

Reading Positions: Gender and Class portrayed in different Art Forms

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The focus of this paper is to illuminate the relationship between language and social structure rather than just highlighting gender. Language is not 'neutral' as it does not reflect equality for the simple reason that the different social groups that constitute our society have not been treated equally. Language is one of the forms of covert politics used by the power structures that govern the society. Politics is manifested in different forms in society. Strategies are framed and strengthened to perpetuate the ideologies of the power structures. Language is used as a main tool for the perpetuation of any ideology. Language reflects society and is used by the groups of people that enjoy the privileges of power to legitimize their own value system by labeling others 'inferior'. According to Frank, language reflects and transmits the culture of the society on the one hand and serves as a powerful weapon with which a dominant group maintains their value system and hierarchy on the 'other'. Saussure views linguistic phenomenon as a dynamic and rotational system of oppositional difference. Structuralism puts forth a theory that linguistic signs are arbitrary and rotational. No word can be defined in isolation from the other word. Saussure remarks that language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of others. No sign has a meaning of its own. A sign produces meaning through its similarity or difference from other signs. Paired opposites 'male' and 'female' acquire their meaning mutually. It is the absence of the characteristics included in the male that designates the female. Western metaphysics has always been defined as structural by binary opposition which exists in a hierarchical mode and has been accepted as universal. The binary oppositions have been extended to the realm of gender as well to restrict female identity. For example: presence/absence, mind/body, positive/negative, order/chaos, language/silence, speech/writing, good/evil all the first terms emerge as self sufficient while the second ones are presented as accidental. Luce Gregory points out that all the first words in all binaries go together and

dominate over the second term. This kind of patriarchal and irrational valuation makes a female associated with silence and absence and the male with language and presence.

It has been mentioned time and again by feminists that gender has nothing to do with biology or psychology. It is socially constructed. The characteristics attributed to her are not inherent but have been either imposed upon her or acquired by her for cultural and political purposes. Gender develops post-natal through one's impressions and experiences from the society. Therefore, gender is something a man or a woman takes from the society and not what he or she possesses inherently while 'sex' refers to biological characters, possessing different genitalia. Gender is a social construct, socially expected traits of men and women. Similarly, the terms 'man' and 'woman' refer to definitions based on biological differences. Whereas ironically the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' stand for what is expected of men and women to be like i.e. expected gender attributes or qualities. But when it comes to gender representation and the challenges of its expression they are interconnected. The role of class comes into play. A rich and powerful woman has the better power of expression than her poor counterpart. For example Sudha Murthy, wife of Narayan Murthy chairperson and founder of Infosys belonging to one of the richest families of India representing capitalist society would be heard immediately and has a more powerful expression in contrast to Baby Halder, a lower class woman who worked as a maid in other households. There is a big class difference between the two. In fact both are poles apart in terms of class. The grievances of a capitalist lady is seen and heard much faster in comparison to Baby Halder who is a victim of class structure. Therefore their representation and treatment is different too. A rich and a poor woman can get exploited at their own levels at the same time. It is also possible that a rich woman exploits the poor working under her as a maid or an employee. In such a case 'class' plays an important role in gender representation. They may be same on the basis of sex but still differ in aspects of caste, religion, language, region, culture, skill, education, etc. If a policy relating to women is to be prepared and its representation is to be given then should the representatives of the class to which Neeta Ambani, Sudha Murthy belongs be the same as that of Baby Halder. Not only would there be a difference in their representation but also in their

language as the two belong to a completely different class. Take the latest example of Triple Talaq. My students conducted a survey with other girl students, teachers and educated middle class women of different religions. Having been born and brought up in different culture and religion they were not as aware of the agonies and affliction of their Muslim counterparts. Can it be truly represented by a Hindu woman advocate or a Muslim representative would be a better option.

As far as expression is concerned, knowledge of the patriarchal structure of the society and the language used to break off that structure plays an important role. Anna Livia and Kira Hall point out that such a statement of gender is not merely descriptive but 'prescriptive'. It prescribes a certain set of rules and norms for the child as to how is she suppose to grow up and behave as a girl. This is a part of social indoctrination. The moment a girl is born we provide her with certain types of toys, dresses in her particular shades of pink and purple and teach her the so called 'etiquettes'. Therefore the poor child is bombarded with images which portray future roles and preferences. Learning about gender starts at a very early age and this gender based socialization lasts our whole lifetime. In an Indian scenario a girl child is not allowed to play and grow freely and naturally unlike her male siblings but every now and then she is sermonized to speak softly and politely, sit properly, help her mother in the household chores, listen to her elders, not retaliate even if she does not agree with them. Hence in a way her emotions, her thoughts are curbed indirectly and her growth stunted. She sacrifices her dreams and aspirations for others. Her own identity as an individual is lost and ends up becoming someone's daughter, sister, wife and mother unless and until she fights for herself and gets the support of her family and friends to fulfill her dreams and prove her worth. Though there has been a gradual shift in the mentality of the people over the years. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the Indian movie 'Kya Kehna" in which unmarried Preity Zinta loses her virginity and gets pregnant. The patriarchal society treats her as a culprit and inflicts atrocities upon her whereas Saif Ali Khan, her boy friend in the movie is hardly held responsible for his deeds. But Preity fights back and ultimately wins her battle with her inner strength, conviction and the support of her family. Similarly, in one the latest movies

“Thappad” the protagonist Taapsee Pannu is a wife of an educated middle class techie who in spite of being educated and talented has sacrificed her dreams and ambition for her husband. She works as a housewife and selfless and tirelessly works from morning till night taking care of her in-laws and her husband. One evening, the husband slaps her publicly in a party thrown by her husband in celebration of his promotion. The husband does not feel guilty for his misdeed and ignores it as an outcome of his bad mood. Hardly did he realize that his dedicated wife also had self respect which was badly hurt. He does not even bother or care to apologise for a second. Taapsee struggles with her inner self to realize her worth and her mistreatment by her husband and her in-laws. She stands ground and fights back for her self respect and ultimately wins with the support of her family. These movies are a reflection of the age old convictions and conventions of the patriarchal society which has constantly marginalized women and has deprived the ‘other’ of her basic rights.

The very semantics of language reflect women’s conditions. Robin Morgan rightly claims in 1977 in *Going Too Far* that “Language is sexist.” Discriminatory job titles have been used for ages to display power structure. For example: chairman, spokesman, policeman, watchman, draftsman, salesman etc. Revisions are trying to combat the age old apathy and unequal treatment of women .The new terms coined to replace the old are chairperson, police officer, guard, drafter, salesperson, etc.

Usage of nouns and adjectives and their connotations with respect to gender is often revealed in language. There are pairs of adjectives that may have the same denotation but differ in connotation. Such adjectives reveal our hypocrite and biased usage of language differently for men and women. Several attributes are typically associated with males and females in society. Males are referred to as logical, rational, aggressive, exploitative, strategic, independent and competitive, whereas females are generally considered intuitive, emotional, submissive, empathetic, spontaneous, nurturing and cooperative. Robin Morgan has emphasized upon the fact that it is man who usually plays the role of a leader and decision maker whereas a woman is reduced to a loyal supporter and follower. Here I would like to quote an example from an Indian Hindi movie “Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam” in which Amitabh Bachchan, the head of the

family subsequently becomes a decision maker. Every time Jaya applies tilak on her husband's forehead she being too short had to use a stool to reach his level but he would not bow down for her reveals the patriarchal nature of her husband. Every argument between husband and wife ends abruptly with Amitabh having the final say revealing the colonial structure of the family. In some cases, terms are exclusively used for one sex or another. For example, beautiful, sexy, bewitching, angelic, cute, elegant, divine, graceful, ravishing-these adjectives are generally used for women whereas adjectives like handsome, well-built, hunky, robust, strong are commonly used for men. Such discrimination is visible not only in different genres of art like poetry, prose, fiction and movies but also in our day to day communication and non parallel treatment of the 'other'. Miller and Swift in 1981 highlight the non- parallel treatment of the fairer sex on the following grounds. Women are described by appearance, but men by achievement. The society has the tendency to describe women by their relationship to men though not describing men by their relationship to women. Then women are often referred to as 'girls' whereas male figures are given the adult label 'men'. Miller and Swift advocated some reforms to make a fairer and more equal representation of women. Strength has always been related with men, though strength can have both the connotations- physical and mental. In order to gauge the plight of Indian women also depicting colonial class structure it would not be a bad idea to refer to the autobiography of a woman who belongs to the lower class, not only tries to break off from the set norms of the male chauvinistic society but also creates a recognized name for herself. *Ek Anpadh Kahani* published in 2005 by Roshnai Prakashan is an autobiography of Sushila Rai. This autobiography is not the outcome of the knowledge gained from feminist discourse and writings. Instead it emanates from her melancholic experience of life. One can rightly say that even though she has not contributed in establishing the concepts of feminism but her life undoubtedly sets an example of it. *Ek Anpadh Kahani* raises several questions on the institution of marriage, husband-wife relationship, the colonial aspect of Indian family and above all Indian culture and tradition. It is a heart rending story of a backward Indian lower caste poor woman who belongs to Madhubani district in Bihar. She had to suffer the atrocities and neglect of her husband and her in-laws as she was dark in complexion. She was not accepted in the family for five years. Even though taken back she

