

PANEL PROPOSAL:

Beyond Victimhood: Examining Gendered Forms of Violence and Reconciliation in Women's Writing

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This panel, which is framed within the research project [RECONFEM](#), examines the gendered dimensions of post-conflict justice and reconciliation through literary texts written by women writers. Focusing each on a particular historical context—Apartheid and the Bangladesh War of 1971, respectively—the papers comprised in this panel address the limitations of official frameworks and policies of reconciliation, which have often failed to adequately commemorate women's lived experiences in contexts of war or violence. Thus, we approach the literary texts explored in this panel as crucial spaces for articulating more complex portrayals of women's gendered experiences of violence, portrayals that challenge reductive narratives of victimhood and instead foreground women's agency and resilience. Furthermore, in response to the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000, which recognised the significant role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, this panel seeks to highlight the responses of women writers to the policies and debates surrounding reconciliation processes.

Abstract 1

Mother Activists and Maternal Peacebuilding in South Africa

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Since the celebration of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) three decades ago, numerous feminist scholars (Ross 2003; Bridger 2021) have highlighted the limitations of this judicial body in adequately representing women's experiences under apartheid and their role in the liberation struggle. In the official TRC report, women—often framed through their identities as mothers—are largely described as either passive victims or as secondary witnesses to the suffering of others (Ross 2003). This paper aims to further contribute to the dismantling of this limited perception of motherhood in South Africa, particularly of black motherhood, through Kagiso Lesego Molepe's novel *We Inherit the Fire* (2026). Set in South Africa in the 1980s, during the final years of apartheid, the novel centres on the fractured relationship between Kewame, an acclaimed “fighter” of the liberation struggle, and her daughter Kelelo. By focusing on their relationship, as well as other family dynamics, this paper

examines how totalitarian regimes such as apartheid can undermine practices of maternal care, a reality that was not fully captured in the TRC Reports and that points to the slow nature of reconciliation in post-conflict contexts. Furthermore, I argue that, despite their victimisation, the black mothers portrayed in Molope's novel are depicted as crucial agents whose political contribution supports both the survival of the black South African community and the creation of a more just and peaceful nation. More specifically, I draw on Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* (1989) to explore how the practices of mothering shown in Molope's novel exemplify a series of peacebuilding strategies, ones that highlight the value of community and collective remembrance in the aftermath of national conflict.

Works cited

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Ross, Fiona C. 2003. *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*. Pluto Press.

Ruddick, Sarah. 1989. *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bio

Teresa Martínez-Quiles teaches contemporary British literature at the University of Alicante, Spain. Her primary research focus has been in the field of postcolonial feminist studies, with an emphasis on Anglophone literature written by Black and Asian women authors. She has participated in the volume *Literary and Cultural Responses to Mnemonic Landscapes: Spaces in Transit* and is currently completing a monograph on the topic of women's friendship in contemporary diasporic fiction with Palgrave Macmillan.

Abstract 2

Women's Postconflict Poetry and Gender-Just Peace

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In the aftermath of the Bangladesh War of 1971, survivors of wartime rape were given the honorific title of 'birangona,' a word meaning 'brave woman' and 'war heroine,' in what seemed an unprecedented policy of post-conflict gender justice acknowledging the

specific ways in which women experience war. While the policy meant to remove the stigma associated with sexual violence and ease the women's social reintegration, in practice it failed to have the intended effect. The honorific initiative and other reparative policies worked more to restore the nation's honour after the event of mass rape, than to protect the rights of women, as traditional gender norms remained strong. In this paper I examine these issues through Tarfia Faizullah's poetry collection *Seam* (2014), which features a sequence of poems based on the birangona interviews that the author conducted in Bangladesh. Faizullah was born in New York to Muslim parents who had migrated to the US from Bangladesh in the 1970s. She first heard about the experience of the birangonas during a university poetry event, and started researching and writing the poems from memory, but felt compelled to go to Bangladesh and record the women's own voices. In this paper, I will argue that the poems function as alternative spaces of justice that depict the women's wartime grievances and point at the failures of official interventions, but at the same time transcend conventional images of the birangonas as tragic victims, to highlight their agency in difficult circumstances, their dissenting voices of protest, and their complex affects.

Works cited

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Balasco, Lauren, Eliza Garnsey, Arnaud Kurze and Christopher K. Lamont. 2024. *Justicecraft: Imagining Justice in Times of Conflict*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Faizullah, Tarfia. 2014. *Seam*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Bio

Lourdes López-Ropero is Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of Alicante, where she teaches contemporary literature in English. Her primary research focus has been in the fields of Postcolonial Studies and Memory Studies. She has recently co-edited the volume *Literary and Cultural Responses to Mnemonic Landscapes: Spaces in Transit*. Her articles have appeared in *Commonwealth*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *English Studies*, *Children's Literature in Education*, or *Social Identities*, among other journals. She is PI of a funded project on postconflict women's writing, [RECONFEM](#).

