

Intersections of Language, Gender and Power: A Linguistic Approach to Discourses of Everyday Life

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Abstract

Discourses surrounding rapes and moral policing in India are not mere verbal expressions. They are manifestations of tacit assumptions and prejudices of Indian society on one hand and desperate pleas for drastic changes on the other. This paper tries to analyze the discourses which negotiate their way into the Indian psyche after such untoward incidents. The paper is fully based on the study of select speeches. The emphasis is on the linguistic features that covertly express as well as engender discourses which permeate the society and in turn, continue to keep specific values in circulation. The methodology used is a combination of discourse historical approach and critical metaphor analysis. While the former searches for evidences of discrimination in a particular speech and takes up the question of intentionality by examining the way in which the linguistic framework enforces the ideology of a particular group, the latter emphasizes on the unconscious associations of words and culturally and historically assumed values through metaphor identification, interpretation and explanation based on contextual analysis.

Keywords: Gender, Discourse, Religion, Power, Metaphor

Tragic Situations - Molestations

Indian women, and men, are living on the edge, perpetually in fear of rapes, moral policing and other forms of gendered violence. In their rush to become empowered, they are constantly pulled back by their gendered bodies. One could say, be it a three-year old or a seventy-five year old, one cannot evade one's gendered body consciousness. Body is constructed as a site of struggle and the feeling that your body is your identity is reinforced in and out through events and the discourses in the times we live in. Oddly enough, for a "culture" which prides itself on its preoccupation with spirituality, the materiality of

the body is a real challenge. Fear seems to rule over so much so that Indian kids before learning the first letter of alphabet are taught by their anxious parents, lessons of “bad touch”.

Focus of This Paper

This paper looks at a set of discourses which circulate in the society and analyze how these reveal a pathological obsession of a society with constructing gendered identities by maintaining the victim/victimizer or master/slave binary divisions. The first part of the paper analyses three core texts selected from contemporary articulations on the theme of rapes, moral policing and the dress code for women. These discourses are selected from print and electronic media and analyzed using a combination of two methodologies: one, the discourse historical approach with which the relationship between language and the context is examined to reveal the ideology behind it. Here, the understanding is that power relationships are realized in and through discourse and contributes to the configuration of social relations. The second method is the critical metaphor methodology by which the metaphors used in a speech are identified, analyzed and interpreted contextually. Identifying the conceptual metaphor used in the discourse is the main objective here, so as to uncover the unconscious emotional associations of words and assumed values. The second part of the paper is an attempt to trace the historical and ideological roots of these values by converging them with certain aspects of religious discourses in form and content.

Mob Hysteria

In a case of mob hysteria during March 2015, a 16 year-old girl committed suicide at Kodungallur in Thrissur district, Kerala. Aswathy, an 11th standard student got terrified when the natives questioned her along with the boy, who was her tuition class mate. In the first report by the Inspector who is in charge of the case, there is an objective evaluation of the situation, a seemingly unemotional account of what happened on the fateful day.

(1) At first when neighbors and relatives reached her house she denied that someone was inside the house, the boy was hiding inside. The girl was taken to her relative’s house, but some of the neighbors waited outside, finally the boy emerged from the house. This further agitated them and the girl was brought back to be confronted with the boy. People were shouting at the duo, she then

rushed inside her house and set herself ablaze,” says Padmarajan P.K, sub-inspector at the Kodungallur police station. “We are not sure how to take the case forward. The natives said they did this in a good sense” Padmarajan added.

When we analyze it deeper, it turns out that the account is not as disinterested as we think. The police officer starts by emphasizing that the girl had “denied” that the boy was “hiding” which brings out the blame on the “duo” for apparently committing an “immoral” act curtailed by the society. The “agitation” of the crowd is constructed as a natural response to the weight of the ‘imaginary’ immodest act. The police also spell out their helplessness in admitting that they are not sure in what way they would take the case forward, which is a euphemistic expression that the case is as good as closed as there is the “good sense” of the society behind this accident. The report of the police intentionally or unintentionally tends to work in favor of the mob’s approach and exonerates them through the words “good sense”. Thus the police also works as part of the moral policing machinery in constructing a discourse which sides with the value administered by the society that a boy and a girl in a room cannot just be “talking” and that it will in no manner allow affront to the Indian culture which ironically enough was summed up by the Defence Lawyer of the 2012 Delhi rape case, ML Sharma “We have the best culture. In our culture, there’s no place for a woman”.

