
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:3 March 2014
ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.
Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.
S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.
G. Baskaran, Ph.D.
L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.
C. Subburaman, Ph.D. (Economics)
Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

Negotiating Power: Maitreyi Pushpa's *The Verdict*

Dr. Ashok Verma



Maitreyi Pushpa

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maitreyi_Pushpa

Power in Society

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:3 March 2014**

Dr. Ashok Verma

Negotiating Power: Maitreyi Pushpa's *The Verdict*

The operation of power in society forms the very kernel of Human life and existence. Consequently, there have always been two groups in society: the dominant group which controls the discourse and thus unleashes power; and the underprivileged that remains at the receiving end. Foucault defines ‘discourse’ as the sum total of statements that define a world and these statements primarily involve the question of representation i.e. who controls the discourse in a given world? Be it Marxism, Feminism or the Colonial Discourse, the expression of power and the division of society in two conflicting groups remains central to all these schools of thought. As the prevailing group is at the helm of affairs, what emerges as the basic principle then is that the powerful subdues and subjugates the powerless and it has continued throughout the history of human civilization.

A Tool for Oppression – Naked Power and Hegemony

Interestingly, there emerge two major *modus operandi* of power as a tool for oppression. The first one, repression is wherein the underprivileged are subjected to direct oppression at the hands of the dominant group. This form of power is rightly termed as “naked power” by Bertrand Russell as its directness is felt overtly by both the groups. The second and more complex way, hegemony, comprises the “ideological state apparatuses”, as Althusser calls them. Whereas repression focuses on coercion and use of raw, force to subjugate the powerless, hegemonic discourse creates a world of willfulness and voluntary submission and “active will”. As it works primarily at the psychological and mental levels and not at the physical level, it is very difficult to see through its surreptitious nature. This form “is multiplicitous, and often impervious; and it operates through ideological manipulation – through mind-games, eliciting consent from the unwitting victim” (Bhaduri, “Introduction” XIX). This kind of power often gets deep-seated in the psyche of people and therefore it becomes very difficult for them to pose a challenge to it. The objects of power unwittingly become a party to their own subjugation and are found supporting those very structures that deny them not only share in power but also pull them into the morass of ignorance and exploitation. The dominant ideology is projected as the source of success and happiness for them.

Any Way Out?

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:3 March 2014**

Dr. Ashok Verma

Negotiating Power: Maitreyi Pushpa’s *The Verdict*

Now a very pertinent question arises: Is there no way out of this octopus-like stranglehold of hegemonic power? The answer is in the affirmative. Within those structures that appear to be insuperable and unshakable, there are certain gaps, breaches which leave scope for the potential of resistance and a new order. It is interesting to note that just like the two modes of power, i.e. repression and hegemony, resistance can also be direct as well as surreptitious. It means that the structures of power can be challenged overtly, i.e., by resorting to physical violence as well as covertly, i.e., through de-hegemonization.

The Verdict

Written in the form of a letter in first person, Maitreyi Pushpa's short story "The Verdict" reveals at length the nuances of power, its operation through repression and hegemony and the possibilities and the mode(s) of resistance. It shows the range and intensity of the dual forms of power that Basumati, the protagonist, is subjected to, her awareness of it and finally, her unique way of subverting the structures of power from within; having located fissure(s) in them. She becomes a harbinger of change for the better with her secret, almost unconscious resistance to the structures of power through subversion of the authority of her husband – patriarchal as well as political. Her resistance may not be direct or violent, it is very effective nonetheless as her final 'verdict' in voting against her husband excludes him from those very 'delicacies' of power he takes pride in. Furthermore, the story is a celebration of a woman's growing into awareness of her perpetual marginalization through the two modes of power and her consequent protest at the level of instinct.

The Power Play

The power play in the story—both in the larger domain of the village and in the smaller domain of the family—is palpably visible. Ranveer's position as a male and a promising politician allows him to keep Basumati away from power even if she has become the Pradhan of the village. His position as a male has the backing of the patriarchal tradition. He considers himself to be in command and therefore the wife must always remain subservient to him. Therefore, he considers it his right to prevail upon her

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:3 March 2014**

Dr. Ashok Verma

Negotiating Power: Maitreyi Pushpa's *The Verdict*

in all matters; whether familial or political. Similarly, as a politician, he considers her to be too naïve to understand the intricacies of politics. Neither does he want her to. All he wants is to make himself more influential and powerful. Because of this duality of power—patriarchal and political—he exercises explicit control over his wife’s thoughts and actions.

