Women and hegemony of language: A case study of 21st century Bollywood action films promoting rape culture

Dishari Sarkar

Abstract

Language as a system and has the power to produce discursive knowledge leading to the formation of cultural identity of human beings. Systemic oppression of women and male domination in different fields has been the core subject to the critical thinking of feminist studies. Understanding the social structure of gender calls for thorough analysis of how a woman perceives her sexuality from within a socio-cultural establishment. Language is the primary and dominant medium of interaction in the communicative process of human beings in a society. Sexuation of discourse within patriarchal structure tends to eliminate women and their accounts as the source of empirical knowledge. Thus, it is felt that the signification of language system should be taken under the purview of feminist critique. Language being predominantly male centric, encodes the patriarchal notions of the society and culture and reproduces it through its use sup lifting only male perspectives. The linguistic representation

of women in a framework of sexist discourse should be held accountable for projecting women sexuality through the male gaze, eliminating and making the first-hand experiences of women invisible as the source. This can be identified as the hegemonic role of language which appears to be universally valid even after speaking from and for one dimension.

In order to understand the power dynamics and dialectics of gender through language, proper analysis of the popular culture being produced and created by Bollywood films can be really effective to have a clear perspective to challenge the basic foundation of the androcentric language. Bollywood action movies are famous for the heroic portrayal of the leading male actors. The communicative factor of the films as a popular culture often promotes rape culture leaving a significant audience affected among the viewers. The linguistic discrimination and the normalization of slut shaming, women objectification including different myths related to women sexuality are often perpetrated by the contents of the films. A study of those films and analysis of the linguistic representation would provide the insight of a woman's place in the linguistic hegemony that contributes to rape culture.

Keywords: *Sexist discourse, Interaction, communicative process, empirical knowledge, signification of language system, and rocentric language, hegemony, gender dialectics, popular culture, linguistic representation, rape culture.*

Introduction

Language as a socio-cultural structure produces meaning that leads to the idealization and formation of concept with intentions and extensions contributing to the fundamental construction of truth. What if the reality of the truth or the concept of the reality is exclusive for the voice of the subaltern and is one dimensional and sexed? The rise of second wave feminism started questioning the discursive praxis of linguistic system. Language as a system does represent power structure. Feminists argue that linguistic discourse has become the domain for the partial sexed historical norms and certain forms of powers silencing the voice of women by dehumanizing them. Thus, hammering the very systemic linguistic discrimination by questioning and analyzing the

sexist nature of it will broaden the path of feminist discourse of liberation. The feminist critique of language not only examines the dominant conditions of it, but also analyses the theoretical and structural formation of it. The inclusion of the feminist perspective shall unearth the sexist, oppressive, and discriminatory nature of language as a sub system of culture also. The politics of language as a male dominated system eliminates women from their own experiences affecting their identities and social status.

The hegemony of linguistic domination after the introduction of mass media has posed critical and different challenges in understanding and locating the subtle forms of oppressions and discriminations. The communication technology is not only pervasive but has become a potential tool for hegemonic domination. The Gramscian theory of hegemony helps describe how ideological hegemony works. It is not only about producing social power but also maintaining it. Working through the organic intellectuals it manufactures consent through persuasion. With the help of mass media, it has become very easy to introduce patriarchal elements to individual conscience and consciousness and establishing patriarchal values as norm even normalizing rape culture. The capitalist hijacking of cinema as a commercial money-making medium, called movie instead of being a tool of resistance has resulted in producing patriarchal, oppressive ideas in the name of entertainment even promoting rape culture. The 21st century actions movies such as Rowdy Rathore, R. Rajkumar, Dabang are few to name that are the highest grossing films in India. The language used in these films as dialogues and lyrics for the subsequent item songs are to be considered as the ideal example of sexist language, sexist metaphors and objectification. The paper aims to examine how (the male dominated linguistic hegemony) language as a male dominant system dehumanizes women destroying their identity with the help of ideological reproduction through popular culture.

Understanding the system of language: Feminist perspective on linguistic theory

Language as a system of signification controls the communicative order and process in the societal plane. According to Roland Barthes, it can be stated that

language is a social institution as well as a system of values. It is dominated by the sets of values; values that stem from the collective empirical knowledge. The structuralist approach to define the system of language has started its journey with the theoretical formulation of Ferdinand de Saussure. Linguistics can be defined as the scientific study of language and semiology as a part can be described as the science of signs and signification. The study of language has shown that language is indeed related to psychology as being part of mind and a human culture shaper as it comes from the socio-cultural structure. Thus, it carries the elements of culture and social norms in it. The structural linguistic analysis of language deals with different elements such as langue and parole.

Langue: The linguistic dichotomist distinction by Ferdinand de Saussure gave the birth of two elements, these are langue and parole. According to Deborah Cameron, "*Langue* is the abstract system of relations which make individual behaviour possible. It is a 'social contract' rather than the property of any one speaker and it is the linguist's primary object of interest."
Langue is the basic understanding of what language is as a collective contract of understanding or knowledge. It is the basic construction that includes the syntax, grammar etc.
Parole: Parole or Speech is very much individual. It might be understood as an actualization of an individual concept of a speech. The langue and speech dialectics work comprehensively complementing each other in a reciprocal way.
Both Saussure and sociