

## **WOMEN AND THE INJUNCTION TO CARE: A CASE STUDY OF REMINISCENCES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper seeks to examine the notion of 'moral imperatives' on women to care from a linguistic perspective and problematizes the ethic of care as an exclusive moral concern of women through an examination of reminiscences. The subversive role that language plays in the negotiation of female identity vis-à-vis the injunction to care is revealed in this analysis of women's reminiscing. In the process, 'caring' itself is shown to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon, as much a matter of socio-cultural impositions to 'perform' gendered roles as a question of individual choice, and a reaction to situated moral contexts that women respond to in society.*

*Key words: moral imperatives, ethics of care, conversation analysis, reminiscence*

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## WOMEN AND THE INJUNCTION TO CARE: A CASE STUDY OF REMINISCENCES<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction: Caring as a moral issue in/ for women

A plethora of voices in the late twentieth century – which included Annette Baer (1985, 1986, 1987), Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984), Sara Ruddick (1984), Caroline Whitbeck (1983) and Alice Walker (1989, 1998) among others – were involved in foregrounding a different kind of feminist philosophical ethics and moral epistemology. Of these voices, Gilligan spoke for a separate women's voice in morality when she claimed that:

...the moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in...women is an injunction to care... [whereas for] men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the right of others and thus to protect from interference the rights of life and fulfillment (Gilligan, 1982: 100).

Gilligan's *care perspective* thus centered around relationships, connection, context and responsibility (or care) and challenged as sex-biased *the justice perspective* which (Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg and others) claimed belonged to the male bastion revolving around rights and rules. In Gilligan's view, "Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices *other than their own* and to include in their judgment *other points of view*" (Gilligan, 1982: 16; italics added). For women therefore, the moral problem arises from *conflicting responsibilities* rather than competing rights. This line of theorization however recreates a stereotypical gendered division amongst men and women with respect to their moral thought and Gilligan has been criticized (amongst others by Moody-Adams, 1991; Lovibond, 2000 and Friedman 2000) for delimiting women's morality.

Walker (1989, 1998, 2003) on the other hand, in keeping with postmodern assumptions of the situated nature of human embodiment, offered a *metaethical* perspective on a "expressive-collaborative" model of morality which proposed morality to be a *set of practices* inextricably intertwined with extremely complex ways of living. For Walker, morality is "*a socially embodied medium of mutual understandings and negotiation between people* over their responsibility for things open to human care and response" (Walker: 1998:3; italics added). Under this view, morality is not merely an 'internalized guidance system' for individuals which is pure, rational and easily available for reflection but rather moral responsibilities are shared by people and moral justification inevitably requires what Walker calls "interpretative moral ethnography"

Given the above theoretical perspectives, a basic objective of this paper is to look into the (Gilliganian) 'injunction to care' in women and see how its linguistic manifestation reveals what Walker (cited above) calls "mutual understandings and negotiation

between people". Beginning with the premise that caring is often deemed the moral concern of women, we endeavor to find how the situated female self negotiates moral issues and manipulates language in order to establish a 'caring' self. In the process we hope to throw some light on such questions like: What may be the role of 'agency' in this injunction to care in women? Do women care by choice or by social obligation?

## **2. Hypothesis and methodology: Caring in women's reminiscences**

Towards the above objective of examining the injunction to care in women's language, a basic hypothesis of this paper is that women not only cater to multiple voices from without but they also have multiple voices *within* them. Language, which is the chief vehicle for the perpetration and maintenance of an injunction to care as an *obligation*, may also take on a subversive role if it exposes care as *negotiation* in certain contexts. This paper aims to show how caring itself can be a multi-dimensional phenomenon and as much a matter of socio-cultural impositions to 'perform' gendered roles as a question of individual choice. Using extracts from women's reminiscences, we will examine how the willful manipulation of language by women may establish care as *both* an obligation (caring for others) and choice (by establishing an 'ideal' self).

Reminiscences were chosen as the area of study because, as various studies have suggested, memory serves the self in multiple ways. Hyman and Fairies (1992) for example, have observed that in general, remembering typically serves to present the self in social contexts while Pasupathi, Lucas and Coombs (2002) note that autobiographical events serve multiple purposes when discussed in conversation and these purposes differ across contexts. The latter study notes that autobiographical memory emphasizes several broad categories of functions often summarized as i) social ii) directive and iii) self-related.

