

Exploring Social Construction of Victims through Gendering of Language: An Untold Account

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Abstract

Language often facilitates the construction of certain social identities including gender identity. In our every day life language used about or for women as well as used by women and men are often gendered, which in some way or the other portray women less than an individual and very often substandard than their counterpart i.e., men. Thus it becomes easier to treat women with contempt, disregard their rights and reduce their existence, often to the extent of nullity.

The frequent uses of certain so-called offensive and sexist language (e.g., English words like ‘whore’, ‘slut’, ‘mistress’ etc., and also in Bengali and Hindi words like ‘haramjadi [synonym of English word ‘bitch’], ‘dajjal’ [implying very dominating], besya [prostitute], daini [witch] etc. and many more) not only devalue and marginalize women but also stigmatize and victimize them.

Yet this is hardly taken into concern as a serious issue for exploration, especially in India by mainstream-malestream social scientists. Gender and language researcher Laurel Sutton (1992) had once presented a host of slang terms used exclusively for female reference and that also categorize the referent’s body size and attractiveness. But she encountered virtually no such terms for male reference and even if some terms are used they are generally seen as categories that also apply to women. Since women generally encounter such similar derogatory terms on a daily basis they not only consider them as mere negative words but also accept the situation habitually as ‘natural’. Hence, they often yield to the surrounding state of affairs and, thus becoming gradually incapable

even to recognize and realize the degree and intensity of their second-grade existence. Victimization and becoming victims become their integral part of daily life. Ergo, by remaining silent and subservient about language abuses in daily interactions, these abuses are legitimized as kernel distinguishing departure point between ‘good and bad’ women, between ‘Madonnas and Whores’.

Given this backdrop, the present paper attempts to explain how language becomes gendered over time for women in both public and private where they are time and again being marginalized and victimized and how linguistic uses act as a catalyst for disempowerment of women quite underhandedly, thus legitimizing patriarchal ensemble of relations, values and structures.

Key words: gendering of language, patriarchal, male-stream social scientists

Introduction

In contemporary social science research, gender is often perceived as an achievement or accomplishment that is something that people ‘do’ rather than simply having one, implying thereby that gender identity is a social construct rather than a ‘given’ social category. And now it is also a widely accepted fact that gender is often performed through language in a variety of ways. Though language is often considered to be an intermediary between the individual and society because of vital social functions like, communicating information, establishing and maintaining social relationships etc. it is also often portrayed as a symbolic resource that speakers can draw on selectively and strategically to perform masculine or feminine identities according to context (Mills, 1995:5). Now this relation between gender and language is one of the most attractive and significant areas of Sociolinguistics, which is basically the study of the interrelationship of language and society.

In North America, Sociolinguistics has been one of the most important interdisciplinary subjects since the latter half of the 1960s and pioneering studies on

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language and gender (Robin Lakoff 1973, 1975, Deborah Tannen1990, Deborah Cameron 1995, Jennifer Coates 1998, Penelope Eckert 2003) have opened up new avenues of research for both sociologists and linguists. Most of the linguistic research, focusing on gender dimensions, has often put forward the hypothesis that gender-specific differences in communication arise in the perception of linguistic interactions. It is assumed that gender stereotypes, which function as cognitive patterns of perception, are responsible for the different reception of women's and men's communicative behaviour.¹ Lakoff (*Language and Woman's Place*, 1975), Tannen (*You Just Don't Understand*, 1990) and others have also shown that gender differences do exist in language and that these differences are quite similar to 'cultural' differences (Coates, 2004:6).

Despite being such an interesting subject in most of the Western societies, Sociolinguistics in India has not yet developed to its fullest extent. There is still acute dearth of research on the interrelationship between language and gender. Therefore, the present paper attempts to throw light on this particular aspect as well as its implications for the study of victimization.

Existing Relevant Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

In order to explore how victims are socially constructed by the ways language is used, we have to get an idea of the background of the subject of Sociolinguistics, focusing on gender-language interface, which will not only help us in understanding the area well but at the same time will also pave the way towards the identification of the fact of how use of gendered language curbs individual identity and place people, particularly women in a marginal social position, where they are constantly being victimized time and again.

