

Research Article

The Archaeology of Absence in Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone*

Margarida Pereira Martins^{1,2,*} 

¹Department of Humanities, Universidade Aberta, Lisbon, Portugal

²University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract

Approximately 1.4 million Indians were recruited to the First World War. Despite their role in the war and the high number of deaths, most of the literature in English on the Great War has been narrowed down to British experience. However, in recent years their stories have been emerging through fiction, in academic research and educational projects resulting in a more complete picture of the war and who was involved. A British arts education group engaged students in a project designed to teach and share the stories of forgotten soldiers from World War I. Writing about the project in *The Guardian* in 2018 Kamila Shamsie claimed the aim was to teach school children about the war and the involvement of non-British recruits whose narratives had up till then been unknown. In academia, respected scholars such as Santanu Das or Claire Buck have undergone thorough research on the representation of Indian recruits through an analysis of literary texts and artefacts states that war memories of the Indian sepoy whose stories were left behind and forgotten on the battle ground. According to Das, the lack of stories by Indian recruits does not mean that history cannot be rectified since it is possible to recover the experience and memory of the recruits. Recently emerging literary representation of the Indian recruit provided historical insight into their experience shedding light on new perspectives of the War. The aim of this article is to analyse the representation of Indian recruits and their experience of World War I in Kamila Shamsie's 2014 novel *A God in Every Stone*. I argue that through fiction, it is possible to construct a broader and more inclusive understanding of this historical event as well as to uncover deeper complexities and anxieties on the Indian colonial experience.

Keywords

Literature, War, India, Colonialism, Decolonization

1. Introduction

1. Peshawar, Viv said finally, tentatively. That's what I want for my life. I want to go to Peshawar.
 2. She waited for her mother to look outraged or disbelieving, but Mrs Spencer only said, Why?
 3. Because there's more past than present there. [1].
- Archaeology is the study of the past through the examina-

tion of remains and artefacts that are dug up and which, once uncovered, contribute to a more cohesive interpretation of past events. According to Salman Rushdie in his widely read essay, "Imaginary Homelands" where he discusses how the past is reconstructed:

Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not

*Corresponding author: margaridapm@hotmail.com (Margarida Pereira Martins)

Received: 12 March 2024; **Accepted:** 7 April 2024; **Published:** 23 September 2024



gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we deny it so fiercely, even to death [2].

In line with his argument, each artefact, object, piece, or stone contains a story that contributes to the construction and possible reconstruction of the whole. Consequently, for a fuller, more inclusive understanding of historical events, it is fundamental to keep digging into the past and to include previously excluded stories, experiences and voices in the (re)writing of history.

In recent years, fiction by anglophone writers as well as translations of texts in vernacular languages have played an important role in decentring the perspective of what happened in World War I (WWI) from a focus on the European narrative. A broader and more inclusive history of WWI is being investigated; one that includes “other” narratives of experience besides the white, European male soldier. When dealing with a more extensive history of WWI, questions must be asked, such as, who made up the body of recruits, what did the recruits experience and why has their role in the war remained generally absent from literary representation and historical accounts for so long? It is at this stage of history in the 21st century that attention is finally being paid to the fiction that questions former models, with demands for change in perspectives, replacing versions of events that are moulded through a colonial discourse.

As Zadie Smith wrote on the role of fiction in constructing and deconstructing systems of thought:

In the process of turning from it, we’ve accused it of appropriation, colonization, delusion, vanity, naïveté, political and moral irresponsibility. We have found fiction wanting in myriad ways but rarely paused to wonder, or recall, what we once wanted from it—what theories of self-and-other it offered us, or why, for so long, those theories felt meaningful to so many. [3]

Fiction continues to play an important role in the voicing of experiences and 21st century writers are using the narrative to expose the absences and silences of history. 2021 Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah, himself a refugee who fled Zanzibar in the 60s and settled in the UK, claims he felt a “‘deeply unsettling’ realisation that ‘a new, simpler history was being constructed, transforming and even obliterating what had happened’” and decided to refuse this version of history and to write of the horrors that had been “wiped from our memory” [4, 5] in his novels.