Social functions include maintaining intimacy, directive functions include action-guiding as well as knowledge-building functions and self-related functions include maintaining a positive and consistent self-image or finding meaning in experiences (Pasupathi, Lucas and Coombs, 2002: 165).

For the current paper, apart from exploring what (gendered) role-playing is accomplished by a speaker in a particular conversational context, the idea is also to explore how reminiscences establish and affect the injunction to care in the actual speech of women.

This study shall use techniques from Conversation Analysis (CA)<sup>2</sup> to examine reminiscences within talk-in-interaction. CA, which is "the systematic analysis of the talk produced in everyday situations of human interaction: talk-in-interaction" (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998: 13), works on three basic assumptions viz.: (i) Conversation is highly organized and orderly (ii) Talk is contextual (iii) Nothing is by chance. How micro features of CA such as pauses, turns-taking, slow/fast speech etc can establish a 'caring' individual in language is what defines the scope of this paper. In the next section we will now examine two extracts from women's reminiscing in order to locate the caring self within language.

### 3 Analysing reminiscences of women: Two extracts

The data sample for this study is part of recordings for my PhD research (Barua 2011) wherein interviews were conducted amongst five Hindi-speaking couples in Delhi (between August, 2007 and June, 2008) in order to examine how a 'moral' self establishes itself in the narrative structures of these couples. The average length of each of the five interviews was 63.01 minutes and almost the whole recording was then transcribed<sup>3</sup>. Both the spouses were present during the interview and for this current study two extracts from the speech of two women speakers belonging to different socio-economic groups have been taken; speaker 'A' belongs to a mid income group and speaker 'I' belongs to a high income group<sup>4</sup>. The first sample taken below is from speaker A's talk-in-interaction.

#### Extract I

#### [ACS A2 0705]<sup>5</sup>

((A and her husband C are a mid-income couple and at the time of the interview A was working as the Mess-in-charge of a University Hostel in Delhi while C was a foreign tourists' travel guide. Asked by 'S' (the current author) if birth of children were happy occasions for them, C responds with his turn in Line 1 and then A takes the floor with a latched utterance marked with '=' to start her reminiscing about the childhood of her two daughters – "Manya" and "Tanya"<sup>6</sup>. The lines below occur fifteen minutes into their interview)).

1 C: *nei↑* (.) *wo to hae hi* (.) *definetli=*  
neg that dm pres emph definitely  
'No – that it is, definitely'.

2 A: *=wo to hae hi bacco ka: to* (.) *bat ye hae ki >tanya::<* (.) *ma:nya::*  
*ka↑:*  
that dm pres emph children gen dm but this pres that Tanya Manya gen

→3 *utna: we couldn't enjo↑↓y* (.) *because we were struggling* (.) *like* (.) *we were* (.)  
that much

→4 *(not normal)* (.) *not stable* (.) {S: *acca:*} <*°ae::n erli maerij bhi thi: °*> (.) {S:  
*hm:*}  
okay and early marriage also pst

'That is for sure but the fact is that we could not enjoy Tanya- Manya's - childhood that much because we were struggling...We were not normal, not stable... . And it was also an early marriage'.

→5 *SHAYA:D* (.) <*us chiz ko::>* *ham utna: enjoi nahi kar paye* (.) {S: *hm:*} *like*  
(.)  
probably that thing acc we that much enjoy neg do could1

→6 *us chiz ko hamne kavar ap kia* (.) *tanya: ke barth se* {S: *okay*} *matlab*  
that thing acc we-nom cover up do-pst Tanya gen birth with means

→7 *us samay esa: tha↑: (.) ki der wer tai- >matlab< (.) jab wo:: GRO AP*  
that time like pst that there were means when she grow up

→8 *ho rahi thi↑ (.) to kabhi MAE hoti thi >then he was not there<*  
(.)  
happen prog-fem pst-fem then sometimes I cop pst-fem

9 *kabhi >he was there, i was not there< {S: achha:} TOGETHER (.) like=*  
sometimes okay

'Probably that thing we could not enjoy that much. That thing we covered up with Tanya's birth. Means those times it was like... there were times, when she was growing up, sometimes I was not there and sometimes he was not there....Together. Like...'

