, much attention has gone to Partition trauma, the silencing of Dalit and Adivasi voices, and the limits placed on women’s speech at home and in public (Satyanarayanan & Lee). Cathy Caruth’s work on trauma and narrative, for example, sees silence as the place of “unclaimed experience” (Caruth 4). While these studies reveal important power issues, they usually see silence as a problem to fix by helping people regain their voices. The main goal has often been to find, amplify, and restore the speech of those denied it.

More recent criticism has begun to view silence as something chosen or used on purpose. Studies now explore quiet resistance in women’s writing, the ethics of not representing everything in post-conflict literature, and the use of fragments in modern fiction. Elleke Boehmer points out that “women’s stories frequently negotiate the borders between speech and silence” (Boehmer 12), and Priyamvada Gopal’s work on Indian English novels and history adds important context (Gopal 45–67). Rukmini Bhaya Nair’s study of “the idea of indifference” also shows that silence is not always about oppression (Nair 23). Still, there is not yet a full theory of silence as narrative agency, especially one that combines close reading with decolonial

ethics, in Indian English literary criticism (Pandey & Kumar). This paper aims to fill that gap by offering a new approach that attends to both how texts are made and the politics of reading. It does not reject earlier ideas but adds to the ways we can think about the unsaid.

Silence as a form of action in practice

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy builds a narrative structure in which silence is not a casual feature but something fundamental. The novel's non-linear timeline, the repeated visits to the 'History House', and its refusal to fully describe the violence done to Velutha create a kind of textual space where the unsaid constantly exerts pressure. The children's incomplete grasp of the situation, Ammu's unspoken wishes, and the mutual silence of the adults Rahel and Estha when they meet again all act as active forces within the narrative. Instead of supplying explanations in prose, Roy lets the reader experience the discomfort of having only partial knowledge—an ethical position that rejects the colonial and patriarchal requirement for complete clarity. The famous opening of the book, "May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month" (Roy, *God* 1)—already sets the tone for a situation in which what is left unsaid will turn out to be just as important as what is said.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, "silence has a new meaning. Anjum's life in the graveyard, Kashmir's subdued histories, and the many characters who speak in fragments or not at all create a polyphonic silence that opposes the state's monolingual, monologic accounts" (Iyer 163-173). In this way, silence becomes a collective means of survival and also a way of forming alternative communities. The novel's structure, with its digressions, the inclusion of documents and poems, and its rejection of a single centre, reflects this politics of the unsaid, showing how the narrative's very structure can be an act of resistance. When one of the characters looks at the unusual community in the graveyard, the unsaid parts of official history find a temporary place to stay, and silence is not the lack of community but one of its essential features (Roy, *Ministry* 87-95).

Jhumpa Lahiri: Diasporic Quiet and the Politics of Naming

Lahiri's fiction is often characterised by its restraint and its attention to the unspoken dimensions of diasporic life (Khatoon 8-13). In *The Namesake*, the silence surrounding Ashoke's near-death experience on the train becomes a generative absence that shapes Gogol's entire relationship to identity and naming. (Identity and Naming Theme in *The Namesake*, n.d.) The novel does not dwell on trauma through confession; instead, it lets the unsaid permeate ordinary gestures, the way Ashoke looks at his son, the weight of a name that cannot be fully explained. This creates a subtle but powerful form of narrative agency: silence protects intimacy while also marking the limits of cultural translation. The name "Gogol" itself becomes a site of productive opacity, carrying meanings that resist full articulation across linguistic and cultural borders (Lahiri, *Namesake* 28-30).

Lahiri's short fiction further refines this technique. Stories in which characters fail to speak their desires, or in which linguistic competence becomes a source of

quiet alienation, reveal how silence operates within the micro-politics of the immigrant family and the professional world. (“From Silence to Expression: Trauma Narratives in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri”) By refusing melodramatic revelation, Lahiri constructs an aesthetics of understatement that challenges the expectation that diasporic literature must constantly perform its cultural difference through explicit articulation. In stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the gaps between what characters know, what they say, and what they withhold become the primary sites of narrative tension and ethical complexity (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 12–29).

Gendered Silence and the Geography of Memory

Anuradha Roy’s novels offer a particularly rich terrain for examining silence as gendered and spatial. In *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, the silences between generations—especially those surrounding women’s unfulfilled longings and the quiet violences of domestic life—map onto the physical and emotional geographies of the narrative. (Sethupathi) The title itself gestures toward the impossibility of fully charting desire and loss, suggesting that some territories of experience remain deliberately or necessarily unmapped. The novel’s attention to the material spaces of home, river, and ruin is inseparable from its exploration of what cannot or will not be said within those spaces (Roy, *Atlas* 45–60).

In *Sleeping on Jupiter*, the silence surrounding institutional abuse and the survivors’ fragmented testimonies become central to the novel’s ethical project. Roy does not attempt to recover a complete narrative of trauma; instead, she constructs a textual space in which silence itself testifies. The novel’s multiple perspectives and its resistance to a single authoritative account enact a form of narrative justice that respects the limits of representation. This approach aligns closely with the decolonial listening practice proposed in this paper’s theoretical framework. By refusing to fill every silence with explanatory or redemptive speech, Roy models an ethics of reading that is attentive to the integrity of what remains unsaid (Roy, *Sleeping* 112–30).

Conclusion

This research has aimed to show that silence in contemporary Indian English fiction is a form of narrative agency. By closely studying the works of Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Anuradha Roy, and using a mix of narrative theory, affect studies, and decolonial listening, the paper has shown that the unsaid is an active and politically important part of literary form. In these texts, silence does not just show where speech ends; it shapes how readers respond ethically and emotionally to the story.

This study’s main contribution is that it does not treat silence as secondary or leftover. By focusing on the poetics of the unsaid, the paper offers a reading approach that is careful about form and politically aware. For students and researchers in English literature, especially those in open and distance learning like IGNOU, this approach offers a way to do independent, creative, and theory-based research that stays connected to the details of Indian writing.

Scope for Further Research

Future research could look at the sound of silence in performances and audio literature, the use of blank spaces in graphic novels, or the silences created by digital platforms. The field is still open, and the gaps remain in useful ways. By paying close attention to what is left unsaid, critics can learn to listen more ethically and with greater open-mindedness.

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