To start with, research and theory that address gender differences in language use have burgeoned since the publication of Robin Lakoff's (1973, 1975) *Language and Woman's Place*, where arguing that language is fundamental to gender inequality, Lakoff pointed to two areas in which inequalities can be found: *Language used about women*,

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*such as the asymmetries between seemingly parallel terms like master and mistress, and language used by women, which places women in a double bind between being appropriately feminine and being fully human.*² Lakoff's article argued that women have a different way of speaking from men- a way of speaking that both reflects and produces a subordinate position in society and since it gradually becomes powerless due to the frequent use of certain speech patterns (e.g., 'hedges such as *sort of, kind of*', 'intensifiers- e.g. *I am so glad you came!*', 'inessential qualifiers', 'empty adjectives like *sweet, charming*', 'tag questions such as *Delhi is the capital of India, isn't it?*', 'superpolite forms' etc.) it disqualifies women from position of power and authority. Women use these forms, because of their childhood socialization, and because they are expected and sanctioned to do so (Coates, 2004:6).

This effectively places women in a double bind. On one hand, women can choose to use tentative language forms, but then they risk being perceived as unintelligent or incompetent (and for men this justifies maintaining women in a subordinate position). If a woman learns and uses women's language, she is necessarily considered less than a real, full person- she's a bit of fluff. But on the other hand if women choose more direct, male language, then also they risk being demeaned and ostracized for being unfeminine. So, a woman is damned if she does and damned if she doesn't.

In reality actually the case is that the distinction between men's and women's language is a symptom of a problem in our culture, not the problem itself. Basically it reflects the fact that men and women are expected to have different interests and different roles, hold different types of conversations and react differently to other people. That is why often it has been observed that the narrow definition of women in language refers to the fact that women are more often discussed in terms of their appearance, family relationships etc., whereas men are generally discussed in terms of what they do (Key, 1975).³

Lakoff argued that these tools helped the speaker avoid committing herself. In the second part of her book, "Why Women Are Ladies," she presented her theory on three kinds of politeness: distance, deference, and camaraderie politeness, and argued that there was strong societal pressure on women to behave in a certain way, i.e., act like "ladies," something that was designed to keep them in their place, which is quite a marginal place in the society.⁴

Apart from this, sociolinguists like Dale Spender, Pamela Fishman, Don Zimmerman and Candace West advocated another theory, namely the Dominance Approach to explain the gender-language interface, where they represented women as an oppressed group and interpreted linguistic differences in women's and men's speech in terms of men's dominance and women's subordination. And it is quite easy to assume that where there is subordination of women inevitably there will be some kind of oppression, and marginalization for them.

Operationalizing Victimization through Linguistic Practices

With reference to this theoretical background, it can be stated that the frequent usage of sexist or gendered language not only marginalizes women as mere submissive, meek and passive beings but very often it poses questions on their very existence and also on their character.

Gendered Language is always a problem because it sends the message that women are less than fully human. If seen as inferior, it becomes easier to treat women with less respect, disregard their rights, and ignore their well-being. Devaluing masculinity with homophobic or sexist remarks indicates that being gay or being a woman is insulting and can help perpetuate violence. And since the way we use language affects the way we think, accepting the use of certain terms makes it harder to battle the concepts behind them.⁴

Laurel Sutton (1992), notable gender-language researcher had reported a host of slang terms for female reference that also categorize the referent's body size and attractiveness. But she encountered virtually no such terms for male reference. Thus one can say that some male is fat and unattractive but a label like *ugly fat slob* can apply just as well to a girl or woman as to a boy or man. Sutton's college-aged consultants reported no prepackaged male labels analogous to *heifer* or *cow*.

The focus on women's appearance is by no means simply a matter of language. Although increasing attention is being given to men's appearance, there is still strength but not beauty contests for men. Among some groups, men sit watching women walk by and rate them on appearance ('she's definitely a 10'), but women don't do the same for men. (Or still do so only vary rarely) (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003:248).

Now there certainly are many ways to categorizing men. They can be smart or stupid, strong or weak, kind or mean rich or poor, fat or thin, generous or stingy, leaders or followers. But these are generally seen as categories that also apply to women. They are principles that sort people. English has very few words for categorizing men as opposed to women on these or other principles. Perhaps the words *prick* or *bastard* might fall in this category. In some ways parallel to the female *bitch*, the expressions do seem to pick out a sub group of males on the basis of their negatively characterized behavior. Unlike the word *bitch*, however, they don't seem readily to get extended to members of male sex in general, losing their implications of particular kinds of behavior or personality (ibid).