In Extract I above, A reminisces about their daughters' childhood and acknowledges that they could not enjoy their first born daughter's childhood that much (she names 'Manya' after incorrectly naming her second born 'Tanya' first) because they were struggling economically (Line 3 marked with '→') and hence 'not normal'. A's *untimed pauses* (marked by a full stop: '.') in Lines 3-4 exemplify a 'guarded evaluation' of themselves: she attributes their difficult phase not only to their economic instability but to another possible reason for an unstable life – 'It was an early marriage' (Line 4). The *slow and soft speech* in that line (marked with '< >' and degree signs respectively) and the *use of linguistic "fillers" (like/ matlab)* in Lines 5-7 and Line 9 encode perhaps a certain extenuation for their inability to care for the first child – having married young, they were ill-equipped to provide care. The staying-apart of the couple due job compulsions had an adverse effect on their first daughter's ('Manya') upbringing which they tried to "cover up" with the birth of their second daughter Tanya (Line 6): the *guilt* of not being able to be good parents is extenuated with the peculiar use of A's phrase "cover up" – they tried to make up for their failure as caring parents to the first child with renewed efforts after the birth of the second one. Through the next few lines (7-9) of her reminiscing, A also attributes their failure to provide good care to their children to their inability to stay together. While this hints at the *lack of a fulfilling life* due to prolonged absences, it also underscores the social pressure to conform to ideals of 'care-giving parents' and the 'ideal couple' (which A confesses they were not at that time).

Interestingly, throughout this reminiscing, A never once takes caring for her daughters to be an individual responsibility – in contrast to Gilligan's (1982) position discussed above, A's dexterous use of *plural pronominals (we/ ham/ hamne)* in Lines 3-6 shows that *she considered caring for children to be a joint enterprise and not the sole obligation of the mother/woman*. Although as parents they were socially obligated to care for their children, A reasons that there were times when due to job compulsions, either her husband or she herself was not there for the children. This compulsion to perform certain socially driven gendered roles in the context of caring is also underscored in this next extract where speaker 'I' talks about a difficult time she and



her husband B faced – the death of B's father. The difference here is that though I also uses plural pronominals to comment on the situation, she makes her *individual positioning* within her reminiscence quite clear.

## Extract II

### [BMP A30611]

((‘I’ and ‘B’ are a high-income couple with B a successful entrepreneur and I on maternal leave from her high-end job in a company at the time of interview. Asked about an occasion when they had faced difficult times, I takes the floor to narrate about the time when B's father was ill. The lines below occur twenty minutes into their interview)).

- 1 I: *it's like:: (. ) >yea< like 'when his father was:: <not well↑> {S: yeah}*
- 2 *it was a difficult time for us. {S: hm::} >i mean< he had to*
- 3 *go to haza:riba:g (. ) a:: to ranchi >because he was admitted there<, and i was*
- 4 *here. so (. ) A::: >we needed each other's opinion< or to discuss each other (. )*
- 5 *>we were very very:: 'desperate< because every moment was:: very*  
*<you know>*
- 6 *< uncertain> and e- every time he called i felt there is a bad news*
- 7 *(. ) >or maybe a good news<.*
- 8 (0.4)
- 9 I: *then >he-< we shifted him here. <he could not survive> {S: hm:} so::*
- 10 *and we had not AT ALL expected that it would happen so quickly. i*
- 11 *mean we all knew that parents are ageing {S: hm:} but:: we could not*
- 12 *>we felt as if< we could not SAVE him. but maybe because none of us*
- 13 *were the↑re {S: hm:} only my >mother in law< was there. so::: that*
- 14 *period certainly a very (. ) bad and difficult in terms of psychological*  
*(.)trauma.*

**((3 lines deleted from original transcript; interviewer asks B where he was at that time)).**

- 15 B: *=i was travelling=*
- 16 I: *=he↑ was travelling. he had to go directly to a: ranch↓i and i was*
- 17 *(. ) i was told not to come <because> there was a possibility of (. )*
- 18 *>papaji< being brought here {S: yeah} so they said that one person*  
*father-DM*

