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# Silence and the Limitations of Contextual Objectivity

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## CONVERSATIONS

What are feminist forms of writing/speaking/viewing and how do they make a difference to international feminist theory, practice and politics? The 'Conversations' section of *IFjP* offers a place in which to experiment with feminist narrative, dialogical and visual forms. Submissions are sought that make strong theoretical and/or practical contributions to feminist debates without necessarily taking standard academic form. Interviews, poetry, film readings, photo essays and exchanges of letters are some of the forms this section promotes. Submissions and submission enquiries should be directed to both Conversations editors:

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## SILENCE AND THE LIMITATIONS OF CONTEXTUAL OBJECTIVITY

**Catherine Hundleby**

University of Windsor, Canada

Contemporary democratic models of objectivity treat the historical development of the concept ‘objectivity’ in aperspectival terms. That version of objectivity gained currency in the nineteenth century, and as Lorraine Daston (1992) argues, it recommends that people transcend personal idiosyncrasies as they would to make moral and aesthetic judgments. Yet, eliminating subjectivity, or what Helen Longino (1990) describes as the influence of ‘contextual values,’ may be impossible. Many feminist epistemologists suggest that although we may not escape from our own perspectives, we can address the ways in which our perspectives influence our understandings. Alternative standards of objectivity that are sensitive to feminist and other liberatory concerns can arise through the critical discourse of the scientific community, as Longino argues (1990), or through individuals actively seeking out and promoting the interests of groups of people who are outsiders to science, as posited by Sandra Harding (1993).

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I will return to Harding’s view only at the end of this paper because I find her feminist formulation of objectivity problematic as it does not account for communication, and I will focus on Longino’s argument that objectivity depends on the level of a community’s openness and fostering of critical discourse. Longino’s approach I call ‘contextual objectivity’ because it shifts the locus of agency from the individual person to the social or communal context, and because Longino describes her empiricism as ‘contextual empiricism’. Like individualistic aperspectival

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accounts, contextual objectivity depends on a standard of *communicability* rather than the standard of skill that earlier claims of objectivity authorized (Daston, 1992). For a communicability that centralizes communal agency, individuals must express verbally whatever they understand, including their observations, conjectures, doubts, and agreements. A context that encourages scientists' desire to and ability to disclose their understandings, a culture of disclosure, is required for the operation of Longino's (1990) version and other democratic versions of objectivity, notably Harding's but also Michael Polanyi's 'The Republic of Science' (1962). Polanyi argues that freedom of exchanging ideas and judgments in scientific communities is akin to general liberties in a democratic community and more vital than freedom of exchanging goods in economic communities.

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The rhetorical environment that promotes disclosure resembles how conversations generally function in the global North, especially North America and Europe, but is otherwise somewhat unique to scientific communities and other institutions that emulate scientific objectivity. The culture of disclosure contrasts with at least some of the other cultures in which people operate, where silence has a wider range of meanings. The restricted significance that cultures of disclosure accord to silence indicate limits to the cognitive value of objectivity which is further compounded by the ways in which powerful people and communities, that include scientists and science, can benefit and may be benefiting from the ways silence operates as a form of oppression.

Although the significance of silence is itself rarely clear, attention to the rhetorical functions of silence throws into relief the value of objectivity. The uniqueness of the scientific culture of

disclosure indicates limits to the objectivity it makes possible, and to any institution that seeks objectivity. These limitations depend on formal and informal standards of what is relevant to a particular empirical discourse that distinguish what scientists and their subjects must disclose from those about which they should be silent. Silence thus signifies an evaluation of some piece of communication ~~— a hypothesis, finding or interpretation — as irrelevant~~. However, what counts as relevant and what could constitute a view that can achieve a perspectival objectivity can only be meanings that are disclosed through explicit communication. This system of building understanding ignores other meanings that silence can have, including the ways that silence is complicit in oppression. The operation of other meanings of silence, including subjugating forms, go unrecognized behind cultural protocols that attribute value only to perspectives that are disclosed. Some of the other meanings that silence can have include *dissent*, ~~which~~ supports the critical discourse that provides contextual and other democratic forms of objectivity. So, the scientific and quasi-scientific protocols intended to foster objectivity can, ironically, stifle sources for the diversity of perspectives and objectivity itself.

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### **Disclosure Serves Objectivity**

The objectivity of a belief depends, in Longino's account, on its production by critical discourse. The publicity of information and informed dissent makes epistemic progress possible; and it depends on there being a culture that values disclosure.

On any topic, whether scientific or less empirical, the *availability* of conflicting perspectives is necessary for objectivity as understood by Longino (1990: 75-6). She explains how objectivity accrues through scientific discourse:

Publication in a journal does not make an idea or result a brick in the edifice of knowledge. Its absorption is a much more complex process, involving such things as subsequent citation, use and modification by others, et cetera. Experimental data and hypotheses are transformed through the conflict and integration of a variety of points of view into what is ultimately accepted as scientific knowledge.

(Longino 1990: 69)

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Therefore, ‘the greater the number of different points of view included in a given community, the more likely it is that its scientific practice will be objective’ (1990: 80). The beliefs resulting from scientific practice and the individual people engaged in the practice gain objectivity only insofar as that practice engages with criticism. Objectivity becomes possible through participation in an appropriately structured community, and particular beliefs and people have objectivity to the extent that they arise from or engage in such a community.<sup>1</sup> Longino admits that the criticism that supposedly makes possible objectivity does not obtain for some forms of understanding, including the mystical or emotional, which lack the necessary *logical publicity*. The medium of a common language and the purported existence of objects independent of individual subjective experience provide the shared environment. The common language and ontology make criticism salient, permitting understanding that transcends individual subjectivity (Longino 1990: 70). In this environment, scientists explore alternative theories, conflicting

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evidence, and various social projects, such as alternative fuels, genetic engineering, and the education of children.

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However, the availability of a discursive medium constituted through a common language and ontology is not sufficient for objectivity. The progress of the discourse depends on critical engagement and hence on scientists sharing with each other any dissenting opinions and

conflicting observations. This expectation of disclosure in science is evident from the scandals

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about scientists keeping secrets and failing to disclose their findings, including the long history

of the tobacco industry. There are also more isolated instances, like the 1996 Nancy Olivieri case

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in Toronto, in which drug manufacturer [Apotex](#) suppressed research findings made by Dr.

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Olivieri at the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children [\(CBC News, October 27, 2001\)](#), and their

[continued efforts to keep her from discussing the drug \(CAUT Bulletin, January 2009\)](#). Often,

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scandals about silence in science depend on moral concerns, such as about whose health

decisions might be ill-served because of such incomplete research. Yet, there are also epistemic

problems with silence in science, regarding both ~~the~~ basic function of science to provide

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education and access to the truth, and its dependence on critical dialogue to provide the objective

understanding that Longino describes.