2. Indian Experience of World War I

Santanu Das’ extensive research on the Indian presence and experience of WWI demonstrates to the non-Indian reader,

historian or literary scholar that a number of Indian writers and intellectuals had, since the outset of the war in 1914, written poems, songs, short stories and novels about the Great War. However, it was only recently, more precisely in the 2000s that attention was drawn to this theme and its essential contribution to the understanding of the war and global history. With the recognition of Indian, African and Caribbean recruits in the war, a history of the experience of WWI, which had until then been silenced and had remained absent from most historical accounts, begins to be acknowledged through the publication and research into stories of recruits from India and Africa. Decolonising this history, how it is taught, debated, and portrayed, opens new possibilities for reimagining and recreating stories of experience. This means not only a re-formulation of events from an academic perspective but a “human concern” for “neglected lives” to quote Gurnah [6], by telling the stories of those who, by now, are unable to voice their experiences.

My aim in this article is to reflect on the war narrative, the experience of non-European recruits, namely Indian, in WWI acknowledging those who “made the largest contribution to the First World War in terms of manpower of any of the colonies or dominions of the British empire” [7], through the literary representation of colonised subjects in Kamila Shamsie’s novel *A God in Every Stone* (2014). Even though the Great War that lasted from 1914 – 1918 was fought on different fronts around the world, “such recognitions entail the question of whose version of the global we are talking about when addressing the *world* in World War One” [8]. Research on fictional accounts of World War I reveals that there have been few narratives that deal with the non-European recruit or even the civilian, whether male and female, experience of the war. For a more complete understanding of the “world” in World War I, the perspective needs to shift and expand to include those whose stories have not been properly or fully told.

Shamsie’s 2017 novel *Home Fire* contains a very short paragraph where the narrator mentions a grandfather who had been in the war, when Aunt Naseem, one of the characters in the story says, “my father fought in the British-Indian Army during World War One. He was in France for a while, billeted with a family there – the sons and the husband were soldiers, so it was just the women he lived with” [9]. This is a unique moment in the narrative, however, the passage not only refers to the Indian presence in the war, as it alludes to Shamsie’s earlier novel, *A God in Every Stone* (2014) which deals with the theme of World War I and the experience of two Indian recruits who were in France during the war. This intertextuality in Shamsie’s novels emphasises that non-European presence in the war must be told in different forms and formats. New, untold versions of history should result in a reassessment of educational curricula from which these accounts have been absent. Although this perspective has been buried beneath other facts which have been considered, epistemologically, more relevant when referring to the war, “the fact

and scale of their participation make a compelling case for changing the way we teach war writing” [8].

The geopolitical causes of the war and the European countries that were involved in the conflict which was fought on a global scale are common knowledge, studied in schools and universities, depicted in film and literature and in extensive research of all aspects of the war that has been produced. However, what is generally known of WWI places “emphasis on a single theatre of war, the Western Front, and on the perspective of European and North American writers” [8] as Claire Buck contends. To add to this, as Debra Rae Cohen and Douglas Higbee have argued,

This narrative is only part of a wider story – the global story – of the war. And scholarship over the last three decades has worked to recover the diversity of war experience, to stress the multiplicity of war rather than its universality. These expansions and remappings of the field draw on postcolonial perspectives, revisionist historiography, feminist rediscovery, media theory and new understandings of modernism and modernity along with a wealth of newly developed material and virtual resources for study – have only rendered more complex the task of teaching a dauntingly enormous subject [10].

Broadening research and representation to include the Eastern Fronts and even “home fronts” (Das, Buck) and the experience of millions of non-European, non-white and even non-male recruits provides a richer, more inclusive and clearer version of history. Most of the European nations who fought in the war, were empires at the time, with colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. As a result of this, most recruits, servicemen, carriers and even their families, who were “dragged into war” were from the Indian subcontinent, from different African countries and from Caribbean islands.