→19 *should BE in delhi* {S: hm:} *in case we bring him someone should*

→20 *be there to manage logistics. so i stayed back with (.) a::shu* {S: hm:}

Initially, in I's reminiscence above, she uses *euphemisms* (*when his father was <not well>*) , *marked intonation* (") as well as *slow speech* ('< >') in Line 1 to signify both the entry into a story domain with a grave topic (illness) as well as her own positioning within her narrative as the concerned daughter-in-law. Further, *the use of 'fillers'* like *'it's like:::* (Line 1), *>i mean<* (Line 2) and *<you know>* (Line 5) capitalize on her positioning as the caring daughter-in-law – she is striving through her language to "ease the pain" while also emphasizing her own part as the supportive wife (they were "desperate" to consult with each other during the uncertain moments/ Line 5). She avoids her turn in Line 6 from being construed as a negative comment ('expecting' a bad news), by subverting it after a slight pause (marked in Line 7 with '→') where she says *>or maybe a good news<*. She then takes a *timed pause* to narrate the exact circumstances leading upto her father-in-law's death. *Her citing the sentiments* that they felt at that moment (Lines 10-14) recreates the entire episode. Significantly, she rephrases her words – switching from *we could not* in Line 15 to specify within fast speech *>we felt as if<* to sort of *extenuate* them from any purported guilt of not being able to "save" their relative.

Following a turn by the interviewer asking where B was at that time, the latter answers but 'I' continues to hold her floor (with the latched utterance in Line 16: '=') and her reminiscence serves multiple functions: i) of reconstruction of circumstances that were occurring when the incident happened (B was traveling/ she was in Delhi/ Lines 16-17), ii) decision-making (she "was told not to come"/ Line 17) and iii) explanation for action (she did not accompany her husband because she was to "manage logistics" in case her father-in-law was brought to Delhi for treatment/ Lines 17-20). Her lines (16-20) not only capitalize her position as the concerned daughter-in-law and supportive wife but also shift any potential blame for her absence during those critical times – she was specifically instructed not to come (Line 17). She also reiterates that she stayed back in Delhi with Ashu (their infant son) which serves as a subtle reminder that he too needed her care. While I's remembering this episode accomplishes many functions as noted above, it is also a linear exposition of *her* position throughout the episode. Her story allows her the freedom to establish herself as the ideal daughter-in-law/ wife/ mother which speaks of the *manipulative* role that language plays. Care is thus not only any particular action but also an *accomplishment of language*. Though in itself, care may be a matter of social obligation, one can 'perform' care through one's linguistic negotiation of a context. It is thus a matter also of individual agency.

Before we draw out the main implications of these reminiscences in the final section of this paper, we list the main functions ('social', 'directive' and 'self-related' as per Pasupathi, Lucas and Coombs, 2002) which the reminiscences of the two speakers accomplish and also the issues raised and line numbers of speech occurrence in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Function	Speaker	Extract number	Issue (Line number)
Reconstructing the past	A	I	Daughter's childhood (2-4, 7-9)
	I	II	Father-in-law's illness (1-3, 9, 13, 16-18)
Defining a problem	A	I	Instability in marriage, prolonged absences (4, 7-9)
	I	II	Helplessness because of relative's illness (5-6)
Decision making	A	I	Covered-up shortcomings in parenting (6)
	I	II	Decision by family to stay back (17)
Evaluating/ explaining self	A	I	Could not enjoy children's childhood (3-5)
	I	II	Feelings when father-in-law was ill (2, 10-13)
Performing social role	A	I	Non-ideal couple (3-4), (non-)successful parents (6-7)
	I	II	Supportive wife (4-5), concerned daughter-in-law (10-13, 17, 20)

#### 4. Conclusions: Implications for the injunction to care

From the two extracts cited above and the functions of the reminiscences as etched out in Table 1, various implications for the injunction to care can be drawn. A's reminiscence in Extract I implies that *non-fulfillment of a life of togetherness* can actually be a cause for an *inability to care*. A in that extract acknowledges that the fact that she and her husband C had an unstable life due to economic instability and their early marriage had an adverse effect on children's caring. Caring, in A's extract, crucially hinges on *the right to a fulfilling life* – traditionally a 'male' ethic. This extract also proves that

...what participants may accomplish (e.g., evaluating others, explaining themselves) in talking about the past can sometimes be different than what they wanted to achieve (Pasupathi, Lucas and Coombs, 2002, p. 187).



