

# Silences

Concept: Silences

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Date Entered: 2005-03-04

Description Silence can be defined as the absence of speech or noise. When applied to the social realm, silence may imply passivity, lack of action, lack of initiative, or tacit acceptance of one's condition. A more nuanced understanding of the notion of silence, however, speaks of "subjugated" voices. Such voices are neither weak, ineffectual or withheld, nor have they been erased by other voices. Instead, they are seen to be "active" alongside dominant discourse, but have been accorded little credibility or authority.

The idea of silence(s) and of "subjugated" voices is a particularly important one when taking gender issues into consideration. For decades, Western feminist literature has talked about the silencing of women's voices by a discourse that is overwhelmingly masculine in its foundations and characteristics. According to feminist authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Cynthia Enloe, Judith Butler, and others, women's voices have been suppressed or subjugated, throughout history, by a discourse that was infused with masculine characteristics. Such a discourse claimed a stark contrast between rationality, discipline, strength, and civilization (associated with the idea of masculinity), and the emotional, the chaotic, the weak, the natural (deemed to be feminine characteristics).

This sort of discourse was characterized by Cynthia Enloe, a feminist international relations theorist, as "hegemonic masculinity," which can be understood as more than a state of mind that belongs to men. Rather she perceives it as a state of mind that informs attitudes and actions in our society at large. It favours a rational, detached and militaristic approach to events, relegating the role of emotions, instincts, and insights to the margins of legitimate knowledge. The implication is that women's knowledge and hence their voices are so marginalized as to be unheard or "silenced." Thus, a central concern of Western feminism revolves around bringing women's voices forward and making them audible, along with rereading and rewriting history from women's stances.

While sympathizing with such concerns, Fatema Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, goes a step further in her work and explores precisely these (suppressed) spaces of silence. She posits that silence is not a sign of passivity and acceptance, but a strategic and productive tool for resistance and transformation. To read silence as lack of resistance and lack of speech, she argues, is to ignore the hidden desires and motivations that guide our actions, particularly when such hidden desires and motivations contrast with our actions. She illustrates this point with the example of

certain categories of Moroccan women who lived secluded all their lives in a patriarchal society, and who found unconventional ways (such as storytelling) to rebel against and resist their condition. Although their outward actions might reflect compliance (wearing the veil or not stepping outside the house without being accompanied by a male relative), their desires and motivations can be quite the opposite. Such desires can transpire through apparently very mundane details of their lives.

Mernissi makes a very powerful statement that poses an interesting challenge to Western feminism's claim of bringing forward women's voices. She claims that "[t]o speak while others are listening is the expression of power itself. But even the seemingly subservient, silent listener has an extremely strategic role, that of the audience. What if the powerful speaker loses his audience?" Taking into consideration that the professed project of feminism is about bringing women's voices forward, a couple of questions arise: What if the project entailed not only listening to voices, but also to silences, as Mernissi does in her work? What would listening to silences unmask? Listening to silences would pose a challenge to Western senses of autonomy. Such senses are inextricably bound up with ideas and practices of "being heard," "raising one's voice," and asserting one's position clearly and loudly. This particular sense of autonomy encourages a verbally assertive behaviour and a clearly visible position of protest or resistance. It should be noted though that this sort of behaviour and position thrives in social and cultural environments in which liberal values, such as freedom of expression and of thought, are recognized societal norms. However, to state that the notion and practice of autonomy relies unambiguously on practices of out loud self-assertion is to ignore the manner in which autonomy can be expressed and practiced differently in non-Western societies. Taking into consideration Mernissi's statement about the role of the audience, it should be noted that silence by members of an audience (expressed in the form of "I will not listen" or "I will not speak") implies an action by a person asserting some control over her own behaviour and over her life.

While having at heart a genuine concern for women's conditions throughout the world, Western feminism may inadvertently gloss over other forms of resistance and rebellion that do not match the standard of out loud, self-assertive, and aggressive protest. For example, the fact that most storytellers in North African societies are women points to the idea that women create for themselves new spaces in which to subvert dominant patriarchal attitudes and practices. The practice of storytelling implies creating, altering, and disseminating narratives in which women hold powerful positions or in which women constantly escape and challenge men's hold over their lives. These practices indicate a different understanding of feminine autonomy, one which is more subtly expressed and practiced, and which relies on discrete subversion of men's domination, esoterism, and a willingness to compromise. Also, this particular sense of autonomy relies more on a refusal to listen than on a willingness to speak up and assert herself. One needs to consider that the

feminist voices coming from the Western world enjoy an autonomy and freedom that has little equivalence with women's voices coming from the "Third World." At stake is a delicate issue: how can such privileged voices (privileged by their position and their self-proclaimed sense of freedom and autonomy) claim to speak for and understand these "secluded" voices? Moreover, can such privileged voices make sense of the silences that come from outside the West?

By the same token, images coming from the media about events in the "Third World" overwhelmingly portray people who are silent, or whose voices and opinions are written and spoken over by experts (mainly Westerners) such as economists, journalists, aid workers, or feminist activists. One only needs to think of the media coverage of events that are characterized as "humanitarian crises," which presents images of people who are not speaking, engulfed in a condition of absolute victimhood. It is mainly images of women and children that the media target, and these women and children appear to be overwhelmingly silent. Such silence gets to be equated with despair, with helplessness, with surrender. Mernissi would encourage us to ask ourselves: what is behind this silence? What are the desires, motivations, and resistances that motivate such silences? To paraphrase her, is the powerful West losing its audience?

Suggested  
Reading:

**Enloe, Cynthia.** 1993. *The morning after: Sexual politics at the end of the Cold War*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

**Mernissi, Fatima.** 1994. *Dreams of trespass: Tales of a harem girlhood*. New York: Basic Books.