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The Dismantling of Linguistic Hegemony: An Odyssey to Gender Neutrality in Language

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Abstract:

Language is usually seen as not that important, but research over the last decade has suggested that how we speak also influences how we think. Gender inequality can be manifested in sexist language. Sexist language is a language that expresses bias in favour of one sex and thus discriminates against the other. In general the bias is in favour of men and against women. Any language that discriminates against women by not adequately reflecting their role, status and presence in society is sexist. Sexist language can be avoided with careful word choice. This omnipresence of gendered language may be part of the problem.

The present paper seeks to explore the biases embedded in the language which is the bearer of the legacy of gender inequality through illustrations from scriptures, textbooks in school curriculum, film industry, media and portrayal of woman in media. It is also an attempt to search for a path from an andro-centric language to a gender – neutral language.

Keywords: Androcentric language, Linguistic hegemony, Sexist discourses, Gender neutral language, linguistic hierarchies.

Language is one of the most important tools of discourses and any language that enforces structural domination and suppression resulting from its prejudices and greed for supremacy is called a gendered language. Since its very inception language has been a puppet in the hands of the powerful and needless to say, man has always been powerful enough to exercise its dominance over females since times immemorial. Thus the words created by males have been exercised as the primary referent and consequently appropriated and codified as well as internalized by females. Herein lies the unconscious passive acceptance of subjugation, discrimination and patriarchy. The consequent infiltration is deeply responsible in creating a stereotype of victimized, oppressed, passive and feeble woman.

Almost every field of discourse employs this signs and symbols called words for communication. Communication without words is something one cannot has think of. Let us consider areas of life with low-visibility, areas that generally go unnoticed or lack consideration. Language and education, after all, infiltrate all areas of human life and have the most potential for damage, the former even more so than the latter. Even if the more noticeable transgressions someday undergo complete rehabilitation with regards to gender equality, there are still other aspects of language and education that will need work and take longer to amend. Textbooks here are shocking with their stereotypes. Women are wives, teachers, secretaries or nurses. Nothing else. They are shown with their kids, shopping or cooking. Men are whatever they want to be, usually never with the kids and if they are cooking, it is because their job is a chef. Gendered language is so common that it's difficult for some people to even notice it. From job postings to

laws, words such as policeman, councilman, mankind, and fireman abound. Let it be scriptures, textbooks, audio-visual medias, movies, prose, poetry fiction etc. Almost nothing has been spared by the web of gendered words. And simultaneously the biases too have become inevitable as such.

Language is used by the powerful to create binary oppositions so that the reins of superiority and supremacy are held tightly by the patriarchs. Since nothing can be apolitical and personal is political, androcentric language is used to indoctrinate patriarchal supremacy and masculine hegemony into various strands of society through its culture, literature, arts, education, literature etc. Patriarchal androcentric language poses itself to be the primary referent and grants a subaltern, subordinate inferior status and space to the language used for women.

The privilege of being absolute is always enjoyed by the man through this androcentric language. The category called feminine is constructed with primary referent male, the masculine, the centre: “Just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique is defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine” (Beauvoir, 1972:15)

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the other. (1972:16)

Androcentric language creates an ideology suited to its needs and demands and this ideology is reinforced in the psyche of both the genders through the agencies of religious scriptures, through internalization of codes and conventions which are written nowhere but in the minds of people. At the periphery stands the submissive woman who accepts the linguistic hegemony with unparalleled readiness and passes it on to the generations without questioning the reliability of the androcentric language. Language is used as a mechanism to perpetuate the discriminations through almost all discourses composed of signs and symbols. All these discourses are engaged in a continual cultural construction of subjugated subjectivity of woman. The androcentric language accepts all that is in conformity with its status of superiority but rejects all the deviations as aberrations that don't fall into its vicious circle of superiority. The construction of an ideology is an ongoing process that employs language as a tool. Language of almost all discourses from family model to nursery rhymes and fairy tales, from advertisements to comic books and from soap operas to films participate in promoting patriarchy.

Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* encapsulates from a West Indian perspective the variety of languages and codes of behavior that construct femininity. The following extract is a piece of advice given to a young girl:

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the colour clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothes-line to dry ... you mustn't talk to wharf-rat boy, not even to give directions ... this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so keen on becoming, be sure to wash everyday, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles- you are not a boy, you know ... this is how to make a pepper pot, this is how to make a good medicine for a cold, this is how to make a man love you ... (1986:326)

The indoctrination of androcentric language and notions begins at a very early stage when a child is in a phase of identification of the world around. The nursery rhymes, the toys and the games they are taught to play are the very first steps towards creating an interior mental landscape grounded in patriarchy. "**Poor Mary**" or "**Poor Jenny**" is a popular English language nursery rhyme and singing game. It has a Roud Folk Song Index number of 1377. Poor Jenny is a-weeping,

A-weeping, a-weeping,
 Poor Jenny is a-weeping
 On a bright summer's day.
 Why are you weeping,
 Weeping, weeping,
 Why are you weeping,
 On a bright summer's day?
 I'm weeping for a loved one,
 A loved one, a loved one,
 I'm weeping for a loved one,
 On a bright summer's day.

The above mentioned poem is a lyric and that too, a popular one meant for kids. The image that is created by the lyric implies that the young girl Jenny is very weak emotionally and is seeking for someone who will love her. At a very tender age such patriarchal thoughts are impregnated in the minds of the kids and the 'weeping' will be always associated with female.

"**Little Miss Muffet**" is a nursery rhyme, one of the most commonly printed in the mid-twentieth century.^[1] It has a Roud Folk Song Index number of 20605. Little Miss Muffet Sat on a tuffet,
 Eating her curds and whey;
 Along came a spider
 Who sat down beside her
 And frightened Miss Muffet away.

The Little Miss Muffet too is a nursery rhyme where the word 'frightened' establishes the cowardly trait of a girls personality. Thus language that is loaded with androcentric assumptions are taught at such a tender age.

Religious scriptures are the primary texts that are accepted by any individual with an unquestioning authority and internalized by the individual with full dedication and this texts, through their language create stereotypes of man and woman – man as the absolute and essential and woman as the incomplete and inessential. Almost all religious scriptures promote male subordination under the guise of words of God. Given below are the lines from theological contexts from Christianity. **Genesis 2:18, 22-24**

Then the Lord God said, " *It is not good that thee man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.*" ... *And the rib that the Lord God had from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the mad said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she will be called a Woman because she was taken out of Man.'* Therefore a man should leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Colossians 3:18 *Wives submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.*

Peter 3:1-2 Likewise, wives be subject to your husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wife, when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

1 Tim 2:8-11—*I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. [Men are to lead; women are to be modest, learning quietly, and in submission; in this way, they prove their claim to godliness.]* The above mentioned lines from Christian theology use adjectives that bind a woman in to gender specific roles with gender specific traits—shamefacedness, sobriety, pure conduct, respectful, subject, silence and subjection etc.

Manusmriti or Laws of Manu, also known as Manav Dharamshashtra' is the one of the widely read and followed earliest traditional literature in Hinduism. Its believed in Hindu tradition that Manusmriti is a text which includes Lord Brahma's wisdom. However, the text is contradictory in itself. One of these flaws is the portrayal of women. Apart from these laws, there are various other laws about duties according to caste, and their relation to women. The below mentioned lines are excerpts from Chapter IX of Manusmriti:

1. Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control.

3. 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. **5.** Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear); for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on two families.

6. Considering that the highest duty of all castes, even weak husbands (must) strive to guard their wives¹¹. Let the (husband) employ his (wife) in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping (everything) clean, in (the fulfilment of) religious duties, in the preparation of his food, and in looking after the household utensils.

10. Let him wed a female free from bodily defects, who has an agreeable name, the (graceful) gait of a Hamsa or of an elephant, a moderate (quantity of) hair on the body and on the head, small teeth, and soft limbs.

11. But a prudent man should not marry (a maiden) who has no brother, nor one whose father is not known, through fear lest (in the former case she be made) an appointed daughter (and in the latter) lest (he should commit) sin.