Ranveer’s Dual Power

There is a marked difference between Ranveer and Basumati regarding their approach to power. Ranveer uses power to increase his domain of influence, both at the familial and political levels. He sees nothing wrong in perpetrating the decadent tradition of wielding power over others. His exercising of power can be understood along both modes, i.e., repression and hegemony. He uses repressive power on his wife. He literally threatens, scolds and bullies her. When Basumati, accompanied by Isuriya, is on her way to the Panchayat, he stops her and asks her to go back home and finding her reluctant, raises his voice: “Basumati, didn’t you hear what I said?” (105) Basumati feels her “feet shrivel under his fiery gaze” (ibid). Throughout the narrative, she feels the presence of Ranveer as if he were watching and monitoring her moves. Thus, he successfully projects his repressive image and Basumati who has already been indoctrinated into subordination to the husband, cannot protest against oppression. Similarly, in the larger domain of village, he is much feared of. Nobody dares say anything against his injustice or misappropriation of public funds as they are ever conscious of his repressive image.

Ideological Manipulations

At the same time, however, Ranveer takes recourse in ideological manipulations to further perpetrate his hold over Basumati. Whenever he finds his repressive measures ineffective, he dexterously uses the “trump card” of propriety and class. The way he makes her understand the importance of the status of the family is in consonance with the dominant ideology: “You must not lose your sense of propriety. Does our status, our standing, mean nothing to you anymore? A woman is respected only as long as she keeps within her bounds” (106). In another instance, when Ranveer severely admonishes Basumati for going to the meeting of the panchayat and passing the verdict in

Ramsingh's favour. He asks her not to have any illusions about her position. Basumati's inner being is troubled and she silently protests against this oppression by not entering the room and preferring to sit in the courtyard. Since it is already past midnight, Ranveer has to pacify her somehow as he cannot let the situation get out of control. So he immediately switches over to ideological manipulations to calm Basumati:

'Is there any distinction between a husband and a wife, silly woman. They live and die for each other. There is no reason why you should harbour such doubts on account of the village folk. They are all jealous of us, cannot bear to see the husband as the Pramukh with his wife as the Pradhan.' (111)

Further, by promoting his wife in politics, he skillfully projects his image of a "liberal and progressive" husband. In this way, Ranveer's deft handling of both the modes of power pays him rich dividends and he is able to keep Basumati under his control through most of the narrative.

Basumati's Idea of Power

Basumati's idea of power is diametrically opposite to that of Ranveer. Better qualified than her husband, she visualizes power as ability – a medium of negating oppression. She intends to use political power, to serve the oppressed thus ensuring equality and justice to all. Her dream of becoming the harbinger of happiness and justice for the villagers speaks of her essentially compassionate nature which becomes further explicit after her mentor wishes that her "courtyard must have a roof of honesty built on pillars of truth, where the weak, the oppressed, the accursed and defeated will find shelter" (111). All her decisions in the story are led by this spirit. When she gets passed the verdict in Hardai's favour, her inner being is thrilled at the very idea of having realized her long cherished dream of maintaining equality and justice in the society. It, to her, is a pious act:

A decision taken with seamless compassion and loving uprightness. The chabutra seemed like sacred ground to me, the temple precincts from where I had released the stagnating water, cleared out all the filth with my

own hands, prepared the ground as though for new seeds, a fresh garden (109).

The Excuse of Propriety

Obviously, Basumati intends to work for the cause of the oppressed and downtrodden. Ranveer, however, does not let her work independently. He does not allow her to attend the meetings of the Panchayat in the name of propriety. Another interesting point is that Basumati is an honest and upright individual while Ranveer is a corrupt politician who (dis)favours someone in accordance with his own gains. Even when Basumati, propelled by her sense of justice, goes to the meeting and passes judgment in Hardai's favour, he gets that decision reverted as he feels his authority – patriarchal as well as political – threatened. In this way, there is a constant clash between the two concepts of power – the unjust power of Ranveer and Basumati's power of fair-play.