(1.1) The boy reportedly said “I went there just to talk to her. That is when some people came when Aswati was taken away by her parents. I thought of getting out by the back door. But when I looked outside the window some one was there. He threatened that if I did not come out he would call the police. I sent her a message saying I was going to surrender. She had said no. But I saw that message only later...a lot of people began to thrash me up. Some people said I should be tied up and beaten. Some people said that wasn’t needed. They asked what I did inside the house. I said we were just talking ,in the midst of all this, Aswathi and her aunt came .she didn’t say anything to me. She went inside the house and did that. I was taken away by the police.”

This account of the event by the “boy” reveals another aspect of the case, the discourse of fear which is deeply entrenched in the psyche of the boy and the girl. The boy repeatedly says he went there “just to talk” which is an outright lie in the eyes of the mob. Look at the predicament of a sixteen year old boy who looks through the window and sees a mob approaching to question him. His narrative

inadvertently places himself as a culprit who tries to escape from the police. Words like “I thought of getting out by the back door.” “I was going to surrender” reveal a frame of mind which is terribly frightened and who has grown up to internalize the fact that he was doing something wrong in the eyes of the society and that he had to pay the price. This same sense of fear and internalized sense of crime is instilled in the girl too. While the boy takes a chance to explain his position in the hope that he would be understood, the girl invariably knows that her language will not have any effect on this vicious mob. Her moral indignation is too deep for words.

2) In an article titled “Let the purdah revolution begin” in Mathrubhumi dated May 14 2015, which was written in response to another article favouring the rejection of the conventional purdah and a stylization based on current requirements, by K.V. Kala on 18 April 2015, Dr. Lasitha S of Manjeri Medical College, Manjeri defends the use of purdah on following grounds:

(2.1) a) While traveling, the women who wear purdah moves about, sits, lies down with the greatest freedom, uninhibited, because all their body parts are concealed from the public. b) It also avoids the additional burden of carrying sweaters since purdah shields us from cold.

(2.2) Dr. Shahasa Saluddin, Coimbatore: a) Purdah offers protection from ultra violet rays and hence prevents melanoma. b) Holy Quran issues forth that the beauty of a woman is exclusively for the eyes of her husband and her family and not to be relished by other men. Manusmriti 3:61 says that women should dress up attractively before their husbands so that their husbands are pleased and reproduction happens. c) Purdah forms a barrier between a female’s body and male gaze and while a man sees a purdah clad woman he is distracted and feels calm and consequently woman is protected.

(2.3) Sajna Siraj, Govt. Medical College, Kottayam: A woman who covers herself fully from the eyes of a stranger is a fully decent woman...whether the debates over purdah stop or not, not even a single Muslim woman will, even in sweltering heat, abandon purdah.

Pattern of Arguments in Discourses

We can see a pattern emerging in these three discourses. These three subjects view the world through certain metaphors. The title heralds a new change in the perspective of the issue, where some people try to see purdah not as a tool of religious oppression of women but as a choice for women beyond religions. It advocates the use of purdah by women of all religions and nationalities but by modifying its

cloth colour and its texture suiting the climate of the regions in which they live. This seems to be a democratic and present-day use of the erstwhile “oppressive” tool.

Let’s look at the metaphors that these discourses carry. In Dr.Lasitha’s response we see words like ‘uninhibited’, ‘concealed’, and ‘shield’. Her opinion reveals the hope of a woman who wants to move along without being inhibited by her body parts. This dress appears to her as a “shield” from something that makes her “inhibited” and “conceals” what she desires to hide from a particular form of gaze. The comparison made here is with a sweater that shields the body from cold. The second response depends on the logic of science as well as religion. The words “prevent”, “protection”, “barrier” presuppose the presence of an amorphous, fatal attack everywhere. Just as costumes rescue us from ultra violet rays and a prospective deadly disease, this dress helps the female body as an armor warding off such evil gazes. It also has an additional effect of calming down the male desire which is undoubtedly, the traditional duty attributed to the female. The third response too, celebrates the “covered” woman as the “decent” woman. Kathleen Lennon quotes from Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1953):

Here is the beginning of the way in which women live their bodies as objects for another's gaze, something which has its origin not in anatomy but in “education and surroundings” (307). The consequence of living a body as an object of another's gaze is an inhibited intentionality, her spontaneous movements inhibited, “the exuberance of life ... restrained” (323) “lack of physical power” leading to a “general timidity” (355).