From the above projections it not only becomes obvious that women's place is basically marginal in society but there is also not an iota of doubt that they are seen not as complementary but as secondary to men. Besides, from time immemorial almost always women have been portrayed as physical entities for whom beauty was the uppermost consideration when it came to evaluation. Also in its crudest form they were primarily portrayed as sex objects. Derogatory terms that are used for women undoubtedly

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stigmatize them and gradually they become the victims of many offenses, which are not always cognizable or even considered as something serious.

Even in our present day society, women are still struggling to make their place and to achieve more in order to come out of their second grade existence, which is quite an obvious outcome of their victimization in the society. It has been a commonly held assumption that gender-related victimization is disproportionately concentrated on women and girls. Starting from sexual assault to intimate-partner violence, incest, and genital mutilation, trafficking for sexual exploitation etc. most of the time the hate crimes are directed at females because girls and women are victimized because of their gender.⁶ And apart from the so-called violent crimes, regular exposure to gendered (and even sometimes derogatory) language can also seriously interfere with a woman's healthy emotional development as well as lead to significant detriment of her self-esteem, emotional well-being, and physical state.⁷

The fear of victimization or becoming victim is not always directly related to crime in its strict sense and the construction of victims within a social setting through various new and innovative ways are occupying quite a serious place these days. There is diversity of victimization explaining the wide variety of different interpretations.⁸

It can be elucidated that considering the nature of the victimization, as well as the person who is victimized, especially through language, victimization is not always recognized and thus not taken into concern seriously.

Here usually the subservient and second grade existence of women is highlighted. It is often just beyond imagination and expectation that language, the elementary basis of communicating with others, can facilitate the construction of gendered identity as well as posing a threat to the survival of women in general. And that is why here the fear of being victimized becomes just equivalent to the fear of crime against women, because they fear the offensive language and deprecating terms used against them.

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But since not every woman is aware of this kind of situation or even has the guts and courage to protest this, they generally accept this critical situation as natural and desirable and remain silent. And even the few who can protest are also not always able to articulate their protest in a conventional patriarchal society and so here victimization is a possibly occurring event, which is also salient in reference to the images of victims in several (indirect) sources.⁹

Now in analyzing the role played by language in creating victims, references drawn from several nuances from all over the world can prove to be relevant and significant. In a study of undergraduate girl students of an American University it was noted that certain derogatory and defamatory words such as ‘whore’, ‘slut’, ‘bitch’, ‘pussy’, ‘fag’ etc. are used so frequently that these are considered as natural and acceptable. When asked about their immediate reactions for the usage of these words following responses were received by the researchers:

1. *“My friends often call me a whore/slut but not because I am one. It is just something they call me if I don’t see them. I don’t really think twice about it.”*
2. *“Unfortunately these terms are used on a daily basis, therefore, it does not have an effect on me but if someone called one of my family members or close friend mine, I would be pissed off and would take action.”*
3. *“All of these words are used around me every day. Although they are offensive, most don’t even mean anything to me anymore.... These words are constantly used around me, they now are just negative words and have lost their true meaning.”¹⁰*

It’s not that such disparaging and insulting words, reflecting gender bias in language, are used exclusively by the male members of the society, rather often women themselves have the tendency to use these. That’s why some argue that if women use

these words to refer to each other, then it can't be sexist. However, realistically sexism and patriarchy are systems of oppression that should not be confused with gender. Both genders can perpetuate sexism, but within patriarchy, only one gender (men) is given unearned advantage.¹¹

In a patriarchal ideological social setting, none can deny either the inherent bias against women or even the tendencies to discriminating them from various social fields. Initiating from the stage of infancy, through childhood the patterns of socialization also vary between girls and boys. Differential socialization invariably sanctions women's actions and interaction patterns with others by providing certain strict principles, which the girls and women are supposed to conform to. And here language once again plays its role of segregating men and women vis-à-vis their interaction including talking, behaving etc.

Frequent usage of gendered remarks like (in English) "*A Boy, being physically stronger is supposed to play with a ball, while the sensitive Girl with a doll*", "*tumi meye, tai dhire dhire katha bolbe, cholbe-firbe, karon etai sulakhanjukto meyder nidarshan*" (in Bengali), implying thereby that "*A Girl is always to behave in a subdued manner as well as speak in a low note, because that is the ideal situation to be a Good Girl*" not only promote masculine power but simultaneously compel women to be in a room surrounded by subordination, timidity and lack of freedom.