Growing Gap in Perception

The simmering dissatisfaction in Basumati shows up, for the first time, in her decision not to sign the financial documents because she does not want to be a titular Pradhan. Moreover, she is not at all happy with the functioning of her husband. The way he misappropriates the funds meant for metalled roads and dispensaries makes her forlorn. She tries to take charge of the funds but Ranveer does not pay any heed to her words and continues to “call shots” in her name. As a mark of resistance, she decides that she would not sign any financial documents. However, her resistance melts when Ranveer orders her to sign the documents. She finds herself helpless as his repressive image is always at the back of her mind. The mere sight of Ranveer numbs her senses. Obviously, Basumati has been indoctrinated into subordination in such a manner that she has accepted her inferiority and internalized that hegemonically constructed image of women in which only those women are idolized who do not oppose the husband.

Slow but Steady Process of Gathering Courage

Basumati lacks the courage to flout her husband openly. However, her inner being is anguished at not being able to use her power as a Pradhan to dispense justice. As such,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 March 2014

Dr. Ashok Verma

Negotiating Power: Maitreyi Pushpa's *The Verdict*

the cause of her uneasiness is more political than patriarchal. As a wife, she perhaps would never like to offend the husband. There is no instance where she records any dissatisfaction for Ranveer as a husband as she has fully internalized the traditional roles assigned to a woman in patriarchy. She is also aware of the advice given by her mentor at the time of her marriage which again is along patriarchal norms. The clash of opposites between Ranveer and Basumati is then to be understood in the light of the difference in their approach of power and justice. She resists because Ranveer has been misusing his power as a Pradhan/Block Pramukh to serve his own trivial interests. Be it the case of Ramsingh the potter; or Isuriya, the goatherd's wife; or Hardai, the girl in her father's captivity, his decisions are always in favour of the tormentor rather than the oppressed. All villagers are well-aware of this gross injustice, no one, however, dares say anything against him. Basumati, a conscientious and just individual as she is, too is conscious of Ranveer's fraudulent ways. She however is faced with a constant struggle between her conscience which goads her on to resist; and the patriarchal tradition that exacts a wife to be docile and "reliable" to the husband. Her predicament gets manifested beautifully in the following lines: "My mind would heave violently in response, almost to the point of answering back. *But being his wife, my anger remained mute*, my words of protest subsiding like froth on boiled milk" (106) (italics mine).

Repressive Measures at their Culmination

Hardai's desperate step in ending her life to escape constant sexual exploitation leaves Basumati miserable. All her dreams of dispensing justice to the victimized girl are completely shattered. She had tried her best to help Hardai get a fair deal in the village panchayat and passed the verdict in her favour according to which Hardai was set free from her father's exploitative clutches and allowed to live with her husband. When she got the verdict passed, she felt extremely happy as finally she was able to bring cheer to the life of a victim. Ranveer, by vetoing that decision, resorts to repressive measures crushing not only Hardai's hopes for a normal married life but Basumati's cravings for justice and equality as well. While the former commits suicide, the latter makes up her mind against such gross injustice. Sunil Kumar too reads Basumati's 'unreliable' act along the same lines when he aptly comments that "while Basumati's meekness and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:3 March 2014**

Dr. Ashok Verma

Negotiating Power: Maitreyi Pushpa's *The Verdict*

submissiveness stem from the effects of ideology and consistently prevent her from defying her husband.... her unreliability – her acting contrary to the expectations of the patriarchal tradition – arises due to flawed means of power” (173).

A Gap in the Dual Power

In fact, Basumati has found a gap in the dual power of Ranveer. She has increasingly come to realize that by projecting her as a candidate for the Panchayat elections, he did not intend to shape her political career and growth as an individual. He himself told her that he was forced to nominate her as a candidate as he himself wanted to contest the election of Block Pramukh and could not have held two posts simultaneously. He knows that by allowing Basumati become the Pradhan, he will be virtually holding both the key positions of the Pradhan and the Block Pramukh as the wife would never go against him. The way he takes his reliance on her for granted speaks volumes about the male mindset in patriarchy. Basumati has come to understand this mindset thoroughly and has located a breach in it.

Flash Point – Impulsive or Deliberate?

Basumati’s resistance comes in a furtive manner where she behaves like a docile wife following her husband like his image but at the level of instinct, she gives vent to the ever-growing dissatisfaction in her and votes against her husband. This resistance through her individual vote becomes very powerful as she successfully deprives Ranveer of the power that sustains him not only as a politician but as an individual also. All his hopes of becoming an MLA stand thwarted. Thus, by not being ‘reliable’ to her husband, she successfully negotiates the repressive as well as hegemonic power of Ranveer; by not coming in direct confrontation with him and yet leaving him crestfallen at the end of the story. Hence, Basumati’s mode of resistance is truly surreptitious in apparently being submissive and docile, but resisting the oppression potently.

