

Degree Project

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Can the Subaltern Be Silent?

Silence as Resistance to Colonialism in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

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Introduction

Silence is, in the Western tradition, associated with “absence, lack, block, withdrawal or blank” (Guignery 2). The silence of the colonial subaltern, or the subordinate or oppressed, is even more so. Vanessa Guignery points out how the mute colonial other is often “spoken for by [majorities]” with “[a]uthoritative voices . . . used to dominate and subjugate the other, impose the official version and suppress the dissonant story” so that silence becomes “an instrument of disempowerment and appropriation” (5). In this colonial context, literary critics have consistently interpreted silence as a passive form of subordination and disempowerment, encouraging postcolonial criticism to make the subaltern speak. Notably, Gayatri Spivak, in multiple works, has underscored the voicelessness of the subaltern characters in literature as well as real-life subalterns and the impossibility for them to speak. For instance, in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” Spivak highlights that even the act of allowing one subaltern to speak in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* is done at the expense of others who remain silenced and oppressed and whose voices the author would not have been able to legitimately write without being interpreted through her ideological lens so that the subaltern must remain inevitably voiceless. Relating to the novels this thesis will analyse, E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, this trend in criticism has persisted.

In Malouf’s novel, the subaltern Gemmy’s silence is often seen as a sign of defeat and surrender. Gemmy is in an in-between or liminal position as an English native brought up by aborigines who is not considered an equal by the Australian settler community. The settlers’ rejection, and specially, their refusal to listen to Gemmy once they have decided that he is not one of their own, render Gemmy

voiceless within the settlement and eventually lead him to leave the colony. His departure brings about a new, chosen silence towards the reader as well as the settlers, but also his freedom from a narrative over which he has no control and the colonial system's epistemology. The closest a critic has come to pointing out an alternative interpretation of Gemmy's silence is Helga Ramsey-Kurz, who reflects that his silence "is never entirely one of defeat, for it forces the literate witnesses of [his] escape (including the reader) to acknowledge the possibility of a life without letters, of a world quite apart from the one represented in letters" (127). However, at the same time, Ramsey-Kurz still argues that, in his silence, Gemmy "cannot transcend [his] subaltern status" (127.). Bill Ashcroft, meanwhile, observes that the ending of this text, in which the subaltern walks out of the novel and leaves his story unfinished, presents "a potential for a freedom outside epistemology" (Futures 59), or, it could be argued, outside Western epistemology. In this case, however, Ashcroft views this "freedom outside epistemology" not as a result of Gemmy's silence, towards the settlers or the reader, but as part of an alternative discourse that Gemmy is a part of. Gemmy's silence, therefore, continues to be seen as a lack of voice and of power.

In Forster's novel, in turn, little importance has been given to Aziz's silence. Aziz is an Indian doctor subordinate to the Anglo-Indian community in Chandrapore. His voicelessness within the colonial system is made evident when he is accused and tried for assaulting an English woman and he is not allowed to speak so as to defend himself. Notably, even his English friend Fielding asks others whether Aziz is guilty instead of asking the subject of his enquiries directly. After this reckoning, Aziz stops trying to speak to the ruling class and leaves Chandrapore for the mountains leaving also the narrative. In his retreat, however, he is pursued

by the narrative focus and by his former friend, Fielding, which forces him to speak to the reader and his former friends once again, temporarily disrupting his silence. In this novel, silence has so far been located in the inability of language to communicate true meaning. Silence regarding homosexual relationships, for instance, is considered by Vybarr Cregan-Reid, who explores Forster's "attempts (and sometimes [failures]) to find a mode of writing that kneads between the binaries of sexual inversion to find other means of expression" in his later works (446), including *A Passage to India* (458). Meanwhile, Michael Orange, following a line that resembles Ashcroft's, observes that for Forster, language is "insufficient as means of incarnating mystical experience which exists outside time and is subversive of hierarchical order" (143), and adds that, "[w]hile language eternally asserts its own reality, one of hierarchy, reason, time and the logic of emotion, India itself represents a mysterious, sempiternal, mystical reality" (145). However, criticism has eluded Aziz's silence as subaltern, whether imposed during his trial or chosen afterwards.

Much of the tendency to interpret subaltern silence as an absence or lack has been nourished by Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In this essay, Spivak uses a deconstructionist approach to address the risks in the attempt to reverse what Homi Bhabha has called "a conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth" (175). Guignery observes that, according to Spivak, "the postcolonial attempt at retrieving lost voices from historical archives and restoring them to history is a complicated issue as, even when the subaltern does speak, her words are interpreted by scholars from within a patriarchal and imperialist mode of discourse" (Guignery 5). In Spivak's view, silence is inherent to the subaltern condition to the extent that, "if the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more"

(Harasym 158). Speaking in this sense actually means being heard by the “hegemonic ears” (Barrett 359) and “having a voice that can access power” (Morris 4). Although this suggests that the only way of acquiring power is by speaking to the hegemonic classes, Spivak, as well as the members of the Subaltern Studies group, acknowledges that subalterns are not a homogeneous class and therefore one theory does not fit all (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, henceforth CSS 272). Spivak’s essay has had an extensive and complex legacy in which the emphasis on finding the subalterns’ true voices and allowing them to speak is often the highlight, as shown in Rosalind Morris’s *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* or in the extensive sociological writing that analyses ways of avoiding the mistranslation of the subaltern (Darder; Griffin; Griffiths). This constant correlation between silence and absence and the interest in making the subaltern speak is reflected in Jacques Derrida’s words denouncing the “demand for narrative, a violent putting-to-the-question, an instrument of torture working to wring the narrative out of one as if it were a terrible secret” (qtd. in Guignery 5).

