

The marginalised,  
excluded and  
silenced social  
groups within the text



**ASSIGN  
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The quote ' Silence is Golden' is extremely subjective in its interpretation and heavily dependent on the context of the situation it is applied to. Is it always right to keep silent, without giving voice to ones innermost thoughts and feelings? Or is it always the better option to speak out, letting words fill the gaps that silence cannot? Or what if one had no choice but to remain silent? In the novel ' The Hungry Tide', Amitav Ghosh represents the social class of displaced, uneducated fisherman and other primary sector laborers through the character of Fokir, a young man with almost no actual ' voice' throughout the entire course of the novel. This is where we must consider the spectrum that contains the several shades of grey between having a voice and no voice at all. To be ' silenced' does not necessarily mean to be robbed of a voice, a concept that is clearly elucidated by Fokir and his vital role in the progression of the plot.

We first hear Fokir's voice after he rescues Pia from drowning in a river near Canning. The strength and morality of his character are immediately established as we see him risk his own life to pull her out of the tumultuous depths. Part One of the novel, entitled ' The Ebb: Bhata', gives us only nine instances where we hear Fokir's voice. Most of his dialogues consist of one word, but in almost every case, one word is enough for both Pia and the readers to understand his intent and the message he is trying to convey. The first word we hear Fokir speak is ' Lusibari'[1], assuring Pia that Lusibari is, indeed, the island he is taking her to. ' Lusibari' is also the last word that the readers hear him speak in Part One. The significance is not lost on us because ' Lusibari' is the place where all the primary characters of the novel meet and steer the plot of the novel into Part Two. The readers soon realize

that Amitav Ghosh's economy of words when it comes to giving Fokir dialogue serves to make the numbered things he says all the more important. Just by saying the word 'Lusibari', he was able to leave the readers with a feeling of anticipation for what was to come. Another extremely important word that Fokir says is 'gamchha'[2], a Bengali word for a coarse, cotton piece of cloth that is traditionally used as a towel. The word is at the tip of Pia's tongue but she cannot remember it, and in it lays an immense amount of culture and heritage because it elicits memories of her father. By giving voice to Pia's thoughts, the readers begin to see how Ghosh uses language to portray Fokir's understanding of Pia despite the language barrier between them.

It would then seem odd that Ghosh has given Fokir almost no voice but provided Horen, another fisherman, with one so strong. We see Horen's character both in Nirmal's journals and in person in Part Two of the novel. This is because although Fokir and Horen share the same profession, they do not belong to the same social group. Horen is a generation older than Fokir; he was a young man when he knew Kusum, Fokir's mother. He had been a laborer all his life but, Fokir, however, is a young man in a different age. While the world progresses, he remains a humble fisherman, a fact that disturbs his wife, Moyna, greatly. Another way that Ghosh silences a character is by using the words of another character against them. Moyna describes Fokir to be 'like a child' and says that he does not understand the ways of the world because he is illiterate.[3] She desperately wants an education for her son because 'in fifteen years the fish will all be gone'[4] and Fokir will be left without a job to sustain his family. She does not want

Tultul, her son, to follow in his footsteps. It is made clear to the readers that Fokir 'feels out of place'[5] in Lusibari and does not enjoy living there.

Moyna's decision, however, seems to override his and he is resigned to living in the town rather than in the village. This belittlement could be a reason for why Fokir is voluntarily silent. We see Moyna undermine him again when Pia comes to their house to discuss her plans for her next expedition and pay Fokir for his prior services. Although she wants to give the money to Fokir, Moyna stands up and intercepts her 'with an extended palm'[6], making it clear that the money was to be handed over to her and not Fokir. Kanai also seems to make this distinction, telling Pia that 'he's a fisherman and you're a scientist'[7]. His motive is different from Moyna's, he is jealous of Pia and Fokir's growing relationship, but his intent is the same. He widens the gap further, telling her that 'he kills animals for a living'[8] while Pia by profession preserves and studies them. Ghosh also never lets Fokir communicate the reasons for his actions. This barrier created by Moyna and Kanai as they speak over him is more effective in silencing him than his lack of words.

The lack of a voice does not automatically connote the lack of a character's presence in a novel. Fokir's influence is tangible as we see him bring Piya to Lusibari, be her guide, companion and even mentor in some cases and save her life three times, the last time giving up his own for hers. The empathy and sorrow that the readers feel at the moment of Fokir's death, despite his lack of dialogue, is testament to his impact in the novel. Piya, in return, seems to be able to communicate with Fokir through just looks and actions. As she fights to be the one to protect him during the storm, he understands,

like he understood everything else. He understands, ' even without words'[9].