In what concerns the history of WWI and India’s role in the war, we are all “implicated subjects”, to use Michael Rothberg’s concept. Rothberg argues, “implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and agency without being themselves direct agents of harm. They contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes” [11]. Having been structured within the framework of these beliefs and grand narratives, taught at schools, in history books, imposed through film and literature, “an implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in the histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator (...) Although indirect or belated, their actions and inactions help produce and reproduce the positions of victim and perpetrator” [11]. Regarding WWI, inaction has been a result of the lack of resources that raise awareness to what lies beneath the master narratives and has been absent from colonial versions of history. Retrieving lost stories, silenced voiced and decolonising experience is essential for a deeper, more human, understanding of what in fact happened during the years of colonialism and war, and why. Taking the necessary action to research, write and read the stories of

non-European presence and lived experience of imperialist domination contributes towards the decolonisation and “corrected” (Buck) version of the history of WWI.

3. *A God in Every Stone* and the Representation of Indian Experience

A God in Every Stone first published in 2014 is a novel by British-Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie. The narrative begins in July 1914 in Ancient Caria, located in present day Turkey. It is here that we are introduced to Vivian Rose Spencer, a 22-year-old English woman, student of History and Egyptology at University College London, who has joined an archaeological dig led by Tashin Bey, an Armenian, who presents himself as a Turk, and renowned archaeologist. At this point in history the tensions that led to the outbreak of the First World War later that year in August were already in motion. A few chapters on, the reader is introduced to Qayyum and Kalam Khan, two Pashtun recruits of the 40th Pathans deployed to France for the Battle of Aubers Ridge in 1915. Qayyum is badly injured and sent to a hospital in Brighton while Kalam stays in France, and they keep in touch through letters. The story unfolds around Vivian, Quayyum and his brother Najeeb as their lives intersect at the time of the war and later in 1930 during the Qissa Khwani massacre, (Qissa Khwani Bazaar is also known as the Street of Story-tellers) in Peshawar, in present day Pakistan.

Approximately 1.4 million Indians were recruited to the First World War serving on the Eastern and Western fronts. Despite their role in the war and the high number of deaths, little has, until now been known or studied of the Indian presence and experience since literature in English on the Great War focused mostly on British (or American) experience. Although this article focuses specifically on the representation of Indian experience of the war, it is worth mentioning that it is not only the sepoy that are absent from historical, cinematic or literary accounts of the war, but also the African askari, many from the West Indies, from China, from Australia and many other British, French and German colonies. Shamsie’s novel sheds light on this epistemic injustice of silencing, forgetting, ignoring and burying the truth in the layers of history, rendering in Indian recruits, to be “doomed to wander in no-man’s land between the Eurocentric narratives of the ‘Great War and Modern Memory’ and nationalist histories of India” [12]. However, according to Das, the lack of stories by Indian recruits does not mean that history cannot be rectified since “amnesia does not mean absence” [12]. Even though there has been until recently a historical blank when it comes to Indian and African narratives of war, it is still possible to voice these experiences through stories and through a rewriting, reclaiming, and reteaching of history as I have been arguing.

Furthermore, and just as important, the novel raises awareness to the desire and struggle for independence from

British colonial domination. This calls our attention to the greater complexity of mixed feelings with which these recruits were ‘dragged into war’, a war that as we now acknowledge was not theirs to fight. The representation of the Indian experience of war has multiple functions. It provides the previously mentioned corrected version of history by decolonising knowledge and fighting epistemic injustice which has seized educational, political and cultural systems. However, this broader literary representation of war reveals deeper social, political and psychological complexities as well as anxieties of Indians and Indian colonial experience and the implications this had on how the imperialism and war were lived and perceived.

4. Earlier Narratives of War by Indian Writers

Narratives of war in English have been narrowed down to the British soldier’s experience, however, it is important to mention that there are accounts of war experience coming from different genres (novels and short stories, poems, plays and songs) in India’s rich literary tradition and written in Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and other Indian languages. In his book, *India, Empire and First World War Culture – Writings, Image, and Songs* Das traces Indian narratives of war through Rabindranath Tagore’s poems “Is it the Destroyer who comes?” and “The Trumpet” both written in 1914, his sister, Swarnakumari Devi’s 1919 short story “Mutiny”, Sharma Guleri’s 1916 story “Usne Haka Tha”, which was later adapted to film in 1960 and Kazi Nazrul Islam, known as the “soldier poet” because he trained as a soldier, although he never went to war who in 1924 wrote the short story “Rikter Vedan” (The Destitute) and in 1927 wrote the novel *Bandhan-Hara* (The Unfettered).