In all these reactions we see a conceptual metaphor emerging, the female body in war with the male gaze. Sadly, it points to the objectification of women and the internalization of a value code in which all men irrespective of age, sexual orientation or any other indexes are implicated. It also celebrates the ownership of the female body by the family. Thus, through these linguistic choices, what the female does, is to reinforce the notion of the female body as a body politic, a site owned and governed by some outside forces and constantly under surveillance. It also constructs the fear of every single man who happens to be in their way, as a potential rapist. Paradoxically, the apprehensive woman is manipulated to think that she is at ease within this body politic and wages a war against the perverted male gazes with the help of her clothing.

Embodied Self

Iris Marion Young discusses the concept of ‘the embodied self’ of women thus “She often lives her body as a burden, which must be dragged and prodded along, and at the same time protected” (36). Although this concept cannot be attributed to all women ignoring other parameters like region, religion, caste and geographic specifics, Young’s concept seems readily relevant for these women.

(3) O my dear hero, who in this world will not accept a husband like you? You are so famous, so magnanimous, so beautiful and so easily gotten.

In the Fourth Canto of Srimad-Bhagavatam (4.25.41) Srila Prabhupada writes, “In this regard, the word vikhyatam [famous] is very significant. A man is always famous for his aggression toward a beautiful woman, and such aggression is sometimes considered rape. Although rape is not legally allowed, it is a fact that a woman likes a man who is very expert at rape.”

3.1: Devotee (1): They said that the man cannot be convicted of rape if he honestly believes that the woman consented to his raping her.

Prabhupada: Yes, that is law always. Rape means without consent, sex. Otherwise there is no rape. There was a rape case in Calcutta, and the lawyer was very intelligent. He some way or other made the woman admit, “Yes, I felt happiness.” So he was released. “Here is consent.” And that’s a fact. Because after all, sex – rape or no rape – they will feel some pleasure. So the lawyer by hook and crook made the woman agree, “Yes, I felt some pleasure.” “Now, there is consent.” So he was released. After all, it is an itching sensation. So either by force or by willingly, if there is itching, everyone feels relieved itching it. That’s a psychology. It is not that the women do not like rape. They like sometimes. They willingly. That is the psychology. Outwardly they show some displeasure, but inwardly they do not. This is the psychology. (Morning walk, May 11, 1975, Perth)

Srila Prabhupada is considered to be a spiritual master who had millions of followers worldwide and is the founder of the famous Hare Krishna cult named ISKCON. Recently this take on rape went viral

over social media and led to fierce debates between defenders and detractors. ISKCON officials immediately came up with the view that Srila Prabhupada lived in Victorian India and the meaning of the word “rape” had different connotations then. He had used it in the sense of “to ravish or transport, as with delight (obsolete)” and not in the sense of violent sex and that he meant “aggression within affection” which means that he was driving home the point that women, by nature, love their men to use some ‘force’ as part of flirtation since psychologically a woman’s “no” means “yes”.

In this elaboration from Srimad Bhagavatham which is a Hindu religious text, he explains the qualities of a man in term of his sexual prowess through aggression and the qualities of a woman in terms of her silent admiration and submission towards his aggression. In this regard, some interpretations of the Vedic texts talk about a woman’s body as “kshaathrabhoomi” or a land that belongs to warriors who have the right to sow their seeds of desire. This religious validation of the male sexual drive discourse leads to the discursive construction of female consent by the patriarchy.

While women and girls are not supposed actively to pursue their sexual desires, they are regularly held responsible for provoking male desires. They are also supposed to help men to 'contain the 'male urges' that might otherwise be expressed in inappropriate or anti-social ways (Cameron and Kulick 54).