Scandals stem from violations of rhetorical assumptions about the significance of silence,

notably that silence should indicate only the irrelevance of or unimportance of an observation,

theory, or evaluation. Indeed, a background of silence regarding some matters is part of the

environment that provides focus for the critical discussion.

## Protocols of Silence and Disclosure

Contextual objectivity depends on criticism fostered by scientific protocols that demand ongoing disclosure of findings and uptake of others' results. Yet, the demands for disclosure are limited, and individual scientists choose to remain silent and impose silence for various reasons, especially because they judge a particular observation, finding or interpretation to be irrelevant. Whereas in personal relationships the appropriateness of disclosure is constantly open to negotiation, in science silence becomes institutionalized, regularly denoting judgments of epistemological irrelevance.

Silence about certain matters demarcates scientific discourse. Scientists never reveal everything that they know or believe, and much personal baggage and belief is left at the laboratory door.

To note the separation of science from the rest of the community is not, however, to support the outdated view that science is distinguished from non-science by reasoning that involves *no*

background assumptions (Longino 1990: 45). Clearly, all people have beliefs that orient their scientific work, but some people have beliefs that directly conflict with that work. Witness

creationists who work in biology where they make regular use of the theory of evolution by

natural selection. Also, beliefs that do not directly conflict with scientific assumptions are kept

silent: personal views and thoughts — regarding one's children's progress in school, or a bad

haircut — are put out of one's mind and kept out of conversation.<sup>2</sup> Sharing beliefs or

experiences that are not pertinent to the task at hand would be problematic in many ways. After

all, in no context ought people to express every passing thought.

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The boundaries within which scientists expect disclosure from each other are fairly rigid, or at least regular. Laboratory operations, conference procedures, publication demands and legal restrictions on intellectual property establish requirements for silence and disclosure. This can take at least two of the forms of silence identified by Rae Langton (1993), as illustrated in the following examples. First, editors decide who gets to publish, what gets published and what does not, a straightforward locutionary silencing that must occur in some form to maintain standards for communication. Second, laboratory heads give praise, resources or other encouragement to some people rather than to others, thus effectively silencing the others in a perlocutionary manner.<sup>3</sup> These forms of silencing escape notice because they are part of regular scientific procedures. Similar regularity defines general academic discourse and other institutionalized forms of inquiry. For instance, the audience in an academic presentation must remain silent unless and until the chair of the session invites questions and comments. In legal environments and businesses, likewise, specific laws and contracts govern what is disclosed and what kept silent. These are chosen rather than imposed silences, and indicate respect and sometimes agreement, rather than mere deference.

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What warrants disclosure in a particular discourse depends ultimately on decisions made by people — in science, by the referees, editors, publishers and administrators of various sorts. They consider convention as well as perceived interest from scientists themselves, who also aim to follow the standards that the others set; so the evaluations have coherence, a potentially virtuous circularity. Epistemological values such as simplicity, precision, theoretical fruitfulness<sup>4</sup> and objectivity itself, as well as market and technological potential, inform both traditional and

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particular subjective perceptions of relevance.<sup>5</sup> Social coherence extends diachronically too, because both conventional and personal evaluations take guidance from past practice in deciding what deserves utterance.

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By contrast, expectations regarding disclosure are not so clear outside of institutions, in personal relationships, where the reasons for sharing beliefs and the extent to which they are shared varies indefinitely, and can be negotiated and renegotiated. The range of disclosure can be extensive in family and friendship; we expect the truth from each other in many contexts. However, the type of disclosure is negotiable, and requests for disclosure test existing social relationships, sometimes stretch, and even disrupt them. To request that another person share his or her experience or opinion is to request a confirmation or perhaps a reconfiguring of the characteristics of the relationship, to clarify or set new bounds for existing expectations of silence and sharing. If I ask that you to tell me about your date last week, it may be just a prompt, noting that I expect that sort of disclosure in our friendship; or it can be a request for a new form of intimacy between us, a change in our relationship, especially if I press the matter.

Regularity distinguishes the bounds of disclosure in science because, from schools and intellectual societies to businesses, science operates as an *institution*, a formal social environment. Science also collaborates with other institutions, such as cities, countries and not-specifically scientific businesses in which people have different but equally regular and regulated expectations of disclosure from each other. Our participation in these formal communities entails that they may demand to learn things from us, e.g., in the form of subpoenas, status reports, and job descriptions. Such protocols hold for any and all communities and organizations

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that pursue inquiry and develop knowledge, though perhaps especially in legal environments. Indeed, the epistemic functioning of a group, its ability to generate knowledge, may depend on its scientific status. The objectivity of any community requires quasi-scientific protocols of disclosure, instituted for instance through laws, collective agreements, and contracts. The choice to disclose is not negotiable on an ongoing basis, in contrast to personal and informal relationships where the choice may be ad hoc. Explicit communication marks the potential for the aperspectival objectivity valued by communities that operate as epistemic agents.

Despite the commonality that science has with other institutions that develop aperspectival objectivity, and given that all institutions must to some extent, develop knowledge, the expectation that scientists will disclose specific findings, theories, hypotheses and conclusions does hold to the same extent in other institutions. Scientific reports *demand* engagement in the sense that uptake marks scientific status and success, whereas legal testimony and business reports frequently receive a silence of authoritative acceptance or simple respect. When a scientific report receives neither challenges nor citation people accord it no significance.

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Silence, both from scientific investigators and sometimes from their subjects, covers whatever those individuals deem to be irrelevant to the goal of objectivity, according to the standards upheld by that particular (disciplinary, subdisciplinary or laboratory) community. So, the expectation of disclosure regarding whatever is deemed relevant and the provision of corresponding uptake (also a form of disclosure) limit the recognized functions of silences and thus minimize the ambiguity and vagueness it brings. Outside of institutions, no clear protocols determine which observations and insights are relevant to disclose. Common etiquette is more

flexible than the sorts of regulation that guide scientific discourse. Generally in relationships among people and communities that are not centrally concerned with the development of objectivity, disclosure depends on a perceived 'need to know'. Various positive motivations, from encouraging intimacy to expressing cooperation, encourage the sharing of understanding, by contrast to withholding information that might be valuable to others when competing with them or wish them not to succeed. Admittedly, competition among scientists also encourages premature publication and falsification of data, which undermines the quality of scientific discourse, but such behaviour is exceptional. The generally characteristic lack of competition among scientists, in view of their shared project of creating knowledge and specific shared investigations, grounds the scientific mandate to require disclosure, and provides a specifically limited context for interpreting silence.

The appropriateness and meaningfulness of disclosure depends substantially on the particular social environment, and how institutionalized it is. The more institutionalized are the practices regarding silence and disclosure, the more clear and the less negotiable they are. So, as well as science having an epistemic and specifically empirical focus, disclosure distinguishes scientific communities among others to the extent that protocols define which sorts of information its members exchange. These protocols of disclosure make sharing information an obligation and having it requested a distinguishing honour.

