



A Critical Study on Women's Language in Indian English Drama

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Abstract

The function of language is associated with the verbal code. It becomes important when the verbal code itself becomes the central theme of a dialogue. Language has a key position in drama as it is, like in real life, the most important means of communication on stage. It has to be regarded as the one basic feature of drama that is related to both the dramatic characters and the action. Language in drama is represented as spoken language or, in other words, as speech. Dramatic utterances are poly functional: they can have several functions at the same time, both in the internal and the external communication system. The present paper aims to show women's language used by both male and female playwrights and the essential rebellious spirit against the male chauvinism and talked of women's emancipation, individuality, and their socio-economic and political equality in present day society. Women performed in the earlier phase very happily to the script written by male playwrights. Though many male playwrights talked about women's issues, their presentation lacked the authentic ring of women's emotions and feelings.

The women playwrights who are remembered for their remarkable contribution are Deena Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Polie Sengupta whose texts have been discussed here. They have introduced new subjects affecting the feminine psyche using their language and technique.

KEYWORDS:

Language, Drama, Dialogue, Male chauvinism, Revolt, Feminine psyche, Critical analysis

Introduction

The language we speak shapes our thoughts about gender and our perception of reality. Many linguistic studies say that there are several types of languages in the world, including the language of women. There are natural languages (or human languages), formal languages, and artificial languages. The latter are often used and created either for amusement or for practical purposes, e.g., Esperanto. Among these are the languages created by women and for women. Mothers are key figures in children's language development, so much so that we speak about a "mother tongue" to identify a native speaker of a particular language. We also have to consider that our language reflects our social prejudices. What happens if none of the existing languages enable women to express the feelings and emotions inherent to them? What happens if women can't express the way they feel and think because their language doesn't contain the right words to convey their thoughts? Or because their language describes and reflects a patriarchal society? Think about how you use your language and whether it's more geared towards how men or how women express themselves.

Women, because of the social judgment and stereotype, frequently use some features that distinguish them from men. Robin Tolmach Lakoff (1975) was the first feminist who determined the features and well-known as women's language. She provides ten basic assumptions that are claimed as to be used more often by women than men in their communication including lexical hedges, tag question, rising intonation on declarative, empty "adjectives, precise color terms, intensifier, hypercorrect grammar, super polite forms, avoidance of strong swear words and emphatic stress.

Gender speech and gender speech styles are representative of the individual and it's a learned behavior which is governed by shared values and norms among individuals. However, in some cases, behavior might be a bit different from their style due to specific situation which influences e.g., conflict, pressure, or nervousness. Pressure and nervousness can occur on public speaking and in academic settings such as in seminars. The important thing lies on the multi functionality of linguistic features and the multi functionality relies on linguistics features surrounding the contexts. By investigating women's language in particular context, this research attempts to explore women's language usage following with the function and their reflection on the communication styles in the very special context, research seminars.

Dramatic speech, however, is semantically more complex as regards its orientation both towards the receiver and towards the sender of an utterance. That is because every utterance in drama has got two addressees as well as two expressive subjects. In addition to the direct interlocutors in the internal communication system there is the audience as a further, silent participant. After all, dramatic dialogues are intended to be heard by the audience and to have an effect on it. And besides the fictitious expressive subject, which is the dramatic character, there is also a real one: the author.

Dramatic language does not only deviate from everyday language as far as its situational complexity is concerned but also in terms of its employment of an aesthetically functionalized language. It may violate the norms of everyday language, for example by the use of innovative word formations or archaisms and may introduce structural features like rhetorical stylization or meter and rhyme. Above that it may employ figurative speech to a high degree. The frequent use of images like metaphor, simile, synecdoche or metonymy characterizes the language especially in verse drama and not so much in prose drama. The artificial character of dramatic language is thus especially obvious in verse drama. These stylistic devices are perceived consciously by the audience but have no effect on the interlocutors of the dramatic situation as it is a convention of dramatic language that the *dramatis personae* are not aware of their own stylized manner of speaking.

Even in cases where dramatic speech imitates everyday speech, for example in naturalist drama or the modern English "kitchen sink drama," we have to regard it as artistic speech. That is because the dramatist selects whatever characterizes a situation or a figure most efficiently. Verse and naturalist prose, however, are only the extremes of dramatic language. In fact, the distance between dramatic and everyday speech may vary considerably.

It is only in exceptional cases that language appears on the stage in writing, for example when banners or signboards are used. For the most part, however, language is represented as spoken language in drama. Dramatical language can thus be described as performative. It is dependent on a performative situation which is, like the communicative situation in everyday speech, characterized by the presence of two or more speakers in the same place at the same time. Furthermore, the hearer can, if the situation is symmetrical, become a speaker as well. This performative situation differs from the situation e.g., in the novel, where speaker and listener, the relation of which is not always reversible, do not necessarily have to be situated in the same place.

The phatic function of language is associated with the channel between speaker and listener and is designed to create and maintain the contact between both. Dramatic utterances also function phatically as regards the external communication system, for example in those cases where they are meant to arouse the audience's eager anticipation of the following events. The phatic function of language is especially frequent in modern drama where the dialogue is above all a means of creating and maintaining contact between the dialogue partners while the referential function is not that important.

The audience has to be able to follow the course of the drama and is not normally inclined to do so for more than three hours. That is why conciseness, clarity and coherence are the principles that shape the conception of a drama and the structuring of speech. As a result, a character's utterances are mostly restricted to the really essential things. This economy of speech based on the selection of representative aspects undertaken by the playwright is an outstanding characteristic of dramatic language. The relationship between what a character says and the action is thus a strictly functional one - "[A character in a play] is limited in his or her utterance to what bears on the play as a whole, keeps it moving". In other words, apart from the mere informative function a character's utterances often simultaneously represent actions and imply stage directions. They are able to cause changes in the dramatic situation- dramatic dialogue can thus be defined as spoken action. This idea of language as action is called speech act theory.

The 'fact of power' accounts for much of the lack of appreciation of women's texts; until there is an appreciable change in power structure, it is unlikely that women's fictional accounts of their lives lying in drawing rooms, the parlor, the nursery, the kitchen, the laundry will have the force to induce masculine *jouissance*. Men's traditional disregard for women's writing and women's mode of existence is caused due to the reality of male power. As Brecht noted, "the theatre as we know it (he calls it illusionism) shows the structure of society (represented on stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium)". The Play maintains illusion of reader as subject who shares with the absent narrator the position of ultimate understanding.

Theatre has been used as a means of communicating protest against any form of violence and oppression. It is a broad term which includes dramatic literature and performance. Theatre has replaced books or films which are considered as popular means of protest. From 1870 onwards, the protest through theatre was directed against social evils in Indian society.

The form of theatre differed in pre- and post-independence periods. 'Street Theatre' began to be performed at public places in metropolitan cities. It was used to spread awareness regarding women's issues. Popular theatre was a highly discriminated sphere on the basis of gender. Here, males ruled the female performers who generally came from the courtesans and prostitutes' classes. The public sphere was male dominated where only women who were considered as 'public' women were allowed to perform. In male theatrical domain, women were forced to perform roles assigned to them by the male practitioners. Therefore, these women characters got constructed and identified by male playwrights and directors who completely ignored the women centered approach. However, the entry of women practitioners in theatre had led to the questioning of assumed normative discourses. A new kind of theatre started emerging on the horizon which is feminist in nature and it is known presently by the name "Feminist Theatre".

Indian women's theatre came to limelight with women liberation movement of the west. This brought forward gender biased issues into the public arena. Several social issues like dowry deaths, female feticide, sexual violence, ignorance, illiteracy, gender discrimination in families and society etc. have been exposed by the women's movement in India. Women Liberation Movement moved nations in support of women's fight against oppression. It proved that women are capable of thinking logically and are equally intelligent with respect to their male counterparts. In 1970's the emergence of urbanization and industrialization created employment opportunities for women. This led to emergence of sensitive writers who wrote about neglected section of the Indian society. Many tabooed issues found place in the writings of these writers. Women's movement along with socially active Indian theatre began to show way to the oppressed ones. Theatre became medium for creating social changes. Soon, street theatre represented various issues especially those of women from women's perspective.

Women's writing tries to protest against the male dominance, repression, division, alienation and marginalization and thereby offers a different perspective and opinion. Women performed in the earlier phase very happily to the script written by male playwrights. They had neither their voice nor their words to express themselves. They had no option but to read out or speak words written by male writers and perform roles created out of their imagination. Though many male playwrights talked about women's issues, their presentation lacked the authentic ring of women's emotions and feelings. The contrary is true of the women writers. In her interview with Mahesh Dattani published under title "Dialogue with Dattani" in her book *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*, Laxmi Subramanyam asks Dattani about the reason behind dearth of women playwrights in the modern Indian theatre. Dattani cautiously shares his observation thus: "women playwrights write about strong feminine concerns or simply write about women for no political reasons (same as male playwrights write about men without really thinking about it)". However, "theatre companies prefer to do plays with a male protagonist" and this may be reason for "less female representation among visible playwrights" (2002, p. 20). Many men who run theatre do not take women playwrights seriously because they find it hard to connect to the stories written from a female perspective. This adversely affected women who wanted to pursue their career in the field of Playwriting.