In spite of the trend to link subaltern silence to defeat and submission and to actively seek the subaltern’s voice as a remedy for the subaltern status, recent criticism about the theme of silence has started to take a different view. In *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*, Guignery argues that silence may be interpreted “as a willful decision not to say or else to unsay” (2) or “a political stance, a way to deny the authority of the oppressor” (5). Similarly, Roi Wagner encourages to “[g]o beyond the assumption that silence is the result of silencing” (102) and argues that silences “can serve as techniques for micro political resistance” (100) for subalterns. Although it does not deal with subalterns or colonial contexts, his branch of criticism, then, discerns a potential in silence to be an active

choice rather than a passive situation, to challenge the authority of the oppressor, and to act as a form of resistance against dominant discourses.

This thesis will argue that, in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, the chosen silences of Gemmy Fairley and Dr Aziz are articulated as a means of achieving agency and authority, ultimately helping them to transcend their subaltern status and challenge colonial discourse. First, it will outline the differences between Gemmy and Aziz as subalterns in these texts and the examples of subalterns Spivak uses in her essay as a fundamental reason for their potential to turn their silence into a means of agency and authority. Then it will look at the ways in which Gemmy and Aziz are able to acquire agency and authority through their silences and how, through such agency and authority, their silences allow them to challenge colonial discourse. And finally, it will analyse the potential of their different narrative silences to make them the authors of their narratives who control their stories and audiences, and to promote alternative narratives and epistemologies which not only challenge hegemonic discourse but also the view of silence as absence.

Subalternity and Silence

Spivak's seminal text, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", explores the impossibility for the subaltern to speak and be heard by hegemonic ears. This imposed silence is characterised by an inability to speak, a complete absence of power, and the inevitability of the oppression the subaltern suffers as a result. The subaltern's attempt to speak is an attempt to be heard by those who have power over the subaltern, or hegemonic ears, in order to improve their situation or escape their position as subalterns. This inability to be heard may be due to either unwillingness

from the hegemonic ears, a lack of communication mediums, or a lack of resources for the subaltern to make herself (Spivak speaks of a female subaltern) heard. Essentially, this silence describes a lack or absence. However, in order to be so, this lack or absence requires: one, a need to be heard, in this case, provided by the power exerted over the subaltern, and two, as a consequence of the former, a desire to be heard.

The definition of the subaltern, or what is considered as subaltern, is of utmost importance. The simplest definition provided by Bill Ashcroft et al is “those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes [and] denied access to ‘hegemonic’ power” (Key Concepts 215). In the field of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha has defined it “as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Ashcroft et al. Key Concepts 216). According to these definitions, open as they are, any subordinate may be considered a subaltern.

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak does not provide a specific definition for the subaltern but one may be outlined from her examples. In an interview, Spivak pointed out that she likes the term subaltern because “it is truly situational” and has been “transformed into the description of everything that doesn’t fall under a strict class analysis” (Harasym 141). This agrees with her wish to not simplify or homogenise the subaltern class, but it also makes it difficult to describe or speak of subalterns as she does in her work given that a theory such as hers may apply to some subalterns but not to others. Rosalind Morris adds that “[s]ubalternity is less an identity than . . . a predicament . . . in Spivak’s definition, it is the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed” (8). Beyond this, Spivak’s examples enable her model of the subaltern

to be outlined. Spivak's subaltern is found at the intersection of several forms of oppression (Riach 34), more specifically, at the intersection of class, gender and race. Indeed, her examples, the Indian sati and independence activist Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, are third-world females of the subproletariat. Spivak illustrates the epistemic violence, or misconstruction, that these subaltern women are subject to as characteristic of this status. The widow-sacrifice women, she observes, were misidentified as Sati, which actually means good wife, thereby "identifying, within discursive practice, good-wifeness with self-immolation on the husband's pyre" (305). In addition, they were subjected to speculation by officials of the British Empire while they were "rendered as the sign of a cultural failure . . . discerning in it the evidence of a retrograde patriarchy" (Morris 5), thus serving to justify colonial government and legislation. In turn, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri was, though it was unknown at the time, a member of a group involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She was commanded to commit a political killing but, unable to carry out her orders, she hanged herself in 1926 (Spivak 307). Bhaduri's story, Morris observes, "expresses . . . an agency . . . that consists in resisting misreading" (6) because she took steps to not have her suicide "diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion" (Spivak 307). However, her mysterious suicide, Spivak points out, was still subject to speculation until her political motive was discovered a decade later.

Accordingly, two notable aspects that define these subalterns are agency and epistemic authority. Spivak's subalterns have no agency or possibility for agency. The Sati and Bhaduri are unable to leave their positions, to access power, or to make significant choices about their lives; rather they are subordinate to others' commands such as being allowed or forced to commit self-immolation or a political

killing. Their silence also means they potentially have no epistemic authority, not only because they cannot represent or define themselves and their wishes within hegemonic discourses, but because there is no evidence of an alternative narrative or discourse within which they do have this authority. Bhaduri's own failed attempt to resist misconstruction illustrates these subalterns' inability to escape epistemic violence and be constructed as subjects to the dominant discourse. Spivak's subalterns are thus voiceless subalterns with no power or "capacity to access power" (Morris 8), no possibility to exert free will, and controlled and defined by others. They are subalterns with no agency or epistemic authority, and with no chance of leaving this position.

In Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and Forster's *A Passage to India*, the subaltern characters do not match the definition set by Spivak's examples, though in terms of agency and authority they are, initially, equally powerless. Gemmy and Aziz are unlikely subalterns in that they belong, in one category or other, to a dominant group: Gemmy was born in England while Aziz is an educated doctor and both are males. However, the colonial societies they inhabit for the majority of the novels negate these privileges and relegate them to lower, subaltern statuses so that they have no capacity to access power. Gemmy may be of English ethnicity, but the aspect and habits he has acquired during his time with the aborigines have dislocated him in colonial eyes and placed him between cultures. His in-betweenness, Don Randall points out, challenges the settlers' "aspiration to form a coherent sense of [self]" (134) and makes him "a troubling transfiguration of the self . . . an uncanny object" (133). This results in the settlers rejection of Gemmy, placing him in the position of the subaltern; his rights are not acknowledged, and, like Spivak's subalterns, he is unable to change his situation within this community because he is

not heard. Meanwhile, regardless of his education, Aziz is an Indian and Muslim, and thus he is considered inferior in the Anglo-Indian society he is a part of. Moreover, he is portrayed as a mimic man who constantly attempts to be equal to the Anglo-Indians but remains, in Bhabha's words, "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 122). Aziz's continuous attempts to be "the same" reflect his expectations to receive equal treatment, that is, that he would be heard by the ruling Anglo-Indians if need be. Ultimately this expectation is frustrated when the need arises and he is not allowed to speak for himself during the trial against him, making him at that point a silenced subaltern, similar to Spivak's examples.

In terms of agency and epistemic authority, Gemmy and Aziz start in a place of powerlessness. At the beginning of their stories, they have no agency; oppressed by the ruling classes, these subalterns have no access to power and cannot make decisions about their lives. Similarly, they have no epistemic authority and are defined by those in power. Gemmy is worse than the Other to the settlers because, as Randall observes, his in-betweenness presents him as "a troubling transformation of the self" and challenges the binaries that make them the dominant group, something which leads to his marginalisation. Meanwhile, Aziz is the Anglo-Indians' Other and mimic man, always attempting to be the same but never acknowledged as an equal because of his ethnicity and religion.

However, there is an essential difference between these subalterns and Spivak's examples that allows Gemmy and Aziz to transcend their status. In short, Gemmy and Aziz have the power to leave the hierarchies which make them subalterns. This limited power is the difference between what Michel Foucault would deem slavery, and oppression. In Foucault's words, "power can be exercised only if there is freedom and struggle . . . without freedom, struggle and resistance,

power cannot exist, it becomes ‘slavery’” (26). Accordingly, Spivak’s subalterns are slaves in Foucault’s sense who have no way of gaining power but by speaking to the hegemonic ears. Unlike them, Gemmy and Aziz, who are also powerless within the colonial systems they inhabit, are able to remove themselves from these systems and enter systems within which they may access power, thus escaping their subaltern positions without addressing the dominant groups. This limited freedom allows them to choose a silence that, rather than disempowering them, asserts the agency and authority that they have gained through their departures.

Silent Agency

In *Remembering Babylon* and *A Passage to India*, there are two types of silences that affect the subaltern characters’ agency: an initial, imposed silence, passive and disempowering; and the posterior, chosen silence, active and empowering. This latter is the one considered by Vanessa Guignery as the “willful decision not to say” (2). This silence is an active refusal to speak that allows the characters to control what they say and to whom they speak, and by these means, gain agency over their lives. The correlation of this chosen personal silence and Gemmy and Aziz’s departure from their communities is twofold: on the one hand, the characters depart in silence without justifying their decision or saying anything to the hegemonic ears; on the other, the departure entails further silence towards the members of the community the characters leave behind. The frequent equation of silence and disempowerment (Guignery 5) invites the reader to view the characters’ departures and their ensuing silence as disempowering and passive responses. However, there are multiple reasons to view their silence and departures as sources of agency. For

one thing, in light of the negative depiction of the characters' lives in those colonial systems, their departures are rendered as a liberation from an oppressive system.

Gemmy's stay with the settlers is portrayed as one marked by rejection and abuse. The settlers think of Gemmy as "a parody of a white man" (39) and find that "the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness . . . [makes] Gemmy Fairley . . . disturbing to them" (43). These sentiments lead the settlers to marginalise Gemmy, eventually attacking him in order to expel him from the community. This negative description alone makes Gemmy's posterior departure resemble an escape from an unwelcome and oppressive community, but the text offers a better possibility in Gemmy's likely return with the aborigines. The description of his stay with them is scant and shows that he was not welcome without reservations, "[h]e was accepted by the tribe but guardedly; in the droll, half-apprehensive way that was proper to an in-between creature" (28). However, though they kept a distance they did not oppress or attack Gemmy. Moreover, their scepticism is not final, the aborigines believe that "[a] day would come when, fully arrived among them, he would let go of the other world" (28), which Gemmy's stay with the settlers and acceptance of his hybridity is likely to cause. Whether he goes to this community or into the unknown, it can be said that Gemmy will be free from abusers and in control of his life.

