

POETICS, POLITICS AND LINGUISTICS: DISMANTLING OF ANDROCENTRIC AND COLONIAL ASSUMPTIONS

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Inquisitive minds have always speculated on the nature of human speech. Countless works have been written dealing with the structure and classification of languages, their connections and points of divergence, their morphology and changing phonetic systems. Theorists, from time to time, have attempted to disinfect language of its unpredictable elements and bring it close to logic and mathematics. Yet, no study is more rewarding or fascinating than linguistics. Language touches on all subjects and overflows into every discipline. It exerts a direct and visible influence on our daily lives. The study of foreign tongues, the revival of ancient languages, the problems of translation, the adoption of a world language, the ethics of advertising, the ravages of propaganda and, above all, the vexing questions of correct speech — these are the subjects which fill the air.

We are linguistic creatures and the world in which we live is described through language. It allegedly follows that there is nothing outside language — everything is discourse and discourse is everything. This makes language omnipotent, omnipresent, so dominant, so facilitating as to give expression to ideas. Our very "being," our "identities," our "perspectives" are constituted through language. Therefore, we are not only "what we speak" but "what speaks us."

"One single word makes a tremendous difference. That is why, you can never be too sure what a word will do." These words of warning from George Lamming, a Caribbean writer, provide an important reminder of the challenge of language, its capacity to chain and to change. As an abstract grammatical system, language may, by some, be considered a closed circuit. But this would be treating it in isolation. Language is social and historical; meaning exists only in relation with "others" and these "others" exist in structured, social relationships. However, there is a political theory in how words are positioned in relation to other words. Oppression is ultimately said to be rooted in the way in which we and others are defined linguistically.

Language is not a mere string of words; it has a suggestive power well beyond lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language is reinforced by poetic language, as the poet alone has the power to give "a local habitation and a name to airy nothing." He manipulates language to the utmost and plays with words. However, many thinkers like Jacques Derrida refute the idea. Derrida

believes that imprisoned with words, we can never hope to liberate ourselves from the structures of oppression rooted in language itself. Michel Foucault contends that language and meaning are social constructs defined by whoever happens to hold power. Looking at the issue from a political perspective, I will try to bring in focus how language has played against women and people in general in the history of the imperial domination of the West.

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft *et al*, say that language is the fundamental site of struggle because post-colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre — planting the language of empire in a new place remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted, it provides names by which the world may be known. (Ashcroft *et al*, 1989.)

In *Being and Time*, section 34, Heidegger remarks, "The Greeks had no word for language." After all, a word for language is redundant for a culture that believes "Whatever is not Greek is not language."

In the context of sixteenth century England, Paula Blank opines that the use of English in place of Latin was not to champion the cause of English against Latin, but to construct a one, true English in place of myriads of dialects, eliminating the competing forms of vernacular, in favour of the authoritative King's English.

"The dominion of Latin, enduring in the predominance of Latin elements in so many modern European vernaculars, was widely envisioned by Renaissance writers not only as a historical consequence of the Roman conquest of England and the continent, but as a means by which that conquest was achieved. Linguistic unity, leveling the "difference of language" across national borders, was understood to be a powerful weapon in service of attaining and consolidating imperial claims. The author of one of the earliest European vernacular grammars, Antonio de Nebrija, is often credited as the first writer explicitly to link linguistic rule with imperial rule, reminding his sovereign that language had always been the "companion of empire," and that those brought under Spain's sovereignty "must necessarily accept the laws the conqueror imposes on the conquered, and together with them our language." (Blank, 1996, p 126.)

Moving on to the nineteenth century Victorian scene, we see the Mayor, in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, rebuking his daughter for using non-standardized English: "One grievous failing of Elizabeth's was her occasional pretty and picturesque use of dialect words — those terrible marks of the beast to the truly genteel." (ch 20.) This goes to show the extent to which the standardized form of English was associated with low social class or derogatory occupation. In the novel, Elizabeth's apology further proves that standardized language was something sacrosanct and violation of its rules was a sin. Thus, in other words, language of dialect, which is socially unacceptable, is mistakably categorized as linguistically incorrect.

Post-colonial writers, on the other hand, take an opposing stance. Kamau Braithwaite, a Caribbean writer, calls patois — the Creole variety — his *Nation Language* and takes pride in it. Writers like Bapsi Sidhwa (a Pakistani Diasporic writer living in America) write in English — but it is a new “English” — punctuated with words from the native language. However, it is not just a simple addition of words from the native language to English; while the writer translates a number of words from his native language, a large number of words are left untranslated, which is a part of a strategy used by the writer as a form of resistance against the hegemony of the English language.

Bill Ashcroft *et al* in *The Empire Writes Back* observe that translation of individual words in a text is the most obvious and most common authorial intrusion in cross-cultural texts. Juxtaposing the words in this way suggests that meaning of a word is its referent. But the simple matching of words from the native language with its translated version in English reveals the general inadequacy of such an exercise. The moment a word from a native language is juxtaposed with its referent in English, instead of clarifying the meaning, it shows the gap between the word and its referent. Bill Ashcroft *et al* argue that the implicit gap between the word from the native language and its referent, disputes the putative referentiality of the word from the native language as a cultural sign.

The use of untranslated words, so argue the same theorists, is a clear signifier that the language that actually informs the novel is an other language. Using untranslated words is a part of the strategy of the post-colonial writer to highlight the cultural differences. Therefore, Sidhwa has successfully questioned the British and Indian versions of the subcontinent's history and through her unique mode of expression, has provided an alternative version of history based on her own point of view. It accounts for the fact that post-colonial writers and theorists outrightly reject the notion of unitary and homogenous human nature, which marginalizes and excludes the distinctive categories of post-colonial societies.

Let us now move to the second issue — language with respect to women. We have already identified language as a prison-house which limits our existence. To quote Wittgensten, “the limits of my language are the limits of my world.” Here, restriction applies to both men and women. My argument, however, is that language specifically is a woman's prison and linguistically speaking, women are doubly disadvantaged by being prisoners of patriarchy as well.

In an androcentric society, to speak or to be spoken of is to encounter verbal instances of sexism. If you happen to be a woman and try to speak, you will experience difficulties in finding an appropriate speaking position. If we concede that androcentricism is inscribed in language, the immediate question is, at what level? What kind of linguistics does feminism promote? K.K. Ruthven, in his book, *Feminist Literary Studies* (1989), emphasizes that irrespective of whether language was invented by men or otherwise, it serves their purpose much better than it serves women. He further says that in a patriarchy, calling it the father tongue, what euphemistically goes by the name of “mother tongue” would be politically more accurate. In the same book Ruthven quotes Dorothy Richadron, “In speech with a man, a woman is at a disadvantage — because they speak different languages. She may understand his. Hers he will never speak nor understand. In pity, or from other motives, she must therefore, stammeringly speak his.”

Joyce Penfield, in his book *Women and Language in Transition* (1987), brings about different instances how language works against women. Different adjectives, he says, are applied to the actions or productions of different sexes. Women's work is referred to as "pretty" or "nice" and men's work as "masterful" or "brilliant." While words such as "master," "prince," "lord" and "father" have all maintained their stately meanings, the similar words "mistress," "madam" and "dame" have acquired debased meaning.

Women's sex is commonly treated as if it is the most salient characteristic of her being, but this is not the case for men. Penfield, in searching terms, argues that trivialization more often than not accompanies many terms applied to females, while male-based terms suggest concerns of importance. Fraternity and mastermind are male based terms while female based terms tend to refer to unimportant things — for example a lady-finger, etc. Women are more often referred to in relational terms, for example, as "wife of" or "mother of." While naming sexes, males commonly come first, like in "Adam and Eve," "Antony and Cleopatra." Incidentally, this male-precedent usage follows rules explicitly stated centuries ago. Moreover, the male power to define through naming is seen in the tradition of a woman's losing her own name upon marriage, and giving birth to children who will have the man's name.

A large number of research studies demonstrate that the paramount example of the way in which language ignores females is the "generic masculine" or "pseudo-generic," as Stanley (1978) has termed it, — the use of masculine to refer to human beings in general. It is common in such terms like "chairman," "spokesman," "men of goodwill," the "two-man boat" — women are utterly ignored in the language simply owing to their not being topics of discourse. Therefore, sex polarization that crops up in male supremacy is fundamentally encoded in our language, and those who fight to retain their privilege will defended it vehemently.

References

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