### **The Power of Silence and Silencing**

Expressing one's own view may or may not be valued or required outside of institutions that seek objectivity. Especially outside of science **other explicit goals such justice** but even within science less official goals such as prudence or politics may be as important as objectivity.

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Intentions of all sorts can be conveyed without verbal expression. Silence can be a way of expressing respect or deference, in addition to how it can express a passive regard that includes agreement. It can also indicate disagreement or denial, but in any case both the attitude and the

object of the attitude → what is agreed on or resisted → tends to be ambiguous. Even clear indications of irrelevance signified by silence are complicated matters, each with a wide range of possible implications. For these reasons, being silent or imposing silence can serve various strategic purposes, as Cheryl Glenn argues in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (2004: 4-5).

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'Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power. It all depends ... In our talkative Western culture ... speech is synonymous with civilization itself and ... silence-as-obedience is frequently rewarded' (Glenn 2004: xi, xii). Thus, I suggest that our Western science may benefit from considering the ways that silence may not mean acceptance or even the passivity that comes to pass as acceptance. Perhaps, silence may be a strategy that resists current scientific practices and, understanding such resistance would serve objectivity by contributing to the critical discourse. In all contexts, silence interrupts discourse and thus control over silence depends on and provides power, affecting not only who can be silent and who must be silent, but also what their silences mean. In order for keeping silence to be meaningful in some form, it is presumed that speech is crucial, and those who already have power can refuse to grant meaningfulness to a silence. *In any culture*, those in power retain the right to decide who speaks, and who is silent. So, silence can be a form of oppression (Glenn 2004) because it can restrict one group of people in the service of another (Frye 1983).

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Science institutionalizes the norms of conversation, and conversation implies equality: no interruptions, taking turns and no silence (Glenn 2004). By contrast, positions of power, such as in science, provide monopolies over the floor and the topics, and also provide the prerogative to remain silent at will. For instance, contemporary science ignores eugenics for moral reasons, but capitalist science also ignores cries for socially equitable technologies. The power science has to ignore these issues and judge them to be irrelevant shows how it controls the significance of silence.

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Using silence effectively depends on power; whether one chooses one's own silence or imposes it on another. The legal right of individuals to remain silent is important because silence provides power, or the ability to resist power. Glenn argues that the power of silence is demonstrated by the ways that former US President Bill Clinton demanded the right to be silent about his marital infidelities, and in turn his wife received the authority to defend him. On the other hand, silence can be imposed: judges can require silence; and although women may speak more often than men, women are more frequently interrupted (Glenn 2004: 21-43). Consider how Monica Lewinsky was legally silenced, and Clinton's other partners were criticized for coming forward (Glenn 2004: 77-106). Further, consider Anita Hill's compelled testimony for the US Senate Judiciary Committee about sexual harassment by her supervisor Clarence Thomas.<sup>6</sup> Her choice to be silent for ten years was treated as evidence of her dishonesty, although the type of public humiliation and threatened loss of employment she subsequently endured obviously discourages anyone from disclosing sexual harassment (Glenn 2004: 52-76). In addition to Glenn's publicly political examples, feminists have argued that many private activities, such as the production and

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consumption of pornography, are political because they silence women (Langton 1993). This silence may be a form of oppression, but it could also be a form of resistance: its significance depends on how people with power interpret it. We can only effectively employ silence to the extent that we already have degrees of power. Therefore, gender, race and class affect the ability to retreat into silence or impose it. Retreating to protect oneself from attack of various kinds is possible, even though silence does not always provide or signal safety, and although others may impose silence as a means of control. Silence can also be a *symptom* of oppression: because and insofar as it is a sign that people feel vulnerable; but it can also be part of the *protocol* of oppression, a way of *making* a group of people vulnerable (Glenn 2004: 43-8).

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The multiple ambiguities of silence affect how people from European cultures, for instance, tend to view non-European peoples such as those of First Nations. The 'noble, silent Indian' is a familiar figure. This image is not completely a false stereotype, for native American cultures do not embrace the 'Greek rhetorical tradition of public, political display' and Western writing practices based on dialectic, argument and debate (Glenn 2004: 113). So, silences from First Nations people seem strange and prominent to those of us immersed in culture derived from the European enlightenment. Consider how European cultures employ titles, such as 'sir' and 'ma'am', to demonstrate respect, whereas many natives of the American Southwest use silence and teach silence to children as a way to communicate the same respect. That in these native cultures silence can also indicate an indifference that is familiar to Europeans (Glenn 2004: 148-9), only multiplies the ambiguities of silence.

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Failure to share one's opinion or perspective may mean things quite different from what scientific discourse assumes: instead of agreement or disinterest, it may indicate respect; or it may indicate submission and oppression. Politeness or deference, and even fear, can mask dissent. Silence does not always indicate passive agreement or lack of understanding, even in a heavily structured context that demands disclosure.

### **The Awkwardness in a Context/Culture of Disclosure**

Dissenters may feel threatened, especially if the dissent in any way resonates with their membership in a social minority → as women may dissent from sexism, and they may retreat into the relative safety of silence (Glenn 2004). Further, many scientists at home in the culture of disclosure, including as a result of their successful scientific training, will have difficulty understanding and recognizing the ambiguities surrounding silence from the social margins because of the authority of the scientific interpretation. This problem is exacerbated if their scientific training dovetails with their own European background. These arguments about scientists apply to other people in quasi-scientific communities and within the larger public context to the extent that they engage in a culture of disclosure. We are thwarted in achieving a perspectival objective beliefs by the uniformity of our training, and our own authority, and by the psychology of communal practice. Regardless of individual backgrounds, and whether objectivity is their goal, members of any group tend to conform in belief, a general phenomenon that is increased by scientific acceptance of that belief. The implication of the testing of a theory depends on the existing alternative theories, and the uniformity of scientists' views impedes the

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development of alternatives and of the potential for a perspectival objectivity. This regressive tendency can, however, be counteracted by attention to the rhetorical significance of silence.

The assumption that scientists have common personal backgrounds is warranted to the extent that they share similar training; so, ignoring that assumption is efficient and streamlines discourse. Yet it also prevents interrogation of the assumption, which could enable us to recognize the effect of personal backgrounds and histories. Ignoring scientists' backgrounds and personal subjectivities encourages false assumptions, and discourages consideration of the cultural/personal formations and their approach to engagement.