still continued to face the travails of life as she was deprived of her basic right of motherhood by her husband. Her husband failed to see the inner beauty of his wife . It was only after the insistence and interference of Ramesh Babu for whom Sushila's husband worked that he accepted his wife and finally bestowed her with motherhood. Ramesh Babu continues to motivate and support her in her hardships by writing letters to her. He insisted her to read and write so that she could read his letters and write back to him. She was illiterate and could only speak Maithili. With Ramesh Babu's inspiration she learns to read and write and finally writes her own autobiography in 2005. It is an honest and heart rending narration of the atrocities suffered by a poor and backward woman who sustains with the help of Ramesh Babu. The very institution of marriage is questioned where a woman is no more than a sex object whose physical beauty is only taken into account completely ignoring her inherent beauty and talent. It is incredible to see how she toils and suffers all atrocities for fifteen years. It is not a new story in India but what is commendable is that in spite of all the atrocities she develops interest in reading and writing and with the encouragement and support of Ramesh Kumar, who gave her shelter, physical and emotional, she starts writing her autobiography in broken language which blatantly reveals the colonial mentality within a family. Women like Sushila Rai and Alo Andhari set an example for all those women who strive to be self reliant and liberate themselves from the shackles of the institution of marriage where in the guise of tradition of 'kanyadaan' a girl is given away by her parents to her husband as if she is a mere commodity and does not have any identity of her own. This callous and disgusting patriarchal view of the society fails to shatter women like Sushila Rai and Baby Halder. Baby Halder, a lower middle class woman wrote *Alo Andhari*, her autobiography which was translated into seventeen languages. Such women rise against all odds like a phoenix to face their unsupportive family and uncooperative society which looks down upon them as a lowly woman discarded by their husband. Traditional feudal values have ingrained in our Indian society to such an extent that our women have got accustomed to it. They do not even question the undemocratic set up of the family.

A radical feminist tradition has rejected the idea that language can be 'improved' by making small adjustments as proposed by Miller and Swift. They assert that women have been forced to use a language that is not their own and see the world through the male eyes. They have not been given the freedom to express their views and experiences in their own language and hence have been excluded historically from the production of powerful public discourses. Attempts have been made from the beginning to curtail and ignore the talent and creativity of women. Emerson, the American liberal thinker argues that a woman should not write but rather inspire men to write. The emergence of female writers was a far dream in the nineteenth century. Many women writers wrote under pseudonyms to remain anonymous with a purpose to encourage male readership and evade the prejudice of their male counterparts in the patriarchally surcharged literary world of the nineteenth century. Emily Bronte and Charlotte Bronte wrote the preface of *Wuthering Heights* under the pseudonyms Ellis Bell and Action Bell. Emily Bronte was well received as long as she did not disclose her identity. The moment she revealed her identity, the Victorian England dismissed her text as a typical feminine literature. Mary Anne Evans wrote the famous novel *Middlemarch* under male pseudonym George Eliot. Similarly, J.K. Rowling, the author of the most famous novel of all times *Harry Potter* was advised by her publisher to use her initial instead of her first name as the intended readers of young boys may not want to read a thriller written by a woman. Similarly, Kamala Das wrote under a pseudonym Madhvaikutty. She lashes back at her critics in her poem "An Introduction" where the male critics try to gag her voice and deny her freedom of expression by imploring her to write in her mother tongue. She asserts that her Indian English might appear funny to the rest of the world but this language belongs to her. It is as innate to her as cawing is to a crow and roaring to a lion; it portrays her emotions completely and honestly. In the same poem she bemoans her marriage, how a girl of sixteen years gets married to a much older man. She expresses an excruciating mental and physical agony she goes through when she desires to seek love from her husband but in return is sexually assaulted by him. Disappointed by her marriage, Das rebels against the colonial/patriarchal structure of the society which is revealed in her dressing sense. She refuses to dress up as a 'girl' and confine herself within the four walls of the house. She prefers to wear skirts and trousers of her brother

which is pointed out by the society. She further highlights the male chauvinism of the society and reveals how every man refuses to adapt to the surrounding and patronizes and denigrates females by treating them as objects of desire and inferior to men. Even though she belongs to the upper class, one can imagine the plight of a woman from a middle class or a lower middle class society.

“Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I
In this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love..”

Das concludes the poem by asserting that a woman too has her desires, her self -respect and her identity. She also should be treated at par with the man.

“I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.”

Hence if one closely reviews the subject of Das's poetry one realizes that apart from *carpe diem* theme and her confessions and revelations, she longed to attain satiating love. She felt the need to assert herself, to conquer-her search for her identity. Most of her poems are intrigued with her longing to win true love. She gets into many relationships but fails to get satiated in love. Simone de Beauvoire argues in her book *Second Sex* that there is a great difference in the attitude of a male and a female in a relationship. For a male, the 'other' is just a part of his life. His family, friends, his career are equally important to him. Whereas for a woman, the 'other' becomes the centre of her life, the other things her family, career and friends revolve around that centre. She does not lose her focus from the centre i.e. the 'man' in her life. In a way the male keeps his identity from the 'other' whereas a woman merges into it. She no

longer desires to remain a separate entity. This is evident not only in the love life of women but also in their writings as seen in poets like Kamala Das, Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath.

A common factor that is found in most of the writings of Western and Indian women poets is a sense of pessimism, anxiety and alienation revealing suicidal tendencies in them. This trait is common across the works of Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Kamala Das or Virginia Woolf. One notices, the poets' gradual withdrawal from the outer world. The antagonistic male critics confer neurosis, psychosis or emotional crisis as one of the main reasons for withdrawal. But Suzanne Juhasz in her book *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the space of the Mind* writes that Dickinson "chose to withdraw from the external world and to live her most significant life in the world of her mind", and that therefore her withdrawal was "strategy rather than retreat". Similarly, Virginia Woolf utilized her mental illness for her creativity as she mentions that she was most creative during her bouts of illness. The words would randomly flash across her mind which earlier appeared to be opaque but later made sense. She would later string the ideas together and create the masterpieces out of them. Women writers were often confronted with the conflicting roles of a mother, a wife and an artist. American feminist scholars have named this dilemma as "double-bind". In her book on modern American poetry, Suzanne Juhasz formulates the dilemma of a woman poet in this manner: "To be a woman in our society is a double-bind situation one of conflict and strain. For the words 'woman' and 'poet' denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles. ...It is men who make art, who make books; women make babies. ...A woman's identity is not defined by a profession, such as poet, but by her personal relationships as daughter, sister, wife, and mother. Her art (if she presumes to have one) must necessarily conflict with her life. Usually she is pressured, or pressures herself-to make a choice 'woman' or 'poet'". Juhasz further enquires that how a woman can succeed as a 'good' poet then if she 'writes like a man' she denies her own experience; if she writes as woman, her subject matter is 'trivial'.

A woman has always been portrayed as an 'angel' in the house bestowed with qualities like chastity, selflessness, devotion and sacrifice quite contrary to the qualities required for an artist/writer that of conviction, economic independence, power and belief in oneself. Even

poets like Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson struggle to strike a balance between the two. These were the socio-cultural, psychological challenges that the women writers faced throughout but did not give up, stood their ground and established themselves as a distinguished class at par with their male counterparts.

The recent trend that has developed in feminist criticism is to move away from the view of woman as victim towards woman as independent and powerful where she no longer laments and broods on a situation but finds ways and means to break off from the shackles of patriarchy in search of her own identity. Later women poets D'Souza and Silgado unlike earlier poets believed that if a mess was created in their lives they were wholly and solely responsible for it and no one else.

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