Thus from the very early age women learn to be in a subservient position, be it in family or elsewhere in the public domain and this undoubtedly is the starting point of their marginalization. Almost all of us have encountered tendencies of discriminating against women as 'deviants' due to their inability to conform to the conventional set of rules and regulations.

A woman, who is against the typical feminine behavior and is vocal enough to make her point, is often labeled as '*Dajjal*' in Bengali, which refers to her uncontrolled

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and dominating personality. Calling a lady by this very nomenclature definitely interferes in her personal character and later on she is often expelled from her intimate as well as distant surroundings, which affects her in an extremely adverse manner.

Then lots of similar instances are available where women are not only harassed physically and mentally but are also stigmatized in their own society as ‘*Witches*’ (also known as *Daini* in Bengali or *Bokshi* in Nepali, i.e., a woman, having supernatural power as by a compact with the devil or evil spirits).

Once these labels or tags are attached with someone, they become victims of a very primitive, superstitious and ridiculous practice, which is one of the worst forms of violence till date. Similarly in both Hindi and Bengali, the use of the word ‘*Beshya*’, the English synonym of which is ‘*Prostitute*’, reflects so much negative connotation that anybody called by this term is on the verge of sinking. While the promiscuous nature of men is not highlighted to that extent, the female members are again the victims of such defamatory terms. Though some swear words in English, Hindi e.g., ‘*Bastard*’, ‘*Son of a Bitch*’ ‘*Haramjada*’ are commonly used for men, which adversely affect their dignity, ultimately in reality all of these refer to the character of a woman or to be more precise, women’s sexuality. It has been observed often that the swear words in many Indian languages refer to women’s alleged tendency towards sexual promiscuity.

Besides, a very common and longstanding use of the words “*Master* and *Mistress*” can also be considered as a good example, where the word *master*, having no gender connotation generally refers to a man who has acquired some consummate ability in some field, the distribution of the word *mistress* is restricted to its sexual sense of paramour.¹²

Even the worst thing is that nowadays in media also there is an increase in derogatory terms used for women. Though in many families people don't do cable tv garbage, and have kept this stuff away from their kids, but often they are losing the battle

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because kids have noticed that on regular network TV and in movies rated PG, that there are many negative terms used toward women.

According to the opinion of a lady in her late 30s,
‘My young son asked me what a "ho" is, and it got me thinking. (He's too old to believe they were referring to a garden tool). Women started out being insulted with terms such as "sissy" and "tomboy", now it is common to hear "bitch" and "ho" on daytime television without a second thought'. Then when we go to the store and the kids look at video games that are supposed to be for their perspective age groups, it's there! Video games with the goal of robbing & raping women are making millions and destroying our children.'

She also added, *‘A friend and I were trying to think of the same terms for men, but there really are none. For example, being labeled a "player" is not a negative term for a male, it seems to be a compliment, yet the term "slut", the equal female term is very negative, and usually unwarranted. I can't even line up a family show on the internet in front of my kids because of the t&a all over the ads, I have to pull it up and then call them in to watch. If this type of marketing didn't work, they wouldn't be putting it out there, so obviously enough people are accepting this crap. No, I'm not a conservative, I'm no prude, not going to put forth "religious" reasons, and organized religions are also perpetuating this stuff also in their own way. But what gets me is that we all know that kids internalize this stuff and humans learn these attitudes from other humans, yet it's getting worse! What is going on here? We're going backwards! Males - you are being insulted also, ads are appealing to your most primitive instincts of reproduction, and they are skipping right past your brains assuming you're too stupid to notice. Your mothers, sisters, daughters and aunts are being assaulted here - doesn't this bother you?’¹³*

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However, the fact is that women are victimized not just because of the use of derogatory terms; even the so-called positive and nice words used for them are also often responsible for their victimization. Using words like “Sati (virgin and chaste)”, “Narittwo (womanhood)”, “Matrittwo (motherhood)”, etc., also not only question about women’s character but also imply that women are born in society for performing their sole responsibility of reproduction and child rearing. Girls and women are always to face these terms, which, though apparently seem quite positive, ultimately tend to reduce their dignity and existence, often to the extent of nullity.