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It can be very difficult to scrutinize or even recognize assumptions in mainstream science. Cognitive psychology reveals that people seek out like-minded views and avoid dissenting views, a tendency known as the 'confirmation bias'. In addition, when people in a group share the same biases, they are likely to reinforce each other's bias (Kornblith 1995). On top of these overdeterminations of background assumptions common to all shared views, scientific practice reinforces shared biases, as Kathleen Okruhlik (1995) argues, because thorough testing of scientific theories only entrenches sociopolitical assumptions if that testing is never against theories supported by contrasting beliefs. So, if only men in patriarchal cultures develop scientific theories, the result will be sexist science. Even if the culture is more diverse, as it certainly is, the confirmation bias entails that dissenting views are rarely *considered*. The result is that science tends to preserve existing dominant background views. Although nonsexist views may be available in a scientific culture with a patriarchal heritage, they are unlikely to receive serious consideration, and likely to be silent or silenced.

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How do we counteract the regressive invisibility of background assumptions and how these assumptions draw on and contribute to misunderstandings of silence? Interaction between scientific and other communities (i.e., ethnic cultures and genders) can provide valuable diversity in understanding and challenging assumptions to counteract the confirmation bias. Western scientists have fairly uniform training complete with the European rhetorical heritage. These people deal not only with each other, however; they also deal with research ethicists, lawyers, and plumbers, all of whom may be better able than scientists to critique background assumptions because they are less vulnerable to the homogenizing social dynamics of cognition and scientific practice. These other people and these other dimensions of individual scientists can contribute to the critical discourse, and allow us to evaluate the extent and importance of objectivity. Sometimes the most distant perspective may provide the most useful criticism. For instance, few people are willing to challenge the taboo against scientific explorations of eugenics. Yet this silence hides the eugenic implications of the scientific money and effort currently flowing into reproductive technologies. Such science serves the wealthy, Whites, Westerners, the able-bodied and males (though not exclusively heterosexuals), which is clear from a poor, dark-skinned, Southern disabled women's perspective. Yet there is no way to simply adopt distant perspectives in order to understand the silences in our discourses. We need to interpret silence *beforehand*, in order to 'think from the perspectives of other "others"' (Harding 1993).

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Science's critical environment comes at a cost. Because silencing, or imposing silence, can be hurtful, a form of domination, regular protocols of silence are neither generally benign nor are they beneficial; they are likely to reinforce the oppressive aspects of science and quasi-scientific

discourses. The power of science to control the significance of silence is inflected with privileges of gender, race, class, and along other axes of oppression. The international and cross-cultural prestige of science combined with its assumption of ongoing disclosure and uptake suggest that science has special impacts on and may help constitute the ways that silence contributes to oppression. Scientific research may (1) misinterpret silence among scientists, or from subjects, or from the public as indicating agreement or disinterest ~~→ in science itself or in whatever issues~~ are being studied; and may (2) impose silence by speaking for people, again both inside and outside of science, rather than letting them speak for themselves. Together, these imply that scientific enculturation inclines people to interpret imposed silence as agreement or disinterest. Therefore, scientific assumptions about the significance of silence are especially a problem regarding the silences of socially marginalized people, whose gender, race, class, etc. make their needs and interests unfamiliar. The European culture of disclosure provides effective means for inquiry, and I don't mean to suggest that we need to change the central practices of science or the law. But we do need to think a bit more about the underlying values. What makes disclosure important is that it facilitates confrontation among competing beliefs, which twentieth century philosophy tends to assume is the only effective means to advance understanding (Moulton 1983).

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Some individual scientists may not experience these forms of marginalization. Further, experiences scientists have themselves or observe in the oppressed lives of others may be discounted by their training in our scientific culture that views human interest in terms of the interests of affluent heterosexual western white men. Some of this is inevitable, but the social uniformity among scientists can be interrogated by considering the rhetoric of silence.

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## Conclusion: Silence and the Limits of Objectivity

Using silence, adopting or demanding it to convey meaning, only succeeds if one already has the power to engage in the discourse. People's silence often has different significance than the agreement or disinterest that define it in discourses that seek objectivity. So it is important to consider the assumptions about disclosure in the context of scientific and quasi-scientific environments. The assumption behind the view that all parties disclose epistemologically significant understandings is that all interested parties agree to the discursive standards, or they would speak up. However, because of cultural background or oppression, or personal idiosyncrasies, people may remain silent about their dissent or agreement, or about further supporting information and challenges.

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People may employ silence without being aware exactly what change they want, as a default method of opposition; in this way, it is much like passive resistance. The problem people might have with scientific discourse may be its exclusive focus on objectivity and its inattention to other goals. Interpreting these desires depends on the rhetorical skill of listening, which allows us to comprehend silences as well as disclosures (Glenn 2004; Ratcliffe 2005). Part of the rhetorical consideration concerns to whom we *listen*. Is the silence from an authority? A lab director? A technician? A student? Or a subject? Forms of status and marginalization are particularly important in understanding silence. We must also consider differences in power beyond the formal scientific relationships, such as those that follow axes of oppression. Because silence can be a form of domination, it is only effective resistance when, to the contrary, speech is expected,

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or demanded, and received with sensitivity to its various meanings. So it is only effective if one already has a 'voice'.

Objectivity is neither a comprehensive value nor of singular importance. To begin with, science may serve non-cognitive goals, such as moral and political values, and perhaps even aesthetic values. Also, other forms of epistemological value are less institutionalized and more flexible: practical knowledge, intuition, emotional understanding, and so on. Some of these may be pursued through non-discursive practices, such as apprenticeship, and through discourses that take more time than the critical discourse that fuels objectivity. Quickly exchanged information contributes to the value of objectivity; however, not all understandings that we want are of the sort that can be quickly shared and captured through the culture of disclosure.

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Rather than indicating a need for change merely with the form of speech, silence can be a request for another general form of engagement, or a rejection of the current form. What form of engagement or understanding is at issue is not even clear: the whole of Western science or its most particular practices. Indeed, silence might express rejection of the norm of disclosure itself or of the pursuit of objectivity. These are the sorts of multiple ambiguities silence has in the context of science and other discourses that seek objectivity.

Critical discourse may well produce cognitive value in exactly the way Longino describes. But perhaps that objectivity is not all we need from science. Among the values we need is *representation*. Longino's model tries to secure that by stressing the need for diversity in the scientific community (1993). But it remains to be explained how we can achieve appropriately

diverse engagement and disclosure, since protocols of disclosure may conflict with other forms of meaningful interaction, and may even obscure available sources of criticism.

