

## THE DISCOURSE OF GENDER AND POWER IN LANGUAGES

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Gender is an independent and important determining factor in the organization of any society. Like class, gender is a structure based on socio-cultural production and sustained by ideology. Language being a product of culture and the only means of verbal communication not only reflects the socio-cultural structure of the society but also reinforces its ideological practices in various ways. The relationship between language and gender is two fold: grammatical gender and biological, socio-cultural gender. However, the term gender here is not referred to the grammatical category in language, which quite often is arbitrary, but to the socially determined distinction between the two sexes: male and female, and to the cultural and psychological meanings that attach rather frame these sexual identities consciously or unconsciously.

The system of language projects sexist bias needs no further clarification, because it is inherent to the system. Speakers, narrators, writers consciously or unconsciously, actively participate in the construction of the inequality that exists between sexes in society. In patriarchal societies patriarchy is endemic to all types of interaction and organization, and language is no exception. Patriarchal worldview of a culture is reflected in the attitudes and language behavior of its speakers giving way to andocentric and male centered word-view, which results in male activities being evaluated positively and female activities negatively. It hardly needs to be emphasized here that concept formation is a cultural activity shared by the entire group, and precedes language codification and lexicalization. Both concept categories and word images are gendered and reflect differences nurtured by the culture. The cultural qualities ascribed to men are bravery, physical strength, confidence, knowledge and logic and to women beauty, delicacy, timidity, ignorance, irrationalism; as a result, both written and oral discourse have portrayed them in these cultural images. Languages all the time make use of their available devices to lexicalize these concepts to reinforce the socio-cultural values and ideologies. These values not only determine the attitudes of a group but also have direct bearing on the language and the language behavior of its speakers. The differences can clearly be seen in the expressions like 'men rule and women drool', 'men yell' and 'women scream', 'men get angry' and 'women fret', 'men have careers' and 'women have jobs.'

Andocentrism in languages is reflected at various levels, formal as well as semantic, phonological, lexical, phrasal and proverbial and at behavioral and attitudinal levels. It has lately drawn the attention and criticism of scholars world over. These aspects have been the subject of many studies descriptive, critical and suggestive of a counter system of language devoid of these biases. While scholars like Labov, Robin Lakoff and others<sup>1</sup> have made attempts at identifying some features of male female language and their paralinguistic features, others studied conversational assertiveness of male in terms of 'high' incidence of males interrupting females or husbands answering or speaking on behalf of their wives or for them. This paper, however, will concentrate on the language in general, the everyday speech shared by the entire community irrespective of their sex and age, and attempt at bringing out some of the gendered power relations and biases in languages.

Although gender bias and prejudice against the female sex is visible in language at every level, it appears to be more marked and apparent at the level of lexical semantics and proverbial expressions than any other aspect of language. English word "mistress" that was a term of authority used for a woman who had authority over servants, children and the household was equal in status to the term "master", has in due course of time acquired a negative connotation meaning concubine and 'prostitute', while as "master" continues to enjoy the same status and a positive connotation even now. A man as "governor" exercises authority over people and state and the "governess" merely obeys orders. She belongs to the small world of children and home. Even simple words like "brainy", "smart" and "professional" have acquired different connotations for men and women. Women are seen solely in terms of sexuality as in "courtesan", "devadaasi", "ranDii".

Quite often it is argued that the Indian languages are not as male biased as their western counterparts. A few examples taken from Indian languages and discussed in the following sections, however proves otherwise. The words "daas" and "devadaas" (devotee) have no negative connotation in Hindi and other Indian languages but their feminine forms "daasi" (slave) and "devadaasi" are used as synonym for a prostitute. Similarly Hindi and Punjabi word "rakhel" (mistress) has no masculine counterpart in these languages. The word "*ranDua*" meaning a widower in Hindi, Punjabi and Gujarati has a feminine form "*ranDi*" (widow), which in addition to widowhood has acquired very bad connotation of being a prostitute and a slut, thereby encompassing all other negative attributes of these characters. In conformity with the culture and its attitudes towards women, languages have various expressions proverbial and others to degrade a widow. Gujarati proverb *vidhavana hazaar dhani* (a widow is the property of thousands), *chinaal, raanD camakati caale* (a promiscuous woman and widow walk with airs and blandishments), and *ranDi raanDana saapa laage nahi* (Widowed woman's curse is not effective), amply illustrate the apathy of widowhood in the Gujarati culture and the scene is not different in other culture-linguistic regions of the country.