These narratives bring to light different themes from martial imagery to narratives of resistance and queer fantasies as part of war narratives (Das). However, even though there were war narratives coming out of India, the absence in this representation of non-European experience of the war remained. Most African and Indian recruits were not able to voice their own experiences, so their stories have been buried with them. But even those who were able to speak out on the war, their narratives nevertheless remained silenced and absent from curricula due to linguistic segregation. It was the colonial language(s) that predominated in these narratives, English or French, while others, like the themes they were voicing, became victims of the silence, the absence and the amnesia they were subjected to. War stories were in the hands of master narratives from which the Indian or African recruit was systematically excluded. To quote the archaeologist Tashin Bey in *A God in Every Stone* “Ladies and Gentlemen, if we lower our voices we might be able to hear them” [1]. He is referring to the “weary footsteps” of the ancient Carian army “as they drag themselves and their wounded brothers”

[1]. An analogy can be made to World War I: if we lower the voice of dominant narratives we too can hear the wounded Indian soldiers and grief of the families who waited for them.

In more recent years, war literature has welcomed the narratives of the recruits from the former colonies, and not only of soldiers, but also civilians, women, children, and these narratives are being read, translated, and acknowledged on a global scale. The International Booker in 2021 was awarded to a Senegalese writer David Diop for his powerful and intensely poetic novel *At Night All Blood is Black* which provides a violent tale of the traumatic experience of the *askari*, while the Nobel Prize for Literature, also in 2021, was awarded to Tanzanian writer, and retired professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at Kent University, Abdulrazak Gurnah whose novels focus on the themes of colonialism, war and refugees. Both these writers, as well as Andrea Levy who in 2014 wrote the short story “Uriah’s War”, dealing with Jamaican recruits (non-combatants) in the war, for the centenary of WWI, and Kamila Shamsie, are authors who have contributed to a rewriting and decolonising of war narratives. They are telling the stories of recruits and civilians, who participated in the War, but whose narratives have been removed from formal historical accounts of the war. By filling this absence, this hole in the representation of WWI with stories of Indian, Senegalese, West African or Jamaican recruits, a more complete version of history begins to take shape. To quote Das, “the contours of the ‘Great War and modern memory’ start to look different if instead of writings of an ordinary European soldier (...) we take the memories of an Indian sepoy, a Chinese worker or an African *askari*” [12].

5. Digging into the Past

In Das’ writing on this subject, there are many allusions to the uncovering of truth, to the digging up of memories, to the reconstruction of historical spaces which is possible through this investigation into the past. As he writes:

Sources, whether an object, a photograph or a painting, are not just used as bedrocks to facilitate the flow of narrative but are dredged up, scrubbed and inspected in all the grit and multidimensionality. Photographs, sketches, paintings, poems, short stories and novels are here recruited not to serve as history by proxy but to open up through their poetics a more complex psychological and sensuous space. [12].

Coincidentally, the female protagonist, Vivian Rose, in *A God in Every Stone* is an archaeologist, physically and metaphorically digging into the past, wanting to discover the pieces, the ancient artefacts, she knows are missing from history and eager to expand her knowledge and gain proximity to the culture and history of what is today Turkey, Pakistan and India through her archaeological investigation of Ancient Caria. This shows that the novel is not only a story of the Indian troops who fought with the imperial forces in WWI, but also an “excavation” into the past to better understand the present, where Shamsie layers ancient history, the experience

of war with the history of the country's nationalist struggle for independence from imperial domination. *The Guardian* called it "an evocation of the past." Through fictional content, the novel explores different themes in Indian history, Indian-British colonial relations, cultural differences and encounters, loyalty and betrayal. To quote a review from the *Financial Times*.