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A popular feminist alternative to Longino's contextual objectivity is Sandra Harding's 'strong objectivity' (1993), which is similarly achievable by degrees, but by contrast achieved by reflexive individuals rather than by communities. However, 'strong objectivity' does not answer the problem of accounting for silence. Whether we prefer Harding's or Longino's account depends as much on whether we want an individual or social account as on anything else. We need some feminist account of how scientific knowledge manifests at the community level, how

'we know'.<sup>7</sup> Even if we prefer the individual level, the prescriptions of strong objectivity are vague (Longino 1993: 211). It is not clear exactly how scientists are to consider themselves on

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the same plane of discussion as their subject matter, as strong objectivity requires. Further, I suggest, this reflexivity depends on expectations about disclosure. One's own disclosure is certainly required, so it must be extra difficult for marginalized people to achieve strong objectivity, and expecting disclosure from marginalized subjects will certainly put them at a disadvantage in a power matrix that marginalizes them. Thinking from another's perspective must involve an appreciation for the significance and ambivalences behind the other's silences, which neither account of objectivity provides. Perhaps the reflective thinking of strong objectivity is meant to provide rhetorical listening that would account for meaningful silence, but that remains to be demonstrated. As it stands, rhetorical listening seems to be the more basic requirement.



There are many forms of silence that affect science. The silences of scientists themselves, of subjects, and from the general public who constitute the audience for science all have distinct significances for scientific objectivity at both the social and individual level. The flexibility of silent meanings outside of science suggests that silence must also have multiple rhetorical functions in science, in addition to enforcing standards of relevance. Critical focus on how scientists assess the relevance of pieces of information and particular understandings results from attention to the many significances that silence can have. The meanings of silence may be beyond what objectivity can address, and yet also hold understanding that can enhance objectivity.

## Notes

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1. Longino argues the community must provide the four criteria for critical discourse: (1) avenues for the expression and diffusion of criticism; (2) uptake of, and response to, criticism; (3) public standards by reference to which theories, etc. are assessed; and (4) equality of intellectual authority (1990).
2. When we cannot set these aside we end up with a 'bifurcated consciousness', which Dorothy Smith (1987) argues is particularly valuable in women.
3. Illocutionary silence occurs when the presence of marginalized people, such as women, in science is used as reason to consider that such people are adequately represented by science in the sense that science serves their interests. However, this is a more flexible form of silence than that which typifies institutions.
4. Thomas Kuhn (1962) was the first to list scientific values in this way.

5. Being assessed without a particular value does not entail that what is expressed actually lacks such significance.

6. Hill does not herself use the words 'sexual harassment', but what she describes is → literally → a textbook case.

7. Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1990) offers a social theory of evidence, but its normative application is unclear.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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**Comment [CE13]:** Alok Bhalla was the only participant not given an academic location, I found this on the internet, please confirm it is correct or supply alternative

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| Is the point here that subversive activities are organized <i>against</i> women, ie that those contesting the repression still oppress women?? Or that women themselves organize subversive activities when they face repression? Please clarify                            |                  |                       |
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| This seems a very strong claim, what about migration of middle class Asian children to American universities, for example? Perhaps we should say mobility is ‘often’ association with subjugation? Or is Wong saying Asian Americans have a lack of mobility? Please advise |                  |                       |
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| Colour rather than race? Or specifically the experiences of racism faced by Black women? Isn’t there a danger here of marking only Black women as ‘coloured’?.  |                  |                       |
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| In a British context, this is a rather problematic use of the word colored, should it be changed to Black? Or perhaps the meaning/context is different in the US or India?  |                  |                       |
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## WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

**Manju Jaidka**

Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

The following is a discussion on the proceedings from the MELUS-MELOW <sup>1</sup>[1] 2007

International Conference on ‘Literature in Times of Violence’ held at the Department of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India, (22-4 March 22-24, 2007). As the chief functionary of the

two associations, I have played a major role in putting the conferences together. Below I provide a brief survey of the conference.

The major theme of the conference was violence and its impact on literature. Out of the struggles with ourselves, if we believe Yeats, literature is created. We live in times of upheaval when one is assaulted physically, emotionally and psychologically from all sides. Despite the trauma, one survives and plods along. Artists continue to produce works of art, musicians create music and writers compose their masterpieces. But, one may ask, how does literature respond to the legacy of mass violence and political conflict? Does the creative mind buckle under the pressures or does it rise above them all to create mournful music? And how does the reader respond to the various tensions that go into the making of great literature? What models are available for understanding these literary responses to the turbulence of the times? Do poetry, fiction, drama and film help us find words and images to understand national and international catastrophes? Can literature narrate mass violence? Does it try to escape violence? Can it be a substitute for violence? Is it a cure or a panacea? Or the symptom of a deeper malaise?

Literature cannot do away with violence completely. However, it can help us cope with it. It can give solace and make life more bearable. The MELUS-India 2007 and MELOW 2007 conferences explored these questions by taking up diverse genres of American Literature and World Literatures respectively. As the theme of the conference was interdisciplinary, there was much crossing of boundaries and intertextual analyses.

In the globalized scenario of today, it is not possible to keep an intellectual discussion confined within well-defined boundaries; nor is it possible for a discipline to remain isolated from world affairs. There is an urgent need to widen horizons and relate to areas across borders. The conferences organized by MELUS-MELOW conference kept this in view and encouraged their participants to undertake interdisciplinary explorations. Further, such a gathering of scholars from various corners of the world encourages camaraderie, fellow feeling and mutual support. The delegates came together like one big family, exchanged ideas and concepts, channeled their enthusiasm and energy in a positive direction, all of which contributed to the formation of a global academic network of scholars engaged collaborative activity.

At previous MELUS-MELOW conferences (we have been meeting annually since 1998), it has been noted that participants take a keen interest in women's issues and other topics related to gender. While the main thrust of the 2007 conference was not feminist issues, a sizable number of papers dealt with women and violence. Roughly, the 'women and violence' papers fell into four broad categories: women and political violence, women and sexual violence, women and domestic violence, and women and psychological violence. While it is not possible to separate these categories into watertight compartments as the issues overlap, cross and interfuse, I offer below a brief overview of relevant papers.

### **Violence, Women and Politics**

There were numerous papers at the conference that focused on the manner in which violence in the political sphere scars women on various levels. For example, Sarmista Mondol of East West

University, Dhaka, Bangladesh, [2] speaking of how women were rendered 'impure' during the communal violence which erupted during the Partition of India, focused on literary works and oral narratives of the Partition which reveal the range of forms of violence against women — the including rapeing, stripping, amputation and mutilation of women. With the help of four short stories, Mondol's paper traced the 'patriarchal follies' (a term used by Alok Bhalla, currently Visiting Professor at the Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi, in [CE1]his keynote address to denote sexual violence during Partition) of history and attempted to analyze the close relationship between the reasons behind sexual crime and the its aftermath of this crime. Referring to Martha Nussbaum's (2007: 187) idea of 'colonial objectification', which suggests that many women are raped during communal riots because they are traditionally associated with the notion of home or nation, Mondol argued that it is precisely because of this colonial objectification that victims of rape are denied a proper 'home'.