Aziz's life among the Anglo-Indians is similarly depicted as one of oppression and lack of power and agency. In chapter 2, his dinner with friends is interrupted as he is summoned by his English superior without explanation, and when he arrives he finds he is gone and his tonga taken by two English ladies without regard, "the usual thing . . . The inevitable snub - his bow ignored, his carriage taken" (18). This "usual" treatment has made Aziz internalise his subordinate role, though

not without resentment; to his English superior he writes, “[d]ear Sir, - At your express command I have hastened as a subordinate should,” before rebelling against expectations and leaving without finishing the note (19) in a brief first instance in which Aziz uses silence to defy the colonials’ power over him. Forster’s text even considers the option of departure before the actual departure takes place. Aziz’s friend, Hamidullah, believes that leaving for an Indian state is “going much too far” (262) and that Aziz will be poor and powerless (263). However, the subaltern’s reply to his friend proves that his freedom is worth being poor, “I shall never be rich anywhere, it is outside my character” (263). The uncertainty and scepticism about the possible outcomes of his departure underscore the agency of Aziz’s decision and his need to escape the oppressive system given that he decides to leave without facing better prospects. Furthermore, to his friend’s prediction that he will be powerless he replies, “[t]here are many ways of being a man, mine is to express what’s deepest in my heart” (263) regarding his wish to write nationalist poetry, which emphasises that the power Aziz seeks is over his life and not within the colonial system.

The reason for these characters’ departure is their disappointment in the hegemonic ears. Gemmy and Aziz wished to be recognised by the hegemonic group and to have a voice in it, but they reach a point that shows them that they are voiceless in these communities. This disappointment debases the hegemonic ears and makes the attempt of being heard by them lose its value. While the need to be heard by the ruling group in order to have agency and access to power within this community remains, the subalterns’ desire to be heard by them and to gain power within this community is diminished.

Leading up to this reckoning, the settlers' rejection and ensuing oppression of Gemmy peaks when he is seen by Andy, one of the villagers, sitting with two aborigines and he convinces the others that it was a conspiratorial meeting. This accusation, in turn, nourishes the fear of some that Gemmy is a spy for the aborigines, who are planning an attack on the colony (99-102). Instead of confronting Gemmy or allowing him to speak, the settlers discuss the situation among themselves, and only Jock McIvor, who hosts Gemmy in his house, intends to consider what Gemmy has to say: "[l]et me talk to him, eh? Gie me that much" (106). This statement demonstrates that Gemmy has no power or voice in the colony, and it is Jock who has to represent and defend him. The end of this is the harassment of the McIvors due to Jock's attempt to defend Gemmy and the eventual violent attack on Gemmy that seeks to expel him. These actions disappoint the McIvors and Gemmy, who "knew what was happening and that he was the cause of it" (114). Gemmy had arrived at the settlement seeking not "to be taken back [but] to be recognised" (32), but instead, he is rejected and abused, his rights far from being recognised. This imposed silence makes Gemmy "[vanish] into his own skin, behind his own dim but startled eyes" (114), avoiding the company of the settlers, some of whom torment him in the present while others, including his friends the McIvors, remind him of both present and past British tormentors (120).

Not unlike Gemmy, Aziz wishes to be recognised by the Anglo-Indians. When he first meets his future English friend, Fielding, Aziz gives Fielding his own collar stud pretending it is a spare one to please the Englishman, observes that the Englishman's room is not as tidy as he'd expected and so he "need not be so ashamed" of himself (64), and declares, answering Fielding's "[why] does one wear collars at all?" that he does so "to pass the Police" (65). This portrait of Aziz under

British rule makes his mimicry a symbolic attempt to be heard or to be recognised as someone with the right to be heard. While he is treated as a subordinate from the beginning, it is clear that the Anglo-Indian community is not willing to recognise his rights when he is arrested without even announcing on what charges (159). In the subsequent chapters, it is revealed that he has been accused of assault on Adela Quested, and the Anglo-Indians, before and during the trial, refuse to hear Aziz or give credit to anything he says, favouring instead a contradictory reconstruction that even the supposed victim does not acknowledge but which suits their interests. The most notable moment of silence, however, is when Aziz's friend, Fielding, asks their common friend, Professor Godbole, whether Aziz is "innocent or guilty" (174). The fact that, rather than waiting to hear his friend's account Fielding considers the Anglo-Indians' contradictory reconstruction and consults with a third party, makes Aziz's imposed silence even more poignant. These events mark a turning point for Aziz, who tells Fielding, "[t]he approval of your compatriots no longer interests me" (243), and who eventually includes Fielding in this, at first wrongly believing he had deceived him and married Adela Quested, "[his] enemy" (298), and later accepting that nonetheless "he had thrown in his lot with Anglo-India by marrying a countrywoman," even if it had not been his enemy (314).

As a result of the debasement of the hegemonic ears, rather than remain silenced and powerless subalterns, the characters choose to depart in silence as a way out. The silence that Gemmy and Aziz choose is empowering; it is the refusal to speak and gratify the hegemonic ears, which also makes it a selective silence. Because the subalterns' attempt to speak gratifies the hegemonic group by affirming their power and status in the subaltern/ruler binary, their silence challenges their status and power over them. The hegemonic ears seek the subaltern's attempt to

speak and be heard by them, and try to force them to fulfil the part, which makes their silences stand out even more as acts of defiance and agency.

Following his disappointment, rather than remaining the silenced subaltern, Gemmy reaches the conclusion that he can escape, “[h]e began to sicken and saw at last that what he was suffering here had to do with the sheets of paper where [they] had set down his life . . . he was convinced that the only way to save himself . . . was to get them back again” (154), and later he reasserts his decision displaying his newfound agency, “[h]e was going to claim back his life” (176). He goes to the schoolhouse and demands from the schoolmaster the pages that he believes contain his life, he takes them away and leaves the settlement, and he does this in silence, without explanation or farewell (177-178); afterwards he feels free and empowered, “he could go anywhere he pleased” (180). This silence is no longer the previous, imposed silence but a chosen one that reflects his wish to avoid contact with the settlers, the abusers and the friendly ones who suffered for him but who remind him of the community the tormentors belong to, and whom he can protect from further harassment with his silence and distance. Even before the attack, when he sensed their hostility because “he was forced to speak” (64), Gemmy used silence to refuse the settlers’ attempt to exert power over him with demands, “[t]he angrier they grew, the more he saw that it was better to keep to himself what even the good men among them were trying to rattle out of him” (65). After his disappointment, he ratifies this stance; through his chosen silence towards the settlers, Gemmy refuses to gratify the expectation that he should justify himself to them as his superiors and instead he acts on his own accord.