The Concept, *Rape*

What is surprising is the way in which an opinion articulated in 1975 against a different context whatsoever resurfaces and elicits responses from people in much the same way. The fact that the word “rape” acquires different meanings over time and in different contexts makes the case worth studying. Since this linguistic phenomenon encourages attribution of meanings to words as the community desires, for people who think rape is “chivalrous behavior” admirable in a man, erases any tinge of power play within.

Here the hypothetical speaker is represented positively and nominated as a “beautiful” woman and the verse generalizes this woman as “every” woman. The qualities ascribed to her are the ‘traditional’ virtues of being “desirous” and “submissive” and she is portrayed as one who invites sexual favours from

aggressive men. Again, she believes in strength and subduing women as the purport of male strength. Written from a patriarchal perspective using the discursive strategy of mitigation, the discriminatory utterances are manipulated to appear like women's desires. In that sense, all men are supposed to act aggressively to satiate women. The use of power over women is legitimized in this way.

The topos here is that of responsibility. 'Women fawn over men who use aggression. Hence men are supposed to behave that way.' We see two premises here. 1. Every woman loves aggression. 2. Aggression is consensual sex.

Susan Ehrlich in her article "The discursive reconstruction of sexual consent" (1998) suggests that a woman will say 'no' with sincerity to a man's sexual advances, but the 'no' gets filtered through a series of cultural beliefs and attitudes and transform the direct negative into an indirect affirmative...Because linguistic meanings are, to a large extent, determined by the dominant culture's social values and attitudes, they may lose their intended meanings in the context of a sexist speech community (197).

Thus "rape" acquires an additional meaning in this context or relapses into its Victorian meaning. Since words when used together frequently, over time, merge in public discourse, it has rigorous implications for the Indian society as in this recent judgment which did not criminalize marital rape and eventually passed a new sexual-assault law. In a statement to Parliament, Federal minister, Haribhai Parathibhai Chaudhary said that the Indian Government does not plan to introduce punishments for marital rape. He is reported to have argued thus:

(3.2) It is considered that the concept of marital rape, as understood internationally, cannot be suitably applied in the Indian context because of various factors e.g. level of education/illiteracy, poverty, myriad social customs and values, religious beliefs, mindset of the society to treat the marriage as a sacrament, etc...If marital rape is brought under the law, the entire family system will be under great stress, a report submitted by lawmakers to Parliament had said in 2013.

Dismal Meaning of *Rape*

This example shows how within a heterosexual, single family system advocated by the Indian culture the word rape acquires a very dismal meaning. The family system legitimizes any kind of atrocity in the name of the divine husband wife relationship as it falls within the norms set by the community. The very fear that marriage intersects with “various factors” like ethnicity, religion and other beliefs make the decision easier because there will always be affront to one system or another and that pre-empts any scope of changing the law. This discourse has the additional effect of ratifying violence within marriage, provides loop holes and it makes the victimizer unanswerable in the eyes of law as in the case of this speech defending Srila Prabhupada by one of his devotees

(3.3) As a female bodied soul... I understood it differently. Don't know if I'm wrong. This statement of Prabhupadas was contextual. He must have told.. About a wife getting raped by her husband... sex within marriage...when she actually was not mentally ready... if husband forces her..then its considered rape by husband on his wife...then out of her love for her husband..she soon accepts the situation because she is chaste and enjoys it too...otherwise her husband wont be pleased. She also likes the fact that her husband is feeling free to force her... when she really was not interested. This is my understanding about the statement” (Amrta Madhavi Devi Dasi)

She echoes the mentality of a section of Indian society “where men rape and women get raped as a normal course of events” (Wolf 167). While we condemn rapes, assaults and murders, rape within marriage is found as consensual sex. Such unrealistic, misconceived notions about ‘happiness, ‘security’ and ‘honour’ of the family is brought about through a manipulation of female sexual consent that operates on many levels; cultural, social, religious, governmental etc.

Interplay between Patriarchy and Religion

All these discourses when interrogated reveal an unholy interplay between patriarchy and religion. Besides constructing rituals around the significant moments of life and death, religion holds its reign over society by instituting the ideology of sexuality. I argue that these discourses show a striking similarity in content, to the proliferating religious discourses of the three major religions practiced in India. The religious discourses replete with images of women as sinners or as submissive subjects as mentioned in the former example create a myth around an otherwise natural and biological process called sexuality.