The women playwrights who are remembered for their remarkable contribution are Deena Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan and Polie Sengupta. They have introduced new subjects affecting the feminine psyche in their works. Deena Mehta is a playwright and an editor from Mumbai. Her first full length play was *The Myth Makers* (1969). Her play *Brides are not For Burning* (1993) won the first prize in worldwide competition sponsored by BBC in 1979. Some of her well-known plays are *Getting Away with Murder*, *When One Plus One Makes Nine*, *Sister Like You* etc. Next is Manjula Padmanabhan who won the inaugural Onassis Prize for her play *Harvest*. She has written powerful plays, comic strips, short stories, novel for children, travelogue, picture books, autobiographical novel and *Illustrator*. Her well-known plays are *Lights Out*, *The Artist Model*, *Sextet* and *Harvest*. Sengupta was born in Kerala in 1948. She has won the Sandesha Special Recognition Award for Children's Literature in 1994. Her first play is *Mangalam*. Apart from this, she wrote *Keats was a Tuber*, *Samara's Song* etc. She is also a founder of theatre club. Recently, she published her novel titled *Inga*. Women writers in India keep on writing about complex issues such as sensuality, subjugation, alienation, migration, identity crisis, free sex etc. The contemporary women writers were always considered inferior to their male counterparts their canvas was narrow and they largely confined themselves to the depiction of the enclosed domestic space and their experience within it.

In spite of the limitations, they have definitely raised the consciousness about the woman's role in the society. The portrayal of women characters by a women writer is always realistic and as such authentic. Portrayal of women and their issues by a male playwright tends to be a little unconvincing as he fails to understand the female psyche and perspective. Only a woman playwright like Manjula Padmanabhan could write a play like *Lights Out* about women's objectification and victimization. This play poignantly depicts an incident like *Without Doubt*, plays by women are powerful in their tackling of more complex themes and depicting issues affecting their everyday life in greater depth. Michelene Wandor writes in *Feminist Review*: "Of Course, the woman playwright does not personally stand up and make a speech in her own voice, putting her own views and convictions, but she engages with something which is unconsciously felt as a far greater threat: she provides a text and meanings which others must follow. In her own voice, refracted through dialogue and structure of the play, she communicates to her audience. She also controls the voice of others. She gives the performers the words which they must speak.

(Wandor, 1984, p. 85). In order to remove the gender gap in theatre, it's necessary for female playwrights to keep writing plays because they their voice and power.

Theatre, like most of the other art forms has been a male dominated field. Whenever we think of great playwrights, we have a long list of male playwrights starting from Shakespeare to Bertolt Brecht. Women as dramatist were rarely present in literary history. They were kept away from stage as stage never belonged to them. Absence of women playwrights could be accounted for by the fact that theatre was a public space along with the problem of publication, public performances etc. If woman as a playwright entered the domain of theatre, she was considered a woman first and a writer next. Now that women have entered the theatre as playwrights, they have shaped theatrical techniques which have no author defined consciousness, no resolutions, even tried to build a new class of audiences who would not expect to be entertained. After successfully establishing themselves as accomplished artists, women playwrights have now created plays which are critical the institution of marriage and family hierarchy. They have written plays with strong, complex female characters that demolish the cultural barriers which are discriminatory in character. Theatre can take measures like sponsoring workshops for play readings to develop playwriting skills and encourage female playwrights.

Theatre is always local, regional, and vernacular. From the local, you move to the regional, from the regional to the national, from the national to the international. Unless you are deeply rooted in the impulses that belong to your area, you cannot be truly universal. Precisely in the same way, one cannot be truly contemporary if one doesn't have the sense of one's history. Indeed, as a poet has put it, the fruit does not know what its root looks like, yet there is a relationship between the root and the fruit. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury Theatre in India has its roots in the mythic past of the country. It has been threatened with extinctions, but has survived them with the ever-present enthusiasm for performances. It has proved to be propagandist and even an effective organ of protest down the ages, but it has also been criticized for being conservative to the women. It has never been a medium which would hold enough space for foregrounding the woman as subject. The situation has been such that though we find a number of women authors in different genres and sub-genres such as poetry, novel and fiction, there is an acute dearth of women playwrights making them expressed in the domain of theatre. This absence is more felt in the case of regional language women playwrights for being ghettoized into further ignorance through the politics of marginalization that has an all-pervading presence in the Indian context.

A critical understanding of the regional plays and theatre productions composed and directed by women unravel before us the aesthetics that emerge out of them. In opposition to linear plot structure with logical building up of events to approach an enclosed climax, they put forward their plays in open-ended non-linear, disjointed and inconsistent plots so as to refuse any sort of resolutions in challenging the socio-political normative discourses. Doing so they aimed at deconstructing not just the patriarchal hegemony unleashed through objectifying and constructing the woman, but also the linguistic, which entails the disjunction between the national and the regional. Having been othered by the national, these playwrights, express the dense fabric of women's varied experiences through their own languages, empowering regionalization to such an extent that they create their own identity.

In doing so, they foreground the multiplicity of women's voices and plurality of contexts, thereby moving away from the essentialism that the national theatre is criticized to promote. In this context a number of plays like Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's *Fida*, which deals with the proliferation of desires and unconventional love of a woman who wants to have her own step-son as her lover, or Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari*, which reinterprets a section of the epic Ramayana by revealing the deep recesses of Mandodari, about whom the epic remains somewhat silent, emerges as a strategist in the defeat of Ravana, or Kusum Kumar's *Listen Shefali*, which deals with the resistances of a woman from being thrown into caste politics, or Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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