In a similar way, Aziz takes action and, despite Hamidullah’s scepticism, he leaves Chandrapore without speaking to the Anglo-Indians or replying to

Fielding's letters. In a novel where personal relationships have been considered to be the central theme by critics (Childs 205; Hawkins 56), Fielding's letters are little more than a friend's letters. However, in his pursuit of Aziz in Mau where he demands why he did not reply to his letters (295), he denies Aziz's right to be silent. Fielding does not "travel as lightly as in the past" (312), and his attitude towards Aziz shows that "he [has] 'no further use for politeness'" (316), which aligns him and his demands with the hegemonic ears' demand for the subaltern's reverence. Aziz initially refuses to reply and instead says, "[d]on't trouble me here at Mau is all I ask, I do not want you, I do not want one of you in my private life, with my dying breath I say it . . . I wish no Englishman or Englishwoman to be my friend" (298), explicitly stating the reason for his chosen silence and displaying his newly acquired agency. Finally, his posterior conversation with Fielding and his letter to Adela Quested to inform her that he has no ill feelings towards her disrupt his silence, but these are a farewell; when he parts from Fielding, Aziz is entering a permanent silence towards the English. As in Gemmy's case, this silence is not a return to the voicelessness of his past but a chosen silence that reveals his "willful decision not to say."

Although they do not acquire power within these systems, they do acquire power and agency over their own lives, a power outside colonial systems. By leaving without speaking to the hegemonic - or colonial - ears, these subalterns defy the power of the ruling class over them since their silences state that they need neither their recognition nor their permission to take action over their lives. Moreover, by leaving these hierarchies and binaries, they escape the systems and discourse that make them subalterns. As such, their silences, even if they are individual actions, challenge and liberate them from colonial discourse and binaries. Finally, having

gained agency and power over their lives and being able to challenge the hegemonic group and discourse, these characters no longer suffer the powerlessness and lack of agency of the subaltern and therefore cease to be subalterns.

Epistemic Authority in Personal Silence

Because of the binary power relations that dominate the colonial settings of *Remembering Babylon* and *A Passage to India*, the subalterns' attempts to be heard by the hegemonic groups affirm their positions of subaltern as subject and hegemonic ears as rulers. This means that the ruler's claim to epistemic authority, that is, the authority to construct knowledge or "epistemic frameworks that legitimise and enshrine . . . practices of domination" (Galván-Alvarez 12), is legitimised by the subalterns' attempts to be heard.

In *Remembering Babylon*, the epistemic authority lies in the hands (and pens) of the settlers. When Gemmy arrives at the settlement, he wishes not "to be taken back" but "to be recognised" (32). This wish to be recognised by the settlers acknowledges and asserts their epistemic authority. When Gemmy tells the hegemonic group his story, "partly with signs, partly with words that he dragged up at need" (10), he feels "[h]e had shown them what he was. He was known" (20). However, this authority is not only an authority to recognise him, as he had expected, but an authority to define and construct him. When they listen to Gemmy's story, they do not just listen but fill in the gaps, "they could never be certain, later, how much of it was real and how much they had themselves supplied from tales they already knew" (16). At this point, Gemmy is unconcerned to concede them this authority, "he was only too pleased to have [the minister] Mr Frazer find words for him" (17), as he is, of yet, unaware of the power of these words.

In *A Passage to India*, the ruling English, or Anglo-Indians, have the epistemic authority to construct the Indians, subaltern Aziz included, as their Other, while the subjects' attempts to be recognised by them affirm this authority. Aziz's mimicry asserts the Anglo-Indians epistemic authority: dressing in Western clothes "to pass the Police" (65), admitting that because an Englishman's room is not tidy he "need not be so ashamed" of himself (64), and obeying his English superior's command and "[hastening] as a subordinate should" (19). These events demonstrate how, in colonial Anglo-India, the English have the authority to establish the standards, and the subjects, like Aziz, have internalised many of those standards and accommodated the rest. By extension, they have the authority to define the Indian subjects according to their acquiescence to their standards and system. Ania Loomba observes how, after the Mutiny of 1857, which is paralleled in Forster's novel, the colonial representation of Indians was divided between the "mild Hindus," and its successor, the "savage rapist of British Women" (71). In the novel, Aziz's submissiveness may be seen as a strategy to avoid being defined as the "savage," which further confirms the Anglo-Indians' epistemic authority.

At the same time, the hegemonic ears use this authority to commit epistemic violence and "constitute the colonial subject as Other" (Spivak CSS 280-281). Whereas Aziz is defined by his acquiescence to colonial discourse, Gemmy, the "uncanny object" (Randall 133), is defined by the anxieties he stirs in the settlers. Ultimately, both are silenced and denied the epistemic authority to define themselves.