The divided loyalties of imperial subjects is one of the recurring themes of Shamsie's novel. It is examined not only in the context of the British Raj, but also through classical Greece and ancient Persia via the archaeological backdrop. When war breaks out Viv is hustled back to London by the British authorities. Working as a nurse in war-torn England, Viv, not realising the implications, reveals Tahsin's secret disaffection to the British war authorities. [13]

Whereas the relations between Indians and the British generated mixed feelings of loyalty and trust, as Vivian says, "there is a... a compact between us, the Indians and the English. We'll honour their bravery as we would that of an English soldier and, in turn, they fight our wars with as much fervour as any Englishman would do" [1], the Ottoman Empire didn't have the loyalty of the Armenians. When visited by a "gentleman from the War Office of the Ottoman authorities, Vivian makes the mistake of revealing that Tashin Bey is Armenian. Nevertheless, this sense of loyalty and need to prove bravery on the part of the Indians was not widespread and common to all the ethnic groups or so-called "martial races". *A God in Every Stone* shows that even though the Indians wanted independence many were afraid to revolt against the English. Qayyum reflects on the fact that "the English would not act gently with Indian soldiers who sided with revolutionaries. No one had forgotten 1857, or even 1915" [1].

In a 2018 article "Trench Brothers: an ode to whitewashed war heroes" for *The Guardian* Kamila Shamsie reviewed "Trench Brothers", a project aimed at expanding knowledge of WWI by focusing on the experience of minority soldiers in the War. By involving 50 schools, the project planned to give school children a more inclusive understanding of the war and the non-British men who fought on the Eastern and Western fronts. The importance of this type of initiative is that it unburied or recovered what has been lost or deliberately omitted from common knowledge of the war and brings to the classroom stories which, "until recently, [their stories] have been almost completely whitewashed from history." [14] And returning to Santanu Das' claim that the Indian sepoys "have been doomed to wander in the no man's land" [12]. Not only is "no man's land" a direct reference to WWI, since it was area that separated German trenches from the Ally's, but the use of the term is also metaphorical since "no man's land" also refers to a shady, undefined area or an area which is unowned. Both metaphorical uses of the terms are applicable to the Indian presence in the war and how it has been historically acknowledged.

It was only recently that literature in English became a

space for representation of the Indian recruit giving historical depth and insight into the sepoy experience and anxieties. With Mulk Raj Anand's War Trilogy and particularly *Across the Black Waters* the non-European, non-white man's experience of war was for the first time written about in English. Anand's *Across the Black Waters* published in 1939 is considered the first Indian War novel. Anand intended to give voice to the experience of Indian sepoys (not all earlier writers included the sepoy in the narratives – Tagore, for example didn't). According to Das, "Defying categorizations as a 'First -' or 'Third -' World text, *Across the Black Waters* blurs the boundaries between travelogue, trench narrative, indigenous and Anglophone novel in the early epoch of its flowering" [12]. Anand initiates the correcting of history, by speaking of India's participation and it is one of few Anglophone novels to address non-white experience of war.

Kamila Shamsie, following in Anand's tradition further voices the experience of the Indian sepoy in *A God in Every Stone* and tells of individual experience at a deeper, more personal, private level. Fiction opens these new spaces for representation, for commonality and for agency: historical, political, narrative. Even though the sepoys did not write their own narratives, their suffering, their transgressions, and their anxieties are represented in the novel. And these experiences are based on stories passed down through generations, on letters, diaries, photographs and recordings. The referred transgressions give agency to Kalam and Quayyum and as they play out their queer fantasies, to the white English nurse treating the wounded Indian soldier and to the Indian soldier and his fantasies as he lies in a hospital in England and is treated by a white female nurse, "it was astonishing how easy the nurses here made it to be in the presence of a woman who wasn't mother or sister or wife" [1], and finally to an English woman befriending and tutoring an Indian boy. Most of these transgressive acts are possible since they occur in no-man's land. According to Buck, "the war occasioned a massive "transcontinental military migration" that created cross-racial and cross-cultural encounters in Europe and other war zones (Koller 114)" [8]. As a result of these cultural encounters "the potential for new identities, transnational or transcultural brings new considerations of the war's role in postwar independence and anticolonial movements and the histories of postindependence societies" [8]. What happened in WWI during that period and in its aftermath is not an imagined space, but for agency and voice to be restored to those who have been silenced, it is necessary to reimagine their stories, to write their narratives and to open the debate to new understandings of war.