A's reminiscence started out with their daughters' childhood and ended up becoming a commentary on her and C's married life where she ensures that accountability for the failure is attributed to her and her husband *as a couple*. Caring infinitely for others is not just the bastion of woman's morality and woman's moral voice becomes a negotiation of past circumstances.

On the other hand, Extract II of I where she recalls her father-in-law's illness and subsequent death showcases how *caring can be accomplishment of language* and thus as much matter of choice as of social obligation. It also challenges Pasupathi, Lucas and Coombs' (2002) claim that:

"Only in pleasant conversations were reminiscence and reconstruction associated (positively) and only in pleasant contexts did evaluating others tend to co-occur with explaining the self (ibid. p. 185).

In that extract I, while reminiscing about a non-pleasant topic, still manages to underscore positive aspects – her togetherness with her husband (Lines 4-5), her sense of responsibility as the daughter-in-law (Lines 17-20) and as the caring mother (Line 20).

Both A and I's reminiscences "entail the creation of beliefs about the self and other via social comparison processes" (Pasupathi, Lucas and Coombs, 2002:186) which while acknowledging caring as a major female ethic in the sense of Gilligan (1982) also posits it as a matter of a "socially embodied medium of mutual understandings and negotiation between people over their responsibility for things open to human care and response" (Walker: 1998:3; cited earlier). Given these findings, not only does the (traditionally masculine) right to live a fulfilled life find expression in women's reminiscences (Extract 1), but it is also proved that women can choose to 'perform' care via language (Extract II).

## **5. Notes**

1 This is a much revised and theoretically very different version of an earlier paper presented at a UGC sponsored national seminar at Jorhat College, Assam, India in 2011.

2 Elucidating all concepts of CA are beyond the scope of this paper. For further explanations and references on CA, see Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998).

3 The Hindi data are transcribed phonetically with glosses being provided for each word and translation provided after every few lines while the English utterances are transcribed in the usual conventions of CA. Where English words occur as code-mixed within Hindi, they have been transcribed phonetically.

4 'Mid-income group' was operationally defined in Barua (2011) as having a monthly family income of up to Rupees 50,000 and 'high income group' as having monthly family income up to or above Rupees 90,000.

5 Transcription Conventions of CA are given in Table 2 and abbreviations used in glosses are listed in Note 7.

6 All names that occur in transcripts have been changed from the original.

7 The abbreviations used in the glosses are as follows:

**1,2,3**=first/second/third person; **acc**=accusative; **cop**=copula; **dat**=dative marker; **dm**=discourse marker; **DM**=deference marker; **emph**=emphatic; **fem**=feminine; **gen**=genitive; **loc**=locative; **nom**=nominative; **neg**=negative; **pres**=present marker; **prog**=progressive markers; **pst**=past marker

**Table 2: Transcription Conventions in Conversation Analysis**

Symbol	Designation	Symbol	Designation
A:	Current speaker (designated by letter / initials).	da-	The dash marks a stop or cut – off in sound
CAPS	Speech section is louder than the surrounding speech	(0.4)	The number in brackets indicate a time gap in one tenth of a second.
<u>Underscoring</u>	Stress or emphasis	(.)	Untimed pauses
<sup>0</sup> Soft <sup>0</sup>	Enclose speech that is quieter than the surrounding speech.	()/():	Untranscribable passage/ unidentifiable speaker
>fast<	Faster than surrounding speech	(guess)/(A)	Transcriber's guess of a dubious hearing or speaker identification
< slow>	Slower than surrounding speech	(( ))	Comment by the transcriber
a:	A colon indicates a prolongation of the immediately prior sound.	=	Latched utterances having no gap.
.	Falling intonation	→	Arrows in the left margin point to specific parts of an extract discussed in the text
,	Continuing intonation	[ ]	Speech overlap onset
?	Rising intonation	[EB:41:031104]	Extract headings indicate transcript source of the researcher
↑↓	Marked rise or fall in pitch in the immediately following utterance	{ }	Backchannel communication

'	Marked fall in pitch on a syllable	1,2	Unique discourse number and numbered lines within each utterance
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