Wafa' Abdullatif Zeinel-'Abidin from Mosul University, Iraq[3], a delegate — who had to brave many hurdles, official red-tapeism, visa problems and more to attend the conference — engaged the works of Iraqi and American wWomen -pPoets, such as Alicia Suskin Ostriker's 'No Heaven' (2005), Adrienne Rich's 'Dark Fields of the Republic' (1995) and Bushra Al-Bustani's 'Mukabadat El-Shajar (Anguishings of the Trees)' (from Al-Bustani 2008), who wrote written in reaction to the Iraq War of 1991 (the invasion and liberation of Kuwait) . According to Zeinel-'Abidin, although each poet is different from the other, they share certain common assumptions because, prominently, the poems comprise a non-violent rhetoric of resistance against systems of hegemony and oppression including war. While Ostriker depicts the massive impact of what she calls America's 'imperialist action' and 'our addiction to low-priced oil'



(2005), [CE2]Rich voices her satire against of the sordid historical moment of America the USA. Al-Bustani, quite more elusively and indirectly, implies her protest against the Iraqi dictator-leader as she admonishes the Iraqis and the whole Arab Nation world for being self-numbed and lying in constant hibernation. The outrageous conduct of war on both fronts (America in the US and Iraq) that has brought about the failure of the national dream and has aggravated the poets' personal pains. However, these women poets do not surrender to despair; instead, they present a hopeful note, underscoring the fact that despite all negativities around them their spirit remains indomitable.

### **Patriarchal Pressures**

This Another set of papers speaks spoke of the social inequality of women, highlighting the fact that in a phallocratic set-up women are forced to remain subservient. For example, the paper of Abdul Rahman, from Taiz University, Yemen, entitled's [4] paper 'Violence Against Women In the Novels of Naguib Mahfouz', explained how the novels of [CE3]Mahfouz (the influential Egyptian author and first Arab to win the Nobel prize for literature) present the condition of women in a patriarchal structure that tends to treat them as second-class citizens. Mahfouz was aware that violence against women and gender inequality in Egypt and the Arab world result from a complex array of interwoven political, social, economic and cultural factors. More specifically, she Rahman read Mahfouz's novel, *The Children of the Alley* (1995 [1959]) as a political allegory of exploitation and oppression.

The paper of Hossein Sabouri from the University of Tabriz, Iran,'s [5] paper focused on the British playwright Caryl Churchill, whose plays deal with subjects like political and sexual oppression violence and racial discrimination. Churchill explores the objectification of women, the masquerading of femininity and women's oppression and victimization whereby they are treated as objects of exchange within the masculine economy. In '*Top Girls*' (1982), Churchill makes it clear that there are few easy rewards for women, even for those who adhere to the strict constraints placed on their lives. She manages to 'cross-gender' by mismatching the performers with their stage roles, underscoring the artificiality and conventionality of the characters' sex roles. Sabouri's analysis of Caryl Churchill's plays demonstrated how women have to cope with oppression and, violence based on their gender, and as well as materialism inequality, which are the key issues for social feminism based on Michel Foucault's views on power, gender, marginalization sexuality, society and marginalization.

Banpreet Kour's [6] from the SPMR College of Commerce, Jammu, gave a paper focusing on 'Psychoanalytic Study of Gender Violence in Shashi Deshpande's Fiction' (see Deshpande 1980, 2006) which discussed traditional psychoanalytic views, which suggestions that gender-based differences are created socially, psychologically and culturally. According to Kour, psychoanalytical feminists believe that gender inequality comes from early childhood experiences that lead men to believe themselves as masculine and women to believe themselves as feminine. In other words, masculinity, like femininity, is not inborn but a social construct. It wasThese feminists further maintained that gender discrimination is the basis of a social system that is dominated by males which in turn influences the individual's psychosexual development. Banpreet Kour examined how an inclination to use violence may enter into the formation of

masculine gender identity in childhood and adolescence. Are we not reminded of W. H. Auden's line from 'September 1, 1939'? ---- 'Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return'. [CE4]

## **Misogyny in Literature**

This A third set of papers was drawn together by the fact that they shared a focus on works informed by misogynist male attitudes. For example, Sanna A. Dhahir from Effat College of Al-Faisal University, Saudi Arabia, suggested in her's, [7] paper 'The Dread of Women in V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*,' suggests that 'misogyny' is a word frequently used to describe Naipaul's presentation of women. However, according to Dhahir, Naipaul (the award-winning novelist and travel writer of Indo-Trinidadian descent, living in the UK) is not a misogynist; he is matrophobic. The rage against women in his fiction and the denigration of their sexuality all have their sources in a deep-seated fear of the archetypal mother who gives life only to take it back, who nurtures only to destroy. Salim, the main character in *the novel The Bend in the River* (Naipaul 1979), reflecting on his relationship with women, focuses on his union with Yvette, a European woman who has come to live in Africa, looking for more varied living conditions. His infatuation with Yvette turns into obsession, not with the woman herself but with the 'man' he sees himself to be with her. Yvette is the temptress, whose words and gestures Salim repeatedly associates with the prostitutes he used to frequent and at whose hands he had been reduced to 'a feeble, critically disadvantaged' man. [CE5] It is this view of her which drives him in the end to brutalize her in a scene of irrational anger and unwarranted violence. Dhahir focused on the ambivalence that informs a sexual relationship in which a woman is invariably at the receiving end.

Neeti Mahajan's [8] presentation, 'Narrativizing Power Politics and Gender Repression in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*' critically engaged the politics of power, religious autocracy, gender oppression, sexual repression, patriarchal structures, environmental pollution and its ensuing hazards with which Canadian novelist Atwood (1976) is concerned in this tale of a dystopic future. The 'Republic of Gilead' represented in the novel has high levels of toxic pollutants, radiation spills and other harmful chemicals in the environment which has led to high rate of sterility in men and women resulting in the 'farming' of women' whereby their sexuality is controlled by the government to produce children for barren elite couples. A fertile woman is a 'prize' object and must either copulate and produce children or be ready to face death. The Government has banned all forms of expression of desire and sexuality. A throwback to the early Puritans who settled in North America, the society of Gilead exercises power play in every aspect of life and commits all forms of atrocities on the pretext of religion. According to Mahajan, from Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, a repressive society gives rise to subversive activities, particularly against women[CE6].

## **Women on the Screen**

Two papers at the cConference focused on violence in films. Vivek Sachdeva from BPS Mahila Vishwavidyalaya [Women's University] in the north of India gave a's [9] presentation was on violence and its aftermath with special reference to Sabiha Sumar's film, *Khamosh Paani*. Produced in Pakistan, the film is set in the period of the rise of dictatorship in Pakistan. It is the story of a Sikh woman who had to embrace Islam as she stayed behind during the partition;

after becoming a victim of sexual violence, she is finally accepted by a Muslim man as his wife. As the film progresses, the narrative explores the scars left on her consciousness. Her The woman's pain revives as her brother, after about thirty years, is looking for her in the village. Her young son's slipping into Islamic fundamentalism, juxtaposed with the opening up of her pain-laden consciousness, allows a sensitive reader of this film to see the violence not merely in the act of raping and murdering men/women of other communities, but in its theongoing reverberations of violence and its impact on everyday life.