6. Absence and Amnesia

Indian recruits have been victims of this amnesia that Das talks about. Considering that the world has by now lost all its WWI veterans and is moving in the direction of a greater forgetting, it is fundamental that the collective memory of

those who fought, endured, were wounded, and died in the war, lives on through the narratives. At this moment of emergency at the risk of disappearing forever, the memory of those who have been silenced needs to be 'resurrected' to quote Walter Benjamin, "the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one" [15]. In Benjamin's words, to speak of the past means to hold onto its memories to ensure these are not forever lost, placing knowledge and articulation of the past in the hands of the 'ruling class'. "For every image of the past which is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear forever" [15]. This reflection on the past is essential to the discussion on Indian presence in the war. Placing Benjamin at the heart of Shamsie's novel, a soldier at Aubers Ridge asks Qayyum, "Do you think one day they'll stories about us in the Street of Storytellers?" [1].

The silence, the amnesia, the absence, the gaps, take on deeper – more political and ideological - contours when we consider what the Indian and African recruits or civilians experienced but were unable to voice or share either because they were unable to or as a result of death. As Gurnah's narrator in *After Lives* keeps repeating when war breaks out, inhabitants were being killed in towns but "no one bothered to count afterwards" [16]. "The carriers died in huge numbers from malaria and dysentery and exhaustion, and no one bothered to count them" [16] and "all of the askari who had joined up at the same time as Hamza were either dead or missing or captured" [16] and yet no one bothered to count them. Most of these men were not literate. Their stories are known through a study of artefacts such as photographs, diaries, recordings, songs, letters, as Das has argued as well as other personal objects which aid in the reconstruction of the recruits' narratives.

In *A God in Every Stone* letter writing, photographs, different artefacts, or fragments which have been passed down through generations are relevant to the story. As Buck contends, "letters offer rich opportunities to consider colonialism as well as war as a context for questions of authorship, reading, translation and interpretation" [8]. Most letters were not written by the recruits themselves but by scribes. Qayyum would write letters for his fellow recruits while in France, after his injury and having been moved to Brighton he continued writing for the wounded at the hospital. And when he received letters from Kalam Khan.

Qayyum wondered who had written Kalam's words for him now that he wasn't there to do it, and if the letter writer left anything out. Qayyum recognised a process of selection as part of his own duty as letter-writer to the wounded, unlettered men at the Pavilion. So many of them asked him to write home for God's sake don't don't don't allow my brother, my cousin anyone from our village to sign up. Such words would never get past the censors, and they would reflect poorly on the Indian troops who had been trusted to come halfway round the world to fight for their king though there were many in

England who thought their loyalty would fail the challenge. [1]

Not only were these men's experiences silenced and marginalised, but also censored and distorted. Returning once again to the archaeology of absence, these letters are mere pieces of what the recruits wanted to say but which they had silenced. "Given their multiple sites of textuality, these letters are perhaps best read as palimpsests where underneath accretions by different agencies, traces of the sepoy's original intent remain" [10].

Furthermore, there is also the question of whose war the Indians were fighting and what choice or agency did they have to choose their own destiny? Whose land, nation or Empire were they fighting and dying for? As Qayyum says, "If a man is to die defending a land let the land be his land, the people his people" [1], but it wasn't. This mixed feeling towards the war began with intellectuals of the early 20th century such as the Tagores, who developed a growing consciousness of the inequalities of imperialism and on national pride. It was in Bengal that the first mutiny against the war took place which led to the British excluding Bengalis from the martial races that could be recruited for war. There are other theories to explain the silence and possible complicity of the Indian sepoy. For one, as argued by Das, "within colonial and post-colonial studies, scholars have powerfully drawn attention to the 'psychological damage' wrought by colonialism, showing how the imperial racist hierarchy is often internalised by the colonised, resulting in the corrosion of self-esteem and confidence" [7]. The opportunity to fight in the war was seen as dignified way of proving loyalty to Britain, following the mutiny, and to show bravery. On the other hand, Amitav Ghosh claims that, for the Indian sepoy, "mutiny always simmered beneath the surface" and he interprets the silence as a form of resistance stating, "in a sense the sepoy was himself complicit in this neglect." [17] The silence stands for his victimhood but also for his resistance. To have voiced his experience would have been to speak about the unspeakable, and therefore to fulfil his duty acknowledging his position as a soldier of Empire.

