

The Voiceless Female: The Politics of Language in the World Driven by Binaries

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ABSTRACT

Language is a powerful medium for the subaltern to represent themselves. It is a cultural text which reflects the attitudes and practices of our culture and languages uses us as much as we use language. Just as our word choice for forms of expression is guided by the thoughts we want to express, similarly the way we feel about the things in the real world governs the way we express ourselves about these things. Language and history describes the external reality. Apart from the established objectives, linguistic discourses also have hidden motives. Power structures that govern the society use language as one of the forms of covert politics. Though politics is manifested through different forms in society (art, music, cinema, law), language is a major force behind the perpetuation of any ideology.

Keywords: language, medium, conventions, reflects culture, hidden motives, manifest, ideology

James C. Scott phrases language as the “politics that does not look like politics” (Duncombe 2009:89). Language perpetuates conventions and opens new interpretative possibilities. While evolving constantly language reflects and transmits the norms and ideologies of the dominant. On one hand the language reflects the culture of a society and on the other hand the dominant group exploits it as a powerful weapon to retain their hierarchy over the Other

genders. The Biblical account of Adam naming God's creatures makes language a male forte. In the absence of Eve, God handed over the power of naming to man. Thus scripturally, women are denied access to language, a pivotal medium of expression. It is observed that during the Biblical myth of naming, woman was not merely silent but totally absent. Women have no role or rightful legacy in the encoding and decoding of language but language is controlled, developed and exploited by the male sex. Language is tailored to fulfill their needs and demands. Language, monopolized by men, becomes a vehicle for the insemination of the patriarchal ideologies. Male historians, philosophers, critics and writers fervently guard language from female encroachment, thereby tactfully fending off the insertion of female-centered subject matter into the male dominated tradition of language. The ultimate effect of these discrepancies is that women are systematically denied access to power through language. They are denied linguistic power on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behavior along with other aspects of their behavior. However, the irony here is that women are made to feel that they deserve such treatment, because of inadequacies in their own intelligence or education

The man/woman binary is so scrupulously ingrained in our cultural texts and institutions that it appears normal and natural. Feminists view language as a strategy used by patriarchy to subordinate women in the hierarchy of power. The binary opposites (men/women) acquire their meanings mutually. The female is designated with the 'absent' characteristics of the male. In the widely accepted binaries such as man/woman, language/silence, white/black, presence/absence, good/evil, speech/writing, positive/negative, order/chaos, the first words are presented as self-sufficient but the second terms emerge defective and accidental. According to feminists like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray the first terms in the binaries go together and dominate the

second. Thus patriarchy associates the male with language and presence whereas the female with silence and absence.

Discourses 'about women' and 'of women' are often dismissed as 'feminine' and requiring no critical attention. A scrutiny of 'history' exposes a glaring dearth of women's voice. Feminist linguist, Deborah Cameron observes that, "If we look at a society's most valued linguistic registers...we find women for the most part silent and in many cases silenced" (1998:3). The right to expression has been a man's perquisite. The patriarchal society condemns 'the Other' to 'invisibility' and 'silence'. Women are denied the freedom of expression. Our history, art, literature and religion resonate with the absence of women, not because they were not adept but because their space was filled by men. The muteness or absence of women often inspired men to fill this emptiness with their own ideas, thoughts achievements and expressions. Listing the different functions of language Francine Wattman Frank states: Language combines the functions of a mirror, a tool and a weapon...[language] reflects society... human beings use it to interact with one another...[and] language can be [used] by groups that enjoy the privileges of power...to legitimize their own value system by labeling others 'deviant' or 'inferior' (1989:108). Language contains marks of ownership in grammar and vocabulary, which facilitates the suppression of the feminine.

The animate, cultured and the things of greater value connotes the masculine, whereas the inanimate, uncultured and things of lesser value denotes the feminine. The patriarchal bias can be traced from such connotations. Men have always enjoyed the supremacy of the phallus in language. They have exploited the capacity of language to breed male dominance and female subordination. Sexism is inherent in the system of signs and the users of this sign system construct men and women as unequal. Assigning gender roles is an important strategy to keep

men and women in their 'proper sphere'. Feminist critic K.K Ruthven remarks that language is specifically a woman's prison because in the prison house of language she is a prisoner of the male prisoner, thus doubly disadvantaged. Gender dichotomy in language reduces women to a mechanical tool, tailored to serve men.