Take for instance, the popular Hindu deities Krishna who is described in the episode of rasaleela as having conjugal relationships with many women devotees or as the playful lover who takes away the clothing of gopis while they are bathing. And Rama, who becomes the ideal male by his act of disowning his wife suspected of adultery. Such evocations set examples of an unreal dynamics between the sexes and naturalise and restore in the psyche of a society the upper male hand in sexuality.

The Islamic code of *zina* has a different story to render. Introduced as a check on immoral activities which include pre-marital and extramarital activities and seen as a precaution against rapes, *zina*, in effect, implicates the victim and functions as a catch for Muslim women who report cases of rape. The laws of *zina* do not offer any scope of redemption for the rape victims. The three ample evidences that can convict the rapist include the confession of the victimizer, the pregnancy of the victim or the eye witness of four Muslim men. The obligation to prove the case of rape lies with the victim and in cases where she is not able to prove, punishment is awarded to her for misleading the court. This law has led to the conviction of a number of women in fundamentalist Islamic countries.

In a speech defending the precepts of Islam on issues of the validity of female witnesses, the concept of woman as cultivable land and the permissibility of sexual relationship of a master with female slaves, M. M Akbar, a religious orator and Islamic scholar of Kerala and the founder of ‘Niche of Truth’ asserts ‘logically’ that Holy Quran prescribes two women witness as a substitute in the absence of a single male witness precisely in cases of financial dealings and argues that two women are required to correct mistakes because it is established ‘scientifically’ that women are prone to make mistakes since they are fundamentally emotional and because of the “problems” they face which include menstruation, pregnancy, delivery and breast feeding. He also argues that only people who fail to see the metaphorical use of language would fail to perceive that the word “cultivable land” was used in a poetic sense and it meant that she was his sole possession and that he wouldn’t permit another man to sow the seeds in a land that rightfully belonged to him.

The Christian evangelism on the other hand builds on episodes of suppression of female sexuality through the Genesis narrative. To expiate Eve’s first sin, she is asked by God to humbly submit to the punishment of child birth and subjugate herself to her husband. Even within modern churches, women

take up the conventional roles where scriptures define specific ways of being female. Look at these following biblical discourses on sexuality:

"If a man lies with a male, as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.

Leviticus 20:13

"If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days."

Deuteronomy 22:28-29

"If a man lies sexually with a woman who is a slave, assigned to another man and not yet ransomed or given her freedom, a distinction shall be made. They shall not be put to death, because she was not free". Leviticus 19:20 (ESV)

Intersection of Religion, Gender and Language

I further argue that these discourses on the containment of sexuality exhibit the same 'form' of discourses within religion. Firstly, they operate through certain metaphors which appeal to the short-term memory of the listeners and help them connect easily with an abstract idea which otherwise eludes their sensibility. Secondly, they create a female subject who is "othered" by the male whose image resembles the concept of a punishing God within religions. The female who refuses to abide by the law of living within a proscribed circle as in the case of the metaphorical "lakshman rekha", will have to put up with the risks of physical and mental torture. Most importantly, they also exhibit a ritualistic tendency by being repetitive and are hammered down at regular intervals over the society at large. This chanting has an esoteric as well as a psycho linguistic effect suspending judgment in the wake of an intense religious experience brought in through the vicious magic of words. Thus, the intersection of religion, gender and language create identities for women and men, and produces more power relationships that keep women at bay.

These discourses stalk women in their journey towards empowerment by limiting them as vulnerable bodies, trapping them unconsciously, instilling fear and thereby, sustaining unequal power

relations. Such incidents are numerous and a continuation of the attempts of a particular section of society which attempts to control sexuality spreading fear psychosis across India, in trains, in buses, in towns, in villages thus hindering the free movement of women. Such untoward incidents of objective violence invite discussions and media attention but the bigger issue of the machination of fear remains largely unaddressed. In sum, these linguistic choices, must be interrogated because they promote and propagate and continue to keep in circulation a set of already obsolete values, creating an unrealistic world, unsafe for both the sexes.

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