Being "manly" refers to 'becoming a man; brave; dignified; noble; pertaining to manhood; not childish or womanish'.<sup>2</sup> and the word "womanish" is defined as 'effeminate, feminine'.<sup>3</sup> The words "purushatva", "paurush", and "mardaanagi" in Hindi and Urdu share all positive meanings of "manly" and "staitva" is less specific and refers to 'a woman, female or woman like qualities'. Derived from "stree" (woman, female), Hindi "strain" is defined as 'effeminate, feminine, womanish/womanly; henpecked'.<sup>4</sup> Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 1973 (8<sup>th</sup> edition) defines "effeminate" thus: 'having qualities (as weakness and softness inappropriate to man)'. In this context it is interesting to know that "hijaDaas" (eunuchs) who biologically are neither male nor female actually associate themselves more with feminine behavior and attire, irrespective of their assigned masculine gender category in both Hindi and Urdu languages. This is suggestive of a world view that male is essential or primary category and what is not male is female, be it human, non-human, animal etc.

Human beings have a tendency to divide things in binary opposite pairs such as good - bad, right - wrong etc. It appears that bias against female sex is carried over to the word order of the compounds and other expressions. A glance at the pairing order of English and some Indian languages exhibits some kind of preference of a male over females such as king - queen, husband-wife, man-woman, brothers-sisters, sons-daughters "nara-naarii", "raajaa-raanii", "pati-patanii", "*laDakaa-laDakii*" and "vara-vadhu" in the same order of preference like, good-bad, right-wrong, light and darkness, high and low, life and death, rich and poor, big and small, the first component being essential, primary and more desirable than the

second one. In fact the term "vadhu" has no independent status, it is realized in relation to preceding word as in "vara-vadhu" (groom and bride), "Raam kii vadhu" (Ram's bride / wife) and "nagara-vadhu" (prostitute). . The Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi word order is fixed and identical to the one in English, such as "raajaa-raani", "pati-patni", "miyaan-biibii", "bhai-behan", "beetaa-betii", "caacaa-caacii", "nar-naari", "marad-aurat", "laDakaa-laDakii", "vara-vadhu", "Shiva-Paravati" etc to cite a few. The hypothesis of the first component being more important and desirable than the second is corroborated by expressions like "maa-beTii", "baapa-beta", "saasa-bahu", "nanada-bhaabhi" " Shiva-Shankar"; wherein both the components belong to the same gender but the socio-kinship system ranks them in order of preference, importance and respectability. However, the occurrence of female names preceding the male ones as in "Sitaram", "Radhakrishen", "Radheshyam", "Lakshminarayan", "Gaurishankar" and "Umamaheshwar", may suggest to their contextual and stylistic compulsions. The theory of male bias creeping into Indian languages as a result of foreign influence needs further investigation with more evidences.