Smita Verghese of Jawarhlal Nehru University, New Delhi, [10] attempted to compare two films — *Beloved*, based on Toni Morrison's famous novel by African-American author Toni Morrison (1987), and *Subah*, based on a novel by the Indian writer Mamta Kalia<sup>[CE7]</sup>. Both films deal with the violence in perpetrated on women in social systems like from slavery to, law and present the extreme steps that women may take in the face of their oppression. Discussing several points of comparison, VergheseSmita tried to show how the USAAmerica and India seem to be linked through the violence of their respective social systems. The paper used a feminist framework as well as film theory to analyze the films. The and the larger question dealt withof the choices women are forced to make in systems where they have to choose between their bodies/selves and their children. This involves the moral burden of motherhood that adds to the cross a woman has to carry. Through the films VergheseSmita tried to illustrated the strength of a womean and the manner in which they mayshe rises above systems that bear her down on them.

## **Domestic Violence**

Another sphere in which women are vulnerable is the home front. Domestic violence is an uncomfortable truth present in many societies but generally hidden from view. Susan Rose [11] from the Dickinson College, Carlisle, Philadelphia, PA, focused on trauma literature and made a multi-media presentation on 'Women's Narratives of Domestic Violence'. She was of the opinion that often the narratives of people who have been traumatized reflect, what the Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman considers to be the central dialectic of psychological trauma: the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud. Survivors both seek and fear knowledge. The structure of the narrative reflects this dialectic and the approach-avoidance of knowing and feeling that comes with the experience of trauma. The trauma literature that has flourished in the past 30 thirty years in the fields of psychology and sociology is paralleled by a number of published memoirs of women who have experienced intimate partner violence, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. RoseSusan focused on selected novels, memoirs, and poems, interviews with victim/survivors, and clips from *Clothesline*, a video documentary that she and a collaborator had produced and screened (see [www.clotheslineproject.org](http://www.clotheslineproject.org)) at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and also in Sweden, Italy, and at various other professional meetings.<sup>2</sup>

Susan Rose was supported by her colleague from Dickinson College, Sharon O'Brien, [12] who spoke of 'Trauma, Recovery, and Storytelling'. Referring to Judith Herman's observation in *Trauma and Recovery* (19922001), that 'remembering' and 'telling' are not just individual but also social processes, Sharon O'Brien tried to understand narratives of violence. She used Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, mentioned earlier, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* by US-based

Indian author Amitav Ghosh (2006) as models of 'elite' literature to explain her point of view. She also focused on the writings of ordinary people (as in collections of narratives by survivors of domestic abuse) and other forms of self-expression (such as the t-shirts created for the *Clothesline* Project and the quilt patchwork squares created for the AIDS quilt in the U.S. ([www.aidsquilt.org](http://www.aidsquilt.org))).<sup>3</sup> She cited Citing Miriam Harris' collection *Rape, Incest, Battery: Women Writing Out the Pain* (1996/2000), O'Brien posing a very pertinent question — whether Herman's theories and categories need to be modified or transformed when dealing with the specificities of a postcolonial society such as India.

Domestic violence was also the subject of Yashodhara Uberoi of D.D. Shinde Sarkar College, Kolhapur, [13] who focused on Tehmina Durrani's, *My Feudal Lord* (1991), an autobiographical account of struggle within and against married life among the elites of Pakistan, and Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin's, (1994) banned book on communal tensions, *Lajja (Shame)*. Both these works reveal the insanity of violence in different forms, yet the language used is the same: that of power politics, fundamentalism and communalism. On the one hand violent possession and pathological jealousies scar Durrani's Tehmina's vulnerable emotive and mental landscape, almost destroying her sanity and identity as a human being, more so as a woman. On the other hand Nasrin portrays a once happy family, which has known no other 'motherland' except Bangladesh, becoming innocent victims of insane hatred and ominous violence after the demolition of the Babri Masjid (Mosque) in Ayodhya, India. Violence in *My Feudal Lord* has a familial base confined within the walls of the home and hearth, whereas in *Lajja* it crosses the threshold of domesticity to become a social outrage.

## **The Diasporic Woman**

MELUS-India and- MELOW are well-entrenched academic organizations located in India; therefore, it is not surprising that literature from the Indian subcontinent is of great interest to its members. All our conferences have several papers devoted to writers from SAARC (the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries<sup>4</sup> and writers of the Indian diaspora. Kuldip Gill is one such diasporic poet who has made a niche for herself in the west. Her poetry (see Gill 1999) was the subject of a paper by Manpreet Kang of Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi[14]. She Kang invoked Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's (2003) concept of mobility to highlight ways in which Americans of Asian descent have not been permitted to travel the literal and symbolic landscapes with the same freedom as the Caucasian mainstream. For the Asian Americans, mobility is usually associated with subjugation, coercion and the impossibility of fulfillment for the self or the community[CE8]. Asians in North America, whether recent immigrants or descendants of the early immigrants, continue to be regarded as simplified 'Others' by a history of acts of exclusion, confinement, lack of full citizenship rights and discriminatory policies. Of late, there has been a favorable focus on the works of Asian Americans who write from a distinct perspective, thereby re-asserting the diversity of Asian American writers against the stereotypes of the public imagination. Kuldip Gill, giving voice to her Asian American experience and gaining academic and literary acceptability in Canada, is one such example.

Another poet of Indian origin who has made her home in New York, and also gained a fair amount of international acclaim, is Meena Alexander. One of our conference delegates, E.



Nageswara Rao of Osmania University, Hyderabad, [15] spoke of violence as a leitmotiv in Alexander's work (see Alexander 1998). Over several decades Meena Alexander has lived in many countries, exposed to different forms of violence, including suicide, rape, shootings, police brutality, murder, massacre, arson, riots, bombardment, war and forced exodus of civilians. As a writer sensitive to the destruction caused by violence, Alexander responds to the violence-ridden world, by depicting it, – or, as she says – , 'translating' it, condemning it, and sympathizing with its those that have been oppressed its victims, irrespective of their color, creed, culture, and country. Her poems, memoirs, novels and other writings reflect her anxiety and deep anguish at the senseless and endless violence in the contemporary world. Whether the violence is man-made or caused by nature, (for instance, the devastating cyclone in 1977 in Diviseema, in Andhra Pradesh, India)[CE9], those who experience violence and suffer are human beings. In Alexander's view, art is 'part of our collective non-violent resistance' to [CE10]violence and she uses violence as a leitmotiv in her work not only to show her concern over the inhumanity, but also to rouse the conscience of mankind against violence of any kind anywhere in the world.