Islam in its purest form honors and elevates women, we are often told. But does it? All too often, textual reality (the Quran) matches up with the historical reality of seventh—century Arabia. Gender inequality and oppression in the Quran reflect the culture of seventh century desert nomads. If Allah and Muhammad improved on this patriarchy, then they did not go far enough for a religion with a claim to universality.

Here are the top ten rules in the Quran that oppress and insult women.

10. A husband has sex with his wife, as a plow goes into a field.

The Quran in Sura (Chapter) 2:223 says: *Your woman are your fields, so go into your fields whichever way you like ...* (MAS Abdel Haleem, The Qur'an, Oxford UP, 2004)

We should have no doubt that the husband controlled their sex life. If a woman does not want to have sex, then angels curse her. His wife to sleep with him and she refuses to come to him, then the angels sends their curses on her till morning . (Bukhari)

9. Husbands are a degree above their wives.

The Quran in Sura 2:228 says: *... Wives have the same rights as the husbands have on them in accordance with the generally known principles. Of course, men are a degree above them in status ...* (Sayyid Abul A'La Maududi, The Meaning of the Quran, Vol. 1, p. 165)

Gender inequality shows up in a theological context. This hadith shows that the majority of the inhabitants of hell are women.

The Prophet said, *' I looked at Paradise and found poor people forming the majority of its inhabitants: and I looked at Hell and saw that the majority of its inhabitants were women.'* (Bukhari)

This parallel hadith explains that the majority of the inhabitants of hell are women because they are ungrateful and harsh towards their husbands. There is no word about the husbands' ingratitude and harshness.

Muhammad was also superstitious this hadith says that women are part of an evil omen.

I heard the Prophet saying. *'Evil omen in three things: The horse, the woman and the house.'* (Bukhari)

7. A woman's testimony counts half of a man's testimony.

The Quran in Sura 2:282 says:

And let two men from among you bear witness to all such documents [contracts of loans without interest]. But if two men be not available, there should be one man and two woman to bear witness so that if one of the woman forgets (anything), the other may remind her. (Maududi, Vol 1, p.205)

The foundational reason for having two women witnesses is that one of the women may 'forget' something. This verse goes to the nature of womankind, and implies that a woman's mind is weak.

This hadith removes any ambiguity about women's abilities in Sura 2:282:

The Prophet said, *'Isn't the witness of a woman equal to half of that of a man?'* The women said *'Yes'*. He said, *' This is because of the deficiency of a woman's mind.'* (Bukhari, emphasis added)

.6. A wife may remarry her ex—husband if and only if she marries another man, they have sex, and then this second man divorces her.

The Quran in Sura 2:230 says:

And if the husband divorces his wife(for the third time), she shall not remain his lawful wife after this (absolute) divorce, unless she marries another husband and the second husband divorces her. [In that case] there is no harm if they [first couple] remarry.... (Maududi, Vol.1, p 165)

Islamic texts too are replete with language and rhetoric of patriarchy. The similes and metaphors used are an insult to a woman.

Language is the most powerful medium of representation. The categories and distinctions of any given language are often considered natural and they subscribe to the external reality. But language is not simply a vocabulary shared by a given group of individuals. It is a system that constitutes meaning. When critically approached, language opens up new interpretative possibilities. Besides the established objectives of language, there are a few hidden motives for linguistic discourse. Language is one of the forms of covert politics used by the power structures that govern the society. It is one of “the politics extended by other means,” as Althusser points out. It is rather a form of “politics that does not look like politics). Politics is manifest in different forms in society.

Every politics has its strategies to strengthen and perpetuate itself. Language, as a system that constructs meanings and constitutes categories, is the main force behind the perpetuation of any ideology. Language combines the functions of a mirror, a tool, and a weapon, it reflects society and it is used by human beings to interact with one another.

Language is being used since ages by groups that enjoy the privileges of power ... to legitimize their own value system by labeling others ‘deviant’ or ‘inferior.’

Language reflects and transmits the culture of the society on the one hand and serves as a powerful weapon with which the dominant group maintains their value system and hierarchy on the other.