Sexism or gender discrimination is a prejudice or stereotyping based on one's sex or gender which includes the belief that one gender is intrinsically superior to another. While society expects men to be at the helm, women are relegated to domestic fulfillment. The male-centered writings overlook the real life experiences of women. A woman's perspectives on marriage, love and familial relations are neglected. Extreme sexism fosters sexual harassment, rape and other forms of sexual violence. Women are expected to have the same perspectives of men in the orthodox patriarchal system. Religious scriptures and cultural institutions are the epitome of misogyny. It is the result of patriarchal social structures. The seeds of sexism/misogyny once planted, will soon germinate and work its roots to all cultural and social institutions. Even the women around a misogynist fail to notice this condition until it's too late. Sexism in language exists when language demeans the other genders. Sexist language promotes patriarchy and supports male superiority. The patriarchal language which operates under the semantic rule of male-as-norm, negatively affects our consciousness, thought processes and perceptions of reality.

Sexism in language is indirect and not always overt. Gradually the 'male' becomes the standard and those who are not male are relegated to the secondary status. Use of generic masculine terms to refer to a group of mixed gender ('mankind' for humanity), use of singular masculine pronouns (he, his, him) as default to refer to a person of unknown gender or terms ending in '-man' that may be performed by members of the other genders ('businessman',

‘chairman’, ‘postman’), these examples testify how language naturalizes the concept of male-as-norm. Use of such general referents is an oblique way of rendering women invisible. These gender prerogatives slacken the importance of women and conceal them under an umbrella male term. Sexist language generates a sexist reality. Apart from supporting the primacy of men, such general referents submerge the identity of women, the other half of the population. Such advert sexism in language can prove detrimental to the women’s identity.

Words used for women are more sexualized than those used for men. Many words in English picture the male as the standard. Sexist language often misleads and feminists find such usages abhorrent. They suggest alternatives for it, such as replacing the female exclusive ‘chairman’ with the title ‘chair’ for the head of the institution. Even the common terminologies like ‘manmade’ or ‘mankind’ can be substituted with ‘artificial’ or ‘humanity’ respectively. In short, use of erroneous and ambiguous gender specific terms tampers reality. Language is phallogocentric, essentially impairing the individuality of women. Gender specific pejorative terms intimidate and constrain another person because of their gender. While feminine terms are used exclusively to refer to the members of the female sex, the masculine terms refer to both male sex and the human beings in general. Such human referents expose the hidden oppressive structures, lurking within the male-centered language. Privileging of the phallus is reflected in the structure of language and is effectively augmented in patriarchal writings. The patriarchal society encodes sexism in language to fortify the male supremacy.

Most Feminist movements since twentieth century have considered language in their theorizing. These theories have maintained a critical stance, which calls for a shift in the way speakers use language in their day-to-day life. Feminists expose the oblique patriarchal agendas behind the linguistic discourse. Language is one of the strategies deployed by the patriarchal

society to reinforce and perpetuate their ideologies. Female philosophers, writers and critics often fail to shape a reality favourable to them, using a language sodded with male preferences. All discourses radiate the different forms of power relations existing within the society. In the linguistic system women do not enjoy the same space as men. Women are captive in a male-centered discourse, forced to endorse the patriarchal ideologies enclosed within language. Gender identity imposed through language obliges women to pretend. Every woman desires to resist the conventions she is forced to conform. However ages of acquiescence has led to the loss of her identity and made her unable to resist her object positioning. While man steers, woman is relegated to the periphery. Patriarchy deliberately suppresses and stifles a woman's competency and proficiency. A woman's dilemmas are rarely acknowledged in a male-centered traditional language which is closed to the female perspectives. The talents of women are snipped off at an early stage so that it does not intimidate patriarchy. Meritorious or intellectual women are comprehended as eccentric. Patriarchal indoctrination trains female children to use language, not to express but to submit. The phallogentric language either fits women in the role assigned by patriarchy or portrays them as the rebels who stand out and get punished for not conforming to the agendas of patriarchy. She has no choice, but to be content with the male concepts of the female and to never question or retaliate. Feminists challenge the patriarchal insistence on women to use veiled and oblique style of speaking and writing. Explaining the role of 'woman as a reader', Elaine Showalter in her essay Towards a Feminist Poetics remarks about the stereotyped images of women in literature; the fissures, omissions and manipulations in male-constructed literary history and reduced identity of woman as a 'sign' in semiotic systems.

Language is an identity marker because language and communication are central to our behaviour pattern and identity. The way we speak or write has an impact on one's socialization.

However, the biased language cripples the non-normative group. Relegated to the insignificant realm women rarely get a chance to speak or write. Women are devoid of autonomy in the male literary canon. Women are insecure in the man-made 'trap' called language. Women's speech pattern indicate their self-image; the politeness, non-assertiveness or non-swearing associated with the female speech are suggestive of their inferior positioning in the labyrinth called language. Language fails to convey the perspectives of women. The dominant male group is consistently favoured by the sexist political structure. The patriarchal society ridicules a woman who employs the traditional feminine modes of speaking and scorns at a woman who employs more assertive ways of expression amateurish.

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