As a result of the "troubling transfiguration of the self" (Randall 134) that Gemmy presents, the settlers go from recognising him to attempting to define and silence Gemmy. After he meets the two aborigines and the villager Andy makes up

details that misconstrue this meeting, Gemmy is unable to defend himself. As previously mentioned, only his host, Jock McIvor wishes to talk to him and listen to what he has to say (106), while the others, who see their epistemic authority undermined by their inability to define this “transfiguration of the self,” opt for constructing him as an aberration, and an immediate and unconditional threat to the colony that must go. This undefinable threat is represented in the fictitious stone which Andy claims the aborigines have given Gemmy (101-102). Jock McIvor attempts to relieve the tension, “[w]hat’s it supposed to be? Magic? . . . For Guid’s sake, man, ye’ve got a shotgun!” (105), but he does not even soothe his own fear, “[t]he shotgun he had evoked to balance that other threat had no weight. The two forces were not equal . . . the shotguns they carried - might not be enough against - against what? Some vulnerability to the world that could only be measured, was measured still, by the dread it evoked in them?” (105). Through the accusation epitomised by the stone and the posterior attack on Gemmy, the settlers seek to impose their epistemic authority and construct Gemmy as a threat to be rid of.

In Aziz’s case, the hegemonic ears of his community similarly abuse their epistemic authority and use it to construct and silence Aziz. When McBryde, the District Superintendent of Police, arrests Aziz, he tells him, “I’m not your judge” (164); however, as he turns away, he is thinking that he is not surprised because “[a]ll unfortunate natives are criminals at heart” (164). This scene illustrates how the Anglo-Indians have already decided that Aziz is guilty and that he has no power to change this belief. To further illustrate this point, the McBryde subsequently reveals that the arrest and decision that Aziz is guilty have taken place without evidence and are the result of assumptions. He explains to Fielding that the alleged victim, who was reportedly saved and found by Miss Derek, said nothing but she

“couldn’t stand the Indian driver . . . and it was that that put our friend on the track of what had happened . . . That’s the story as far as I know it” (165). When Fielding addresses the lack of solid evidence and points out the inconsistencies in their reconstruction of the events, McBryde disregards them with the ambiguous retort that “when an Indian goes bad, he goes not only bad, but very queer” (166), rather than admitting that their assumptions lack foundation. The Anglo-Indians in this text use their epistemic authority to construct reality as it suits them, and refuse to consider this reality as anything other than universal.

However, their disappointment following this epistemic violence and imposed silence makes the subalterns revoke this authority through their personal silence. After their debasement, the hegemonic groups’ authority becomes liable to opposition and defiance in the subalterns’ eyes who see no value in being heard by oppressors who refuse to listen to them. The refusal to (attempt to) speak to the hegemonic ears denies their claimed epistemic authority and power to define them; in Guignery’s words, silence is “a way to deny the authority of the oppressor” (5). Instead, the silence relocates this power and authority in the subalterns, allowing them to transcend their powerless, subaltern status and define themselves outside the hegemonic discourses.

The disappointment resulting from such epistemic violence is best expressed by Gemmy’s hosts, Jock and Lachlan Beattie, for whom “the belief that to be thought well by such fellows was the first thing in the world [was] gone” (161). But this disappointment in the hegemonic ears is also seen in Gemmy’s withdrawal, when he “simply [vanishes] into his own skin, behind his own dim but startled eyes” (114), and later when he avoids the settlers. The debasement of the hegemonic ears leads Gemmy to revoke their epistemic authority, no longer seeking to be known or

recognised by them and on a quest “to claim back his life” (176). As a symbol of his emancipation from their authority, Gemmy takes what he believes are the sheets on which the settlers had written down his life away from the settlement and sees them destroyed (181). After destroying them he reclaims the authority to define himself by embracing his hybridity as a new life, “[o]ne life was burned up, hollowed out with flame, to crack the seeds from which new life would come” (181). No longer speaking, or trying to speak, to the hegemonic ears, Gemmy walks into “a known landscape” from his past among the aborigines and looks for a word “that would let him enter here” (181). Notably, the word he needs to enter this landscape is the English word “water” (181). At this moment, Gemmy manifests his hybridity and defines himself, not by difference but by the sum of parts that he has now come to peace with.

Aziz, too, is disappointed after seeing the futility of his attempts to be heard by the Anglo-Indians and sees their authority debased. At his victory dinner after his release, Aziz tells Fielding, “[t]he approval of your compatriots no longer interests me, I have become anti-British, and ought to have done so sooner, it would have saved me numerous misfortunes” (243-244). This conclusion translates into a silence towards the British, which, as aforementioned, comes to include his friend Fielding when he becomes a part of the colonial system (312); the colonial epistemic authority no longer has any value for Aziz. After the debasement of the hegemonic ears, Aziz reclaims this authority and achieves self-definition, stating, after settling in Mau, “I am Indian at last” (288). This statement, like his silence towards the Anglo-Indians after his trial, signals Aziz’s independence from the colonial discourse which attempted to define him and shows that he is no longer a powerless subaltern defined by the hegemonic group.

Through these silences, the subalterns challenge the legitimacy of colonial discourse. Within such discourses, they do not challenge the existing constructions; they may be defined as irrational, or “queer”, in the case of Aziz, in order to maintain the binaries that define the hegemonic groups in opposition to the Other. Outside those discourses, however, the subalterns acquire power and achieve self-definition. On the whole, their silences threaten hegemonic discourses by, first, denying their legitimacy and epistemic authority, and second, pointing to alternative discourses.

Narrative Silence and Alternative Narratives

Narrative silence, which takes place when Gemmy and Aziz depart *Remembering Babylon* and *A Passage to India* respectively, illustrates the gains in agency and authority of these characters through silence. Through their narrative silence, Gemmy and Aziz are able to acquire control over their narratives and audiences. By controlling their narratives, these former subalterns move on from their powerless position within the novels, that is, within narratives over which they had no control, to narratives of their own. While the reader may not be aware of these alternative narratives, this does not mean they are any less valid or assertive, and thus the equation of silence and absence is refuted; absence of knowledge for the reader does not mean absolute absence.