In today’s tech-savvy world, one of the most important tools of consumerism is advertisements. Everyday a new advertisement floods the screen of the viewers, and these advertisements go a long distance in creating the image of a woman etching a powerful image on the psyche of the viewers. Most of the advertisements portray women as the beauty icons to be emulated by the viewer females in the race of models and provides an ideal to the opposite sex to possess such woman. It’s a persuasion that doesn’t look like persuasion: a very intricate politics indeed that doesn’t look like politics. The adjectives that are like catchwords to describe a woman are used so frequently that they have been internalized as well as appropriated by the viewers- lambe, ghane, swasth baal, gori twacha, smooth and glowing skin, smoky eyes etc are used in majority of advertisements. A subtle politics to promote their products, the producers are creating an ideology that is intricate enough to go unnoticed by a layperson.

We all must have read the beautiful eulogy about Rani Laxmibai in our school days: *‘Bundele harbolo ke muh humne suni kaani thi, Khub ladi mardaani wo to jhaansi wali rani thi’*. Now this very word Mardaani seems to me a mockery of a woman’s courage. If a woman is courageous, does that imply that she has to be described in a word borrowed from androcentric terminology?

If we analyse textbooks that are taught in our schools we will find how this gendered language is used to stereotype a female as an appendage to a man. Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra is known for his generosity and truth whereas Pativrata Savitri is known for her submission and dedication to her husband (definitely with her valour and perseverance as a virtue but above all is the virtue of her pativrati). Does Savitri’s identity is a cipher without her dedication to her husband? Has the language fallen so short of words that it has to describe a woman’s valour through words like pativrata and mardaani?

How the vocabulary of English Language is androcentric would be clear if we look at the examples below:

Adjectives: Beautiful is for females whereas handsome is for males. A female can be easily called a slut and a whore but for a man very few insulting words like that appear. All the virtues of benevolence is contained in the words like mother nature, mother earth, motherhood, mother country etc. Contrastingly men are defined by the words of strength, wisdom and wholeness like manpower, mankind, manliness, master plan, mastermind, masculine master key etc.

Gender neutrality in genderless languages is the use of wording in those languages that avoids referring specifically to the male or female gender. This is typically achieved by using gender-exclusive words ("human being", "person", "businessperson", "caveperson"; "people", "businesspeople", "cavepeople", and so on) instead of gender-specific ones ("man", "businessman", "caveman", "men", "businessmen", "cavemen") when one speaks of people whose gender is unknown, ambiguous, or unimportant. When only a gender-specific word happens to be available, a gender-inclusive neologism may be coined to replace it.

Regarding the possibility of a gender neutral language in Indian context as well as in English, it is quite to impossible that a new gender neutral language be created but yes there is a chance of minimizing the extent of gender bias in languages. Though one can easily find the existence of gender neutral languages across the globe yet a complete replacement of a language is not a feasible idea. For e.g. As an Austronesian language, Malay is fundamentally gender-neutral. The third-person singular pronoun *dia* can mean 'she', 'he' or sometimes 'it', and the object/possessive suffix *-nya* can mean 'her/his', 'him/his' or 'it/its'. For example, *dia mencintainya* means 'she/he loves her/him/it'. Similarly Tagalog, Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, Finnish are gender neutral languages to some extent.

There is a dire need of linguistic activism required so that the entire architecture of imagination in political, social, economical and emotional realms is bed rocked on a more gender sensitive language and not androcentric language. A reformulation of vocabulary, texts, and scriptures, textbooks in academics, culture and society should be done to the utmost possible extent. Thus the only way out for the language users is that one should dispense with the impurities in a language and try to break free the language of its androcentric chains. The violent hierarchies that are deeply embedded in the androcentric languages need to be removed from the language if one needs an egalitarian society. The cleansing of vocabulary in the languages of all the discourses is the only way out towards a society which is conducive for a woman to live. We can only become what we can imagine and we can only imagine what we can articulate. Language users need to be careful while using words of a language that tends to universalize one element of humanity to the exclusion of others.

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