

Silence between Absence and Presence: Perspectives from Asia and Africa

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Silence is an inherent part on the research on memory and remembrance. For a long time, it has been a little-explored area. Silence has long been regarded as a mere absence of speech—a void signalling a lack of communication, a loss of words or muted signs, whether resulting from enforced silencing or from the unspeakability of violent experiences. Recent scholarship, however, has highlighted functions of silence that frame it as a presence: a presence of meanings, practices, and memories of the past. Silence is, in fact, essential to human expression and capable of conveying multiple, even conflicting, meanings, the interpretation of which depends on context and the intention of the subject. Without silence, speech would be neither perceptible nor meaningful, for there would be no space in which to listen, recall, or reflect.

Silence has also been closely associated with trauma (Felman & Laub, 1992) and violence, evoking the absence of adequate words or expressive means through which experiences of extreme pain, fear, or embarrassment might be articulated verbally. Even when difficult experiences are muted or shrouded in silence, they can still be expressed through other modes—not only through narratives but also non-verbally, transmitted and communicated in bodily habits, muted signs or everyday interactions (Weiss & Six-Hohenbalken, 2011). Contemporary social anthropology regards silence as “a complex moral, affective, and social force” (Dragojlovic & Samuels, 2023), which has also been examined as a consequence of the suppression of voice, particularly in feminist, post-colonial, and authoritarian contexts, where it is linked to structural forms of oppression. While in English the term silence encompasses both the definition of a state and the human action, in German there is the differentiation between the calm (Ruhe, Stille) and the hush (zum Schweigen bringen).

Because of its semantic ambiguity and analytical complexity, silence can signify both consent and disapproval, compliance and resistance (MacLure et al., 2010). It may suggest not only passivity but also agency—a refusal to speak or to bear witness while holding meaning within (Ross, 2001). In narratives and fiction, silence has often functioned as a powerful rhetorical tool of dissent (Pérez, 1984). When unexpected or out of place, silence becomes eloquent, carrying meaning and illocutionary force (Schmitz, 1994; Bonacchi, 2021). Silence is therefore not only indicative of a “maladaptive repression of the past” (Kidron, 2009), promoting forgetting (Augé, 1998), but it can also foster healing, transmission, and remembrance of the past (Winter, 2010; Dessingué & Winter, 2016). Some approaches therefore speak about both enforced silence and self-imposed silence. Furthermore, research on silence often follows a negative methodology, since it typically involves the absence/lack of direct evidence in the field (Navaro 2020). Therefore, silence here is not understood in binary terms—as merely the absence or presence of speech, communication, or memory—but rather as a spectrum that fulfils diverse functions and allows for multiple context-specific and culturally sensitive interpretations.

For this special issue, we welcome proposals that reflect on the ambivalent character of silence, particularly those addressing aspects and functions that have long been underrepresented in academic scholarship. We are especially interested in perspectives that focus on the Middle East, the Arab World, the Persianate World, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Ancient Egypt, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast

Asia, and Oceania. Works examining diasporic communities with strong historical and cultural ties to these regions are also encouraged. As memory studies in general are an interdisciplinary topic, we invite contributions from various disciplines, such as literary studies, social anthropology, ethnology, cultural studies, history, sociology, political science, art, communication and media studies, linguistics, gender studies, and related disciplines.

We welcome articles that engage with one or more of the following topics:

- Silence in collective memory: memorialization, commemoration and forgetting
- Silence related to violence and trauma, silence as part of a healing process
- Silence in relation to forgetting
- Silence as an embodied practice
- Silence as resistance and a tool of dissent
- Eloquent silence and silence that activates speech
- Silence in storytelling, autobiography and fiction
- Silence in the context of mourning and in rituals
- Enforced silence related to denial
- Silence and the negative methodology in the field

If you are interested in this call for papers, please send an abstract of 200–250 words to the following email addresses:

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Complete articles should not exceed 6,000–7,500 words (36,000–45,000 characters, including spaces).

We only accept contributions that have not been previously published (including online, in a different form, or in a different language) and are not concurrently under review by another journal. Manuscripts submitted for publication must adhere to the internationally recognized academic standards for presentation and formatting. Bibliographies and citations should respect the journal's Style Sheet (https://orient.sav.sk/wp-content/uploads/APA_guidelines_AAS.pdf) with the citation norm required for articles being the APA 7 standard. All submissions will undergo double-blind peer review. Accepted contributions will be professionally proofread.

About the journal:

Asian and African Studies - is a platinum open-access, double-blind peer-reviewed journal (DOAJ, ESCI Web of Science Core Collection, SCOPUS, ERIH PLUS) published since 1965 by the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. It is dedicated to the study of languages, literatures, cultures, and histories of the regions of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Its scope encompasses the geo-cultural areas of the Middle East, the Arab World, the Persianate World, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Ancient Egypt, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. Works focusing on communities with strong historical, cultural, or religious ties to these regions are also encouraged. The journal publishes original, previously unpublished articles across a wide array of disciplines, primarily focused on history, linguistics, literature and cultural studies, however, contributions from social and political sciences, religious studies, art and philosophy, as well as interdisciplinary and comparative works are also welcome. Please note that the journal does not publish technical or educational materials, nor does it accept contributions in the fields of economics and medicine. Each academic paper in this journal undergoes a rigorous peer-review process, involving initial editor screening and subsequent blind reviews conducted by independent experts in the field.

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