In Malouf’s text, Gemmy uses narrative silence to acquire authority and actively choose his audience. Gemmy walks out of the narrative as he walks away from the settlement where the narrative focus lies. His departure is portrayed as a liberation from the constraining pages of the narrative through its alignment with the destruction of the sheets of paper which Gemmy believes contain his life:

He began to sicken, and saw at last that what he was suffering here had to do with the sheets of paper where, months ago, Mr Frazer and the schoolmaster had set down his life. . . . More and more now he was haunted by those sheets . . . till he was convinced that the only way to save himself from so much racking, and despair and sweat, was to get them back again. They would be in one place or the other . . . All he needed was the strength to get there. But that was just what their magic had drawn from him. (154-155)

Upon retrieving those sheets, Gemmy walks away, “the papers safely in his pocket . . . for the first time . . . he could go any way he pleased” (180), and sees them destroyed, “the sheets of paper . . . were sodden . . . the paper turning pulpy, beginning to break up in his hands . . . bits all disconnected” (181). The recorded events of his former existence are now freed so they will no longer haunt him, and Gemmy sees in this destruction an opening of possibilities before walking away into the unknown, “[o]ne life was burned up . . . to crack the seeds from which new life would come” (181). Don Randall states that Gemmy “understands the writing exercise as a power ritual that works to disenfranchise and dominate him” (138), and as such, the undoing of this ritual’s products, whether by the destruction of the pages or through his narrative silence, leads to his freedom.

In a similar way, in Forster’s text, Aziz’s narrative silence suggests the same potential to gain him authority and agency over his narrative. *A Passage to India*’s part 3, Temple, starts with a description of the upcoming Hindu celebrations in Mau from the point of view of Professor Godbole, and Aziz is absent from the narrative until the narrator mentions, without much emphasis, that he is in Mau and

he is the Rajah's physician (284). Up to this point, Aziz's narrative silence is similar to Gemmy's in that he refuses to metaphorically speak to the audience and be part of a text over which he has no control. Whereas Gemmy's acquisition of narrative authority is staged in his destruction of the papers on which his story had been written, Aziz's narrative authority comes to life in the nationalist poetry he writes, "published Bombay side," for an audience of his choosing (316).

On the other hand, the novels differ in their engagement with narrative silence through their conclusions. Malouf gives Gemmy an open ending as his former friends in the settlement, Lachlan and Janet, reflect on their old friend's disappearance in the final chapter of *Remembering Babylon*. The closest the narrative comes to establishing an ending for Gemmy's story is brought by Lachlan, who attempted for years to find out what happened to Gemmy and eventually, finding the remains of the massacre of a group of aborigines, "decided, without proof, out of a need to free himself at last of a duty he had undertaken, a promise made, and a weight on his heart, that this was the place [where Gemmy's] wandering at last had come to an end, and this was it" (197). But even this conclusion eludes the closure that Lachlan sought as the narrative underscores, first, that it was out of a need to give closure to Gemmy's disappearance that Lachlan decided that that was the end, and second, that it was a decision made without proof. The narrative further justifies the personal necessity of Gemmy's former friends to find closure and an "ending, such as it was" (195), in Janet's thoughts: "she knew he did not believe it. He was tying up one of the loose ends of his own life, which might otherwise have gone on bleeding forever" (197). Meanwhile, Lachlan's final thoughts highlight the possibilities of continuity of the open ending, "[h]e could afford to admit now that it had not ended" (197). In this chapter, Malouf engages with the Western tradition

and expectation of giving closure to narratives and subsequently confronts this expectation by inviting the reader to embrace the possibilities of an open ending, the possibilities that Gemmy's narrative silence enables.

Aziz's narrative silence, meanwhile, is temporarily disrupted and his story is given a conclusion. After the first chapter of part 3, in which Aziz is absent, Forster brings the narrative focus back to the former subaltern to depict his farewell to Fielding (314). The author thus forces him to speak to the reader again, diminishing the significance of his narrative silence. The disruption of his silence is temporary, one last "good-bye" (314) to reach closure. And, notably, it forces Aziz's demand, "[d]on't trouble me here at Mau is all I ask, I do not want you" (298). This choice shows the author's ambivalence towards his protagonist's silence: while, on the one hand, forcing the former subaltern to speak allows him to communicate his will, on the other hand, it violates his free choice of silence. More significantly, the narrative forces Aziz to speak to an audience which he cannot choose and in a way that gratifies them: by explaining his silence to the reader the narrative asserts the reader's authority. All in all, Forster shows scepticism regarding narrative silence but does not negate its potential.

One interpretation of Forster's hunt for Aziz's narrative places his text closer to the realist tradition. Judith Scherer Herz links this to his "essentially nineteenth-century belief that characters should 'live continuously'" like Leon Tolstoy's, and which, she adds, prevented Forster from taking a more modernist approach to characterisation (5). But beyond literary style, this apparent necessity for closure resembles Lachlan's when he decides that he has found the end to Gemmy's story. Despite the difference that, while one conclusion is reverted, the other is permanent, both aim to give closure to personal relationships, suggesting

that Forster's disruption of Aziz's narrative silence satisfies the same personal need as Lachlan's temporary ending: tying a loose end that would have gone on bleeding forever. While this choice may render Aziz's narrative silence insignificant, it also underscores the centrality of personal relationships in the novel observed by critics (Childs 205; Hawkins 56) and emphasises the fact that the friends' parting is not due to personal issues or misunderstandings but politics: "we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then . . . you and I shall be friends" (317). On the whole, while Forster shows scepticism about narrative silence and makes it secondary to his emphasis on personal relationships, *A Passage to India*, like Malouf's novel, displays the potential for the subaltern characters to gain authority through narrative silence.