Legal Provisions for Combating Verbal Abuse

So, what we find is that women are victimized through language in basically two different ways, one where they are assigned a different and to some extent marginal place in the society vis-à-vis their counterpart, i.e., men and another where they succumb to the swear words used against them by people in their surroundings. So, in both the cases it is women who suffer, tolerate and in spite of that are constantly victimized in one way or the other. In this context we can also refer to ‘Verbal Abuse’, which (also called reviling) is a form of abusive behavior involving the use of language. It is a form of profanity that can occur with or without the use of expletives.

While oral communication is its most common form, verbal abuse may be expressed in the form of written word as well. Researches have shown that women are the victims in most of the cases of verbal abuse. During intense verbal abuse, the victim usually suffers from low self worth and low self-esteem. As a result, victims may fall into clinical depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Verbal abuse, despite showing no visible proof, is nonetheless damaging.

While there are no specific legal rights for women to be protected from the use of gendered language, but in India similar concerns are dealt with under the LAW Against Verbal abuse Section 294 in The Indian Penal Code, 1860 [I.P.C.], 294. 4 which entails

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that [Obscene acts and songs. -- Whoever, to the annoyance of others, (a) does any obscene act in any public place, or b) sings, recites or utters any obscene song, ballad or words, in or near any public place, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine, or with both.]¹⁴

However, since the degrading swear words that are used against women are not always reported legal help is not often an option here. And since women generally encounter such derogatory gendered terms on a daily basis they not only consider them as mere negative words but also accept the situation habitually as 'natural'. Hence, they often yield to the surrounding state of affairs and, thus become gradually incapable even to recognize and realize the degree and intensity of their second-grade existence. Victimization and becoming victims become the integral part of their daily life. Ergo, by remaining silent and subservient about language abuses in daily interactions, these abuses are legitimized as kernel distinguishing departure point between 'good and bad' women, between 'Madonnas and Whores'. Thus ultimately they forget to protest for themselves, for the resurgence of their dignity and also for coming out of their victim-status, which then becomes quite a 'master-status' for them. Thus, time and again women are marginalized and victimized in society and their linguistic uses act as a catalyst for their disempowerment and also legitimize the conventional patriarchal ensemble of relations, values and structures.

Conclusion

Therefore, the paper has made an attempt to throw light on such an area of gendered victimization, which exists and continues as almost unnoticed by people in general as well as in law. Though almost all of us are aware of marginalization and victimization of women through the (intended and unintended) use of gendered language, only very few people have taken the initiative of drawing an end line to it, but the legal system has not always been able to successfully stop such heinous and degrading practice. And the real fact is that despite the so-called heavy words of constitutional laws to abolish gender discrimination, women are still lagging far behind in several aspects.

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Boys and girls even here and still now learn their gender specific behaviour, which leads necessarily to the binary distinction of the two genders as superior and inferior. Even today in this so-called modern, global world we- women are not being able to set ourselves free from the petty issues of gendering, marginalisation and also victimization. Our identities are gendered everywhere, every time and we just can't say anything, but keeping quiet and accepting this.

Language is something that we think of as our own. Through it we express our feelings to others. But even the usage of our language is governed by the so-called societal rules or more particularly the gendered social rules, which do not even possess any solid and substantial logic. Women still have to think about what they are supposed to do and say, what is required of them, what if they do not conform to the conventional set of rules and norms- and, ultimately in all cases they are being victimized again and again. That is why the present paper attempted to explore as well as explain how a new dimension of victimization occurs through our own words, by our very own language, by creating a barrier around us.

But being a member of the society and more specifically being a member of the field of Sociology, I think that all of us should raise voice against this kind of discrimination in the society, which even nowadays tends to marginalize and victimize people on the basis of their differences related to that of their gender. With reference to the language used for or about women and men separately, it is now suggested to use gender neutral terms, so that language in general as a means of communication does not segregate people anymore (e.g. using terms like flight attendant instead of steward and air hostess, chairperson instead of chairman, human being or individual in place of man, we or they instead of using he or she, actor for both male and female, salesperson instead of salesgirl or salesman, businessperson in place of businessman or businesswoman etc. and many more).

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So, finally it can be said that once women realize their secondary status in the society they themselves have to take the initiative to resist any kind of discrimination against them. They also have to get back their deserved place in society on their own and here the entire society can also participate by setting appropriate legal provisions for them. Besides, more research should also be conducted with the orientation of solving this kind of inherent and deep-rooted problems as well as helping women find a safe and much privileged position in the society.

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