The question of interest here could be whether Basumati’s resistance is a conscious effort towards subversion of power or it is an act she does rather impulsively. In fact, the writer never shows her as a woman planning her resistance. Whenever she defies her husband, she does it on impulse. In case of her voting against Ranveer also, she

comes to realize the implications of her act only when the results of the elections are declared and then she feels pricked by her conscience for not being faithful to her husband:

O God of fire! O great priest who had guided me through the seven steps to holy matrimony! O father, my creator! And Massav, you, my mentor ... you had made me his consort, companion and partner in all his joys and sorrows and bidden me farewell as Ranveer's wife. (116)

Contrast between Isuriya and Basumati

The character of Isuriya and her relationship with her husband further help in understanding power play in the story. The writer skillfully uses her character to juxtapose the two contrary aspects of Basumati's character. With her bold, outspoken and insubordinate nature, Isuriya impresses Basumati and the readers alike. Ecstatic and thrilled after Basumati's election as the Pradhan, she openly proclaims that the days of inequality are over:

'Ai... listen everybody. Listen carefully. Things will be different from now. We can demand our rights. Now if those spindly little men beat us, shout at us, don't let us visit home, if they force us to ask our parents for money or they harass us, then make straight for Basumati. Write it all down. Get them bastards jailed.' (103)

This feeling of jubilation in Isuriya is an expression of the emotions pent-up for long in all womenfolk alike. Basumati's election as the Pradhan of the village is perceived as a change for the better by the villagers particularly, Isuriya who is thrilled about a woman becoming the Pradhan, something hitherto unseen and unheard of: "So, you are now the Pradhan. That can only be for the better." (103). In Basumati, she sees an opportunity for equality and justice which was denied to the villagers by Ranveer. Not only this, she envisions a day when Ranveer shall pay the price for his unjust ways and Basumati shall hold the sway.

Basumati wants to be like Isuriya as she feels burdened by the baggage of the customs and traditions of upper class society. Her status as the wife of a respectable person suffocates the individual in her that wants to be free like a bird, without any

restrictions: “If only I had been Isuriya, outside the walls of propriety and decorum. Under the free sky. Beyond illusions fostered by the paralyzing customs and traditions of genteel society” (111). She envies Isuriya’s freedom from “the paraphernalia of caste and family ties” (103) and recalls how Isuriya came to the village as a bride on the same day but got familiar with every household before “I [Basumati] had barely lifted my veil” (ibid). The protagonist attributes the rebellious part in her to Isuriya. Undoubtedly, she is her alter ego. Since Basumati has been indoctrinated to bear the burden of propriety and customs of the upper class society, she has apparently become timid, submissive and docile. Isuriya, on the other hand, is forthright. Being from a lower class, Isuriya is not supposed to observe ‘manners’; she can afford to be blunt and direct. Basumati, on the contrary, has to live in a world of ‘must-nots’ being the wife of a man of influence.

The Defining Feature of Reaction against Oppression

The two women can further be contrasted along their reaction against oppression. Since Isuriya is subjected to physical violence, her reaction has to be direct and blunt. She reacts against repressive power in the form of reporting her husband to the authorities for maltreatment. She openly breaches the patriarchal norms. In her case, repressive power is met with forceful resistance. Basumati, on the contrary, has to negotiate the duality of power and therefore reacts in a secretive, indirect manner.

Undoubtedly, Isuriya makes Basumati conscious of the undercurrent of dissatisfaction, the ever-growing uneasiness in herself. She becomes instrumental in making Basumati realize her true nature and changes her from a meek and submissive wife to a judicious individual who can go against her husband, if necessary. The last line of the story accentuates Isuriya’s role in Basumati’s resistance as she confesses to her mentor after casting her vote against Ranveer: “I just couldn’t kill the Isuriya in me” (116)!

Works Cited

Bhaduri, Saugata, ed. *Translating Power*. New Delhi: Katha, 2008.

Kumar, Sunil. "Unreliability and Subversion as Resistance: Reading "The Verdict"."
Bhaduri 168-173.

Pushpa, Maitreyi. "The Verdict." Bhaduri 102-16.

Russell, Bertrand. *Power: A New Social Analysis*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.,
1938.

Dr. Ashok Verma
Assistant Professor
Department of English
B.P.S. Mahila Vishwavidyalaya
Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat (Haryana)
ashokgverma@gmail.com