Finally, the narrative silence of these characters points to alternative narratives outside of hegemonic discourses; accordingly, silence is articulated as the opposite of absence. Although, as previously noted, the personal silences towards the hegemonic ears already indicate that these characters' silences are selective, the narrative silences further prove that silence in one narrative does not equal absence or absolute silence. In this case, although the characters' destination is unknown to the reader, it is made evident that both leave in order to live different lives. Gemmy walks into what is, for colonials, uncharted territory, but which the account of his past with the aborigines proves is simply part of a different culture and narrative. This alternative world is the "world quite apart from the one represented in letters" as Helga Ramsey-Kurz views it (127), and the world "outside epistemology" in Bill Ashcroft's words (Futures 59). Above all, it is a world which, though outside of hegemonic knowledge, is equally valid for Gemmy to inhabit and which suggests freedom for him. Aziz similarly walks out of the novel into an alternative world, and

in his case, its value is illustrated in his poetry. In Aziz's last conversation with Fielding, the latter laughs about Aziz's life in Mau, "[a]way from us, Indians go to seed at once . . . Look at your poems" (316), to which Aziz replies, "[j]olly good poems, I'm getting published Bombay side" (316). While the now more colonialist Fielding slights Aziz's nationalist poetry, Aziz's reply proves that, though not for those who have invested interests in the Empire, for others, his poetry has value. The texts thus articulate their narrative silence not as an absence but a turning away from one narrative to another.

This also echoes the themes of alternative epistemologies in both texts. In *Remembering Babylon*, "non-linguistic perception" (Tayeb, 343) is presented as an alternative means of forming knowledge. The minister, Mr Frazer, learns this different approach to knowledge from Gemmy and concludes, "[w]e must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there . . . so that what spreads in us is an intimate understanding of what it truly is" (130-131). According to Ashcroft, Mr Frazer's diary is "an account of the ecological blindness which language has produced in settler societies, [he believes] that by breaking out of this language the land might reveal its secrets" (Transformations 203). Meanwhile, *A Passage to India* often resorts to the motif of the muddle, in particular, to describe India and what Margaret Procter calls "the incomprehensibility of India" (271). In the tea party Fielding organises, he, Dr Aziz, Adela Quested and Mrs Moore discuss the difficulties of the English to understand Indians and Indian customs, and Fielding states, "Aziz and I know well that India's a muddle" (68). Fielding, who, being friends with the Indians, is portrayed as the English character most open to Indian difference, is frequently linked to the concept of the muddle and for him this mystery is not an impediment to connect with the

Indians, “born in freedom, he was not afraid of the muddle, but he recognized its existence” (172). The muddle and the non-linguistic perception, then, represent alternative epistemologies in these different cultures, alternative epistemologies which some of the colonial characters can accept even if they do not fully understand them. In light of this, the subalterns’ narrative silences underscore the validity of these alternative epistemologies regardless of whether or not they are known to, or understood by, readers and hegemonic ears.

Conclusion

In the Western tradition, silence, and particularly subaltern silence, has been associated with absence, lack, oppression, disempowerment and appropriation. Because it has been imposed on subalterns and has been used to force them into submission, the aim of the majority of scholar criticism, amongst which Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” stands out, has been to make the hegemonic ears hear the subaltern voices and to make the subaltern speak. However, in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, silence is actually articulated as a means of resistance.

Several contributing factors determine whether a subaltern’s silence may be turned into an empowering, chosen silence. Notably, the subaltern protagonists of these texts are peculiar in that they have an option to escape the society that oppresses them into their subaltern positions. Although this alternative is not necessarily promising and does not, on its own, guarantee that their situation will improve, it is an option the subalterns in Spivak’s paper do not have. Interestingly, the imposition of silence on these characters has the opposite effect and instead makes the attempt to speak to the hegemonic ears lose its value. As a result, the

subalterns in these texts are able to question and challenge the authority of the hegemonic groups.

Their choice of silence, or more accurately, their decision to refuse to speak to the hegemonic ears, is articulated as the execution of this defiance. Firstly, they relocate the authority previously assigned to the hegemonic groups by refusing to speak to them and acquire agency over their lives, choosing those they speak to and what they say. And secondly, they are now able to resist and challenge colonial discourse and binaries, which, for one thing, would not allow them to acquire this agency and authority. Consequently, they are able to transcend their subaltern positions: through the agency and authority they acquire, which are the opposite of subaltern powerlessness, and also through their refusal to be part of colonial binaries, which construct them as subordinates.

Ultimately, silence is presented as an alternative to the affirmation of hegemonic discourses which weakens them and questions their legitimacy. Furthermore, these texts, through their silent protagonists, draw attention to the existence of alternative narratives and epistemologies which refute the equation of silence and absence. The silences of these characters are not total; instead, they are intended towards the hegemonic groups and their discourses while the characters move on to alternative narratives and epistemologies that the former subalterns are not silent towards, and which are equally valid.

Making the subaltern speak is, therefore, more than “a demand for narrative” (Guignery 5), for it entails making them speak within a given discourse, traditionally a hegemonic discourse, and as such legitimises the authority of that discourse. Instead, silence, as a response to colonial oppression, may be considered

as an alternative that empowers subalterns by challenging hegemonic discourse and relocating its power to those alternatives they favour instead.

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