Nandini Bhadra of BKM Science College, Valsad, Gujarat, 's [16] gave a presentation was entitled 'Grappling with Violence: Female Bbonding in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Lan Samantha Chang's *Inheritance*'. The paper explored women's responses to violence in diasporic communities and the anxiety of the diasporic male, which accounts for the fierce patriarchy in such communities. These two texts discussed, both by Chinese American women, interrogate and critique the mysterious female bonding which insistently surfaces in women's relationships despite all patriarchal conditioning, and which goes far deeper than conventional familial ties. Does the radical disruption of life in the war zone permit an escape from the strict

feminine mold of ordinary life and open up explosive possibilities of freedom for women? Or does it subvert women's identity thereby throttling their voices? The paper addressed such issues, made particularly relevant in a world torn by terrorism. Like Chang's *Inheritance* (2004), in many ways Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* (2004) is an exploration of the mother-daughter relationship though Tan addresses other important issues like cultural dislocations, identity confusions, marriage, the consequences of war and the nature of friendship. Her women use word as weapons and; experience a strong feeling of isolation and fragmentation due to male domination and the violence of war. In fact, *The Kitchen God's Wife* records a woman's journey from silence to full voice and showcases how women can empower themselves by breaking those their silences through the vehicle of story-telling, widely considered to be a female act.

### **Gender and Colour**<sup>[CE11]</sup>

The focus shifted to the sufferings of Black women in the presentation of Omid Poorkalhor from the University of Pune [17] who focused on violence towards Black women in an unjust society. As a case study he referred to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) which engages with the and protests against violence towards Black women (including childhood sexual abuse,e), violence from an intimate partner, sexual assaults, domestic violence, sexual misconducts towards women, and sexual interference). Pecola's The rape of the character Pecola by her father is the most tragic illustration of the abuse faced by Black women's abuse that occurs in the novel. Morrison shows that Black women are subject to violence even from their close family members. She appeals to her readers and to the Black community to act against violence, rape,

sexual abuse, and racism against Black women who are doubly victimized, first on account of their color and then their gender.

Black American experience was also the subject that of presentations by Seema Murugan of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, [18] and Shivani Suri Verma of the University of Jammu [19] dealt with. MuruganSeema's paper was based on what Joan Cannady (1977) calls the 'image'. According to Cannady, the image of a Black person casting a shadow upon American life, or being the shadow that makes that life so difficult, is common in American literature and thought. With special reference to the work of prominent African American novelist Alice Walker, MuruganSeema was of the opinion that often the Blacks themselves are touched by evils —analyzed aspects of the shadow image including violence, incest, and a sense of defeatism and sometimes even a collaborationist attitude toward their oppressors found in Black communities. With special reference to Alice Walker, she analyzed these aspects of the shadow image. ShivaniVerma, on the other hand, also focused on *The Color Purple* and showed how Alice Walker, but showed how she identifies the color 'purple' as a symbol of the indomitable female spirit and how her work confronts issues such as racism, intra-racism, sexism, neocolonialism and imperialism. Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (2004 [1982]) emerges from the experience of Afro-American women and the brutally complex system of oppression they face, yet it also celebrates the courage and resilience of the black woman and her bold sexuality. Walker creates a new world order defined and determined by the female of the species.

It is not the Black woman alone who suffers; the colored<sup>[CE12]</sup> man, too, has his share of the burden, as demonstrated by Zareen Choudhury [20] of Chittagong University, Bangladesh, in her comparative study of Richard Wright and Toni Morrison. Both novelists deal with racial violence and its devastating effects on the Black race. Based on the true cases of Robert Nixon, a Black teenager accused of murdering a White woman, and Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed her child rather than see it return to enslavement, we find ugly and hostile forces of racism at the core of Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) as well as Wright's *Native Son* (2000 [1940]). The two murders in these novels are committed from a deep sense of necessity and desperation when the protagonists are left with no other choice. Their long-suppressed fear, anger and frustration towards the White society find an outlet through violence. The mindset responsible for such inhuman acts has been shaped by the social structure perpetuated by the oppressive White society. Who then is to be blamed? Should one blame the society that provokes or the one who is provoked into committing a crime?

## **Conclusions**

These were the main issues that on which delegates at the conference focused on — — violence, discrimination, marginalization, and related questions of individual identity. The interactive sessions handled them extensively and with a lot of enthusiasm. I have briefly tried to touch upon the main concerns that came up for discussion. Predictably, in such discussions it is never possible to arrive at a clear-cut solutions. However, it was evident that all the participants, regardless of their gender, had a deep sense of involvement in feminist issues. I would like to sum up with a reference to an unusual treatment of the subject at the hands of Srirupa Chatterjee

[21] of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, who established a connection between beauty and violence in her paper entitled 'Violence Inherent in the Beauty Myth'. The beauty myth, in Srirupa's view, is a creation of women's interactions with the post-industrial world where a legitimate form of discrimination, based on female appearance, is being practiced. Such discrimination though has its roots in the ancient patriarchal system and has now gained legitimacy, given the pressures on women to present a certain appearance for professional and social acceptance. Srirupa's paper investigated the effects of globalized professional societies on women. It included an analysis of the novel *Blonde* by Joyce Carol Oates (2001), a fictional biography of the quintessentially beautiful Marilyn Monroe. Oates's novel becomes emblematic of the subjugation faced by otherwise liberated professional women and the manner in which they are compelled to adhere to stereotypical parameters of beauty.

A unique feature of the MELUS-MELOW conference on violence and literature was its animated debate. The conference was marked with by open-mindedness and a willingness to share each other's views and experiences. So it turned out to be an enriching and satisfying exercise, very fruitful and satisfying. The sense of bonding was even stronger at the end of the three days when it was time to go home. As the delegates said their good-byes, they could be overheard making plans to meet at next year's conference. Surely, for another, equally stimulating reunion.!

[Interested readers may follow MELUS-India / MELOW activities from the website:

[www.melusmelow.org](http://www.melusmelow.org)]

## Notes

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MELUS is the acronym for the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States in which there is an India Chapter, MELUS-India. MELOW is the acronym for the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the World. Together they held an International conference in Chandigarh, India, on 22-4 March 2007 on 'Literature in Times of Violence'. The sub-theme for MELUS-India was 'Literature in Times of Violence: The American Response' and for MELOW it was 'Contemporary World Literatures in Times of Violence'. I will refer to the two organizations as MELUS-MELOW. Interested readers may follow the activities of these twin organizations from the website <http://www.melusmelow.org>.

See <http://www.clotheslineproject.org>.

See <http://www.aidsquilt.org>.

SAARC countries include Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. See <http://www.saarc-sec.org/>. [CE13]

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