7. Conclusion

Representations, perspectives and knowledge of the war are changing. As argued by Das:

The colour of First World War memory in Britain today is no longer white; the Indian sepoys have in recent years been more visible than ever before. Indeed, an inspection of the sepoy-story may help us to ask some of the deeper questions about commemoration itself: what do we mean by the term, whose memory are we talking about, and why and in what form do we seek to remember? [12].

Perspectives now include the experience of the sepoy, the askari, the carriers, the servicemen and many others whose lives were affected and forever changed by the war. However, the archaeological symbolism in *A God in Every Stone* alludes

to the fact that there is still much to be uncovered, learned and written about this past. With every stone that is lifted, a new part of the (hi)story is uncovered. “The soil was dense, the work slow. From sunrise until mid-morning Najeeb and his team of men dug through history. A few feet down there was a face of bone, which made the men touch their cheekbones and nose, as if considering for the first time their own faces” [1]. Recognising that there are many missing pieces to the version of the war that has been told is acknowledging that it was in fact a *world* war. Amnesia implies that memory has been partially or totally lost but, it can be retrieved. Even though following the end of WWI India gained Independence from Britain, colonial legacies persist in many spheres of action including education, politics and culture. The decolonising of English literature and the rewriting of history contribute to putting an end to epistemic injustice. Afterall, as Tashin Bey tells Vivian, “All empires end” [1].

Abbreviations

WWI World War I

Author Contributions

Margarida Pereira Martins is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

This work is financed by national funds through the FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of the projects UIDB/00114/2020 and UIDP/00114/2020.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Shamsie, Kamila. *A God in Every Stone*. London: Bloomsbury; 2014, p. 52, 17, 40, 257, 67, 59, 68-69, 256, 243, 29.
- [2] Rushdie, Salman. “Imaginary Homelands.” *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage; 2010, p. 12.
- [3] Smith, Zadie. “Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction.” *The New York Review of Books*; 2019; [3].
- [4] Gurnah, Abdulrazak. Nobel Lecture. 2021 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/gurnah/lecture/>
- [5] The Guardian. “Nobel winner Abdulrazak Gurnah says ‘writing cannot be just about polemics.’”. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/dec/08/nobel-winner-abdulrazak-gurnah-says-writing-cannot-be-just-about-polemics> [Accessed 3 April 2024].
- [6] The New Yorker. “A Nobel Laureate Revisits the Great War’s African Front”. Available from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/10/24/a-nobel-laureate-revisits-the-great-wars-african-front> [Accessed 3 April 2024].
- [7] Das, Santanu “Introduction.” *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*. Edited by Santanu Das. Cambridge University Press; 2011. 1 – 31, p. 70.
- [8] Buck, Claire. “The “World” in World War I. Learning to Think Globally.” *Teaching Representations of the First World War*. Eds. Debra Rae Cohen and Douglas Higbee. Modern Language Association of America; 2017, kindle.
- [9] Shamsie, Kamila. *Home fire*. London: Bloomsbury; 2017, p. 62.
- [10] Cohen, Debra Rae; Higbee, Douglas. “Introduction.” *Teaching Representations of the First World War*. Modern Language Association of America; 2017, kindle.
- [11] Rothberg, Michael. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators (Cultural Memory in the Present)*. California, Stanford University Press, p. 1.
- [12] Das, Santanu. *India, Empire and First World War Culture – Writings, Image, and Songs*. Cambridge University Press; 2018, [16, 1-2, 25, 16, 347, 82, 406].
- [13] Financial Times “A God in Every Stone’, by Kamila Shamsie”. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/ae479ebc-c3ba-11e3-870b-00144feabd0> [Accessed 3 April 2024]
- [14] The Guardian. “Kamila Shamsie on Trench Brothers: an ode to whitewashed war heroes.” Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/oct/16/kamila-shamsie-trench-brothersbrighton-first-world-war> [Accessed 3.04.2024]
- [15] Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on The Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York; Schocken Books; 1968, p. 254.
- [16] Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Afterlives*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing; 2021 p. 90, 91, 92.
- [17] Ghosh, Amitav “The Way of the Sepoy.” *Foreword from If I die, who will remember me? India and the First World War*. Vedica Kant. Delhi: Roli Books, 2014.