A woman almost always is defined, differentiated and identified with reference to a male member of the family and denied an identity of her own as is evident in our naming patterns and address terms from girlhood to womanhood. As for the naming pattern, she is like a rolling stone that gathers no mass. When born she gets her father's name and on her marriage her husband's name, thereby questioning her very existence without a man. She is almost always addressed in relation to a male member of the family, his daughter, sister, wife or mother as in "Ram ki beti / behan / biwi/ amma" .thereby making her dependent on a male relation all through her life. Manu described the fate of a female as one whom 'Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.' (Manusmriti 9.3) If we believe that there is something more in a name than a mere label or tag, the loss of name amounts to the loss of one's identity something that is most degrading and makes woman a mere object of sex a possession of man, and that may explain the female based nature of verbal abuses. A man is almost always abused through a woman that belongs to him be it a daughter, sister, niece or mother. These abuses notionally defile and demean female sex as a whole. In contrast, there are no, or fewer abuses directed towards the male relations such as father, brother etc. When you abuse a woman you abuse her directly by calling her names like 'bitch', 'whore', 'slut' etc. Either way all the abuses are channeled through women or targeted at them. On the other hand all the blessings to a female are targeted at her male relations, husband, brother, father and son as in "saubhaagyawati bhawa", "putravati bhawa"; "dekabaD", "potragaassh", "bab lasinay", "booy lasinay" in Kashmiri. The denial of identity and respectability to a female is expressed in various ways. For instance the address forms for male and female are different, men address their wives in singular non-honorific form and women make use of honorific form for their husbands. In some cultures a female child is always addressed in neuter non human terms. In Tamil, a girl child is referred to as "poTTay kuTTi", a phrase that is associated with the young one of an animal.

Preference for a male child in India culminates in the neglect of a girl child, and the system of dowry makes her a burden for the family. Expressions like "paraayaa dhan", "luuka hund maal" (goods that belong to others) in Hindi and Kashmiri and "kanyaadhaan" equate women with objects or animals that are given away as alms, and very clearly explain the status of women in Indian society. Both through the practice of dowry and bride price a woman is reduced to a commodity either economically harmful or useful. Consider the following proverbs of Gujarati language:

*dikri to paarki thaapan kaheyaay*

( A girl child is the property of others.)

*dikri ne gay Dore tyaan jay*

(A girl child is like a cow and is driven in the direction the elders choose.)

*dikri etle saapno bhaaro*

(A girl is a burden for the parents [who are always worried about her marriage])

Marital status is an important component of woman's public social identity not of man's. 'A previously married man is a "bachelor", a previously married woman is a "divorcee", with the implication being that a bachelor has future, and a divorcee has had a past'.<sup>5</sup> Men are known by their profession and women by their husbands or their profession such as Mrs...., "dhoban" (washer man's wife), "maalan" (gardener's wife), "naayin" (barber's wife). 'A man is defined in the serious world by what he does, a woman by her sexuality, that is in terms of one particular aspect of her relationship to men.', observes Lakoff.<sup>6</sup>

Proverbs that are assumed to represent the collective wisdom of a culture continue to exhibit a strong gender bias. Proverbs about women being stupid, inferior, unintelligent, untrustworthy, and quarrelsome are numerous in Indian languages cutting across language and regional barriers, so are the ones advocating beating of women, to keep them under control or to 'put them in their place'. Kashmiri proverb *zanaani akli chu bati kaaminy gatchaan* (A woman's wisdom /advice leads to scarcity and non availability of food), Hindi expressive *aurat ki salah pe chale w oh chuutiya* (He who follows a woman's advice is a stupid) and Tamil ariwai *mooli keTTaal apattana aawaana* (A man who listens to woman or is guided by her brings disaster on himself), amply illustrate the power sharing strategies and discourse of these languages. Tulsidass in his great epic *Ramayana* not only justified violence against women by sayings *Dol ganwaar shudra pashu naarii, yeh sab taaDaan ke adhikaarii* (A drum, unsophisticated person, lower caste person, cattle and women deserve to be beaten.), but also equated them with low caste, inferior beings, cattle and inanimate things like drum. Not surprising a Kashmiri woman is quite often blessed with the expression *zanaani gatchi rany sinz vodi tsand rooziny mujuud* (A woman should always have the pleasure of being beaten by her husband (on her head)). A Punjabi proverb describes the differential impact of male and female death thus: *moii run giTe dii saTT, marda mare tan sir dii saTT* (If the wife dies it is like a blow on the ankle, if a husband dies it is like a blow on the head).

Traditionally men have the tendency to dominate in mixed gender interactions and women are expected not to make substantive verbal contribution in such mixed social settings. This cultural attitude is expressed in very strong words in Indian proverbial expressions, such as:

*Satavanti ko laaj baD, chinaarii ke baat baD* (Hindi)

'A chaste woman is bashful and a slut a great talker'.

*Murgii kii bang kaa kyaa aetibaar* (Hindi)

'A talkative woman should not be trusted'.

It will be very appropriate here to mention the importance of speech which is not a mere utterance but represents power and life itself. Controlling speech is a power game, the powerful speaks and the less powerful listens as it can be observed in political and public rallies. The speaker invariably stands on a higher platform as opposed to the audience. The powerful a ruler or a leader speaks and the subjects and the followers listen in silence. Silence is a sign of submission and "raising a voice" a revolt. Besides power, speech also symbolizes life, and silence death. When someone is "silenced" he or she is rendered helpless, powerless, and lifeless, therefore the adage "Dead don't speak".

As said earlier, a woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man. She is "incidental" and unessential as opposed to the "essential". The stereotypes about talking are that when men talk, it is serious, becomes discussion and eventually makes sense; and when women talk it is termed as "gossip",

nonsense and non serious irrespective of their status and relevance. The news of the final round of talks between the British Prime Minister Mrs. Margret Thatcher and Mrs. Indira Gandhi the Indian Prime Minister held in New Delhi was flashed by Guardian newspaper with the title "girl talk". It is referred as "zanaan! kathl" in Kashmiri, "pombalu peccu" in Tamil "andaaDa kuta" and "aaDagaala" ( the chirps of females) in Telugu, implying something non serious , not worth listening to.

Gender related asymmetries in languages are numerous. Some common words like leader, teacher, linguist, scientist, manager, editor etc., which in principle can have either masculine or feminine reference, in actual usage are used assuming male reference. Male constitutes the norm and female a deviation. Therefore special female markers are used to basic nouns to explicitly refer to female scientists, female teacher, lady doctor, lady manager etc. All power yielding terms are male centered. For example Hindi word "pati" has three dominant senses –(a) husband, (b)master, (c) head, possessor Several other words are derived from each of these senses such as "patidharma", ( duty towards the husband), "patibhakti" (devotion to the husband ), "patiseva" ( dedication to the husband), "pativrata" ( a faithful wife, a virtuous wife ); "bhupati" ( king, emperor ), "lakhapati" ( millionaire), "karoDpati" (billionaire); and words like "sabhapati", ( chairman), "raashtrapati" ( President ), " kulapati" (Vice Chancellor), respectively to name a few. In contrast, "patni" the feminine form of "pati" means only 'wife, a female spouse'. No words parallel to "pati" are derived from "patni". In course of time and in view of women's emancipation and participation in politics and other fields of development and education, Hindi like some other languages makes use of its available grammatical and other devices to coin new words such as "adhyakshaa", "mahodaya" to denote the feminine reference of the term, but then these devices fail when it comes to power yielding words like "sabhapati", "raashtrapati", "kulapati". Recently after Mrs. Pratibha Patil assumed the office of the President of India national newspapers were abuzz with questions and suggestions about how she should be addressed. The fact remains that most of the vocabulary in many fields 'mocks, degrades, excludes or sentimentalizes women'.

This gender related asymmetries are aggravated and legitimized by language behavior of the speakers, scholars, writers, material producers. This gendered discourse both oral and written , has its impact on language learning tools such as text books, children's literature and dictionaries. In American Heritage Dictionary (School Edition, 1974) reference to boys and men outnumbered references to girls and women. Use of the words "he", "him" and "his" were found to be four times more frequent than the use of "she", "her" and "her's". Based on the results of an analysis of sentences taken from children's books and magazines, these pronouns were used to illustrate the word entries in the dictionary. A glance into the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1966 edition) reveals that females are more frequently associated with domestic contexts such as mothers, wives, hostesses and the world of fashion and glamour and in emotional situations. Men on the other hand are portrayed in the roles related to business and finance. It hardly needs to be emphasized here that educational materials such as text books, dictionaries and school readers etc. are considered far more credible and have a normative function. Students are less likely to disregard or be critical of these materials and are more attentive to the messages these convey.

Although it is being argued that the lexicographers describe the language as it is, thereby, implying that dictionaries mirror the gender bias of the language and the culture it belongs to. Yet besides this inherent bias in the language, the lexicographer's mode of operation, methodology and presentation leaves ample

scope for individual and shared bias to creep in, which in turn is reflected in dictionaries right from the planning stage through collection, selection, presentation and meaning of the words to the editing stage. Although dictionaries are not planned for a particular sex, yet in practice the collection and selection of data, defy these parameters, so does the presentation part. For example, the data for a dictionary is collected either from written sources alone, or entirely from oral sources, or from both written and oral texts, depending on the language, its literary history, the type, purpose and scope of the dictionary. The selection of the texts theoretically, is determined by the above mentioned factors. However, historically women had no access to or very little knowledge of writing systems and literature, so their contribution to written classical literature has been minimal and that was never considered the "standard" and thus ignored by lexicographers, because the focus of these dictionaries has primarily been prescriptive or normative. It is further observed that while collecting linguistic data from non written sources the informants due to certain socio-cultural reasons are very often males. Needless to say that certain expressive form in language is gender specific. In this manner then, at least half of the expressive repertoire of a society or a speech community is overlooked by investigating and collecting only the verbal behavior of one sex alone, or those areas where one sex performs. Just because the other half of the data is more difficult to reach, is no reason to ignore it, nor does that make it less important. Women informants are either ignored or rarely sought only if male informants are not available; or occasionally if the materials concerned are an area thought of as women's domain.

Selection of words for a dictionary is equally biased in the sense that public arenas are more easily available and preferred than private ones. It is too often assumed that expressive activity flourishes in formal and public domains which more often is a male prerogative. Lexicographers rely too much on formal language which traditionally has been male oriented than the female arenas like home, child bearing and rearing etc. For some linguists, "standard" language may even exclude women's speech. Mary Ritchie in her study on male female language refers to this kind of discriminating situation of women speaking Prakrit and men Sanskrit. (Ritchie 1975)

At the level of presentation of entries, their meanings and definitions the male bias comes in because historically language studies and lexicography have been a male activity, highly dominated by them, and the situation has not changed much over the years. Therefore, it is not a surprise that male and male related activities are evaluated positively and female activities negatively. Feminists have from time to time pointed out that, the traditional dictionaries not only ignore the words and definitions created by women, but include many sexist definitions and examples. Chris Kramarae very aptly questions the authority of traditional dictionaries and expresses her dissatisfaction of these with these comments:

'The dictionary is not designed by women or for women's exercise of imagination. It is a basic laugh at women, a book which sets forth a category system, a way of knowing ourselves and our relationships with the rest of the earth. It is not only a hostile system for women, but it is constantly referred to as the only system'<sup>7</sup> (1994)

An outcome of this anguish was the publication of *A Feminist Dictionary* in 1985 by Kramarae and Treichler presenting the feminist point of view of the language, giving precedence to the language spoken by women, and their understanding of it. The feminist emancipation aims at structural transformation rather than changing the social relationships. Although, the feminist anger at the male bias in language

and lexicography is justified to a great extent, and the publication of this dictionary could be a wake up call, yet resorting to extreme step of representing only the female point of view would be as erroneous, unjustified and counter productive as the male point of view. It is high time that sociologists, linguists, lexicographers and text book writers overcome their gender biases at least while preparing dictionaries and other educational materials, because these play a vital role in the development of , language. and the gender-specific psyches among the younger generations.

#### Notes and References

1. For details see, William Labov. 1966. Hypercorrection by the Lower Middle Class as a Factor in Linguistic Change. William Bright (ed.) *Sociolinguistics*. The Hague: Moutan. pp.84-102. and William Labov. 1907. The Study of Language in its Social Context. *Stadium Generale*. 23. 30-87. Also see Robin Lakoff. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper& Row.
2. Chambers. 1971. *Twentieth Century Dictionary*. Allied Publishers.
3. *Ibid*.
4. Chaturvedi, Mahendera and Bholanath Tiwari. 1970. *A Practical Hindi- English Dictionary*. Delhi: National Publishing House.
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7. Kramarae, Chris. 1994. Punctuating the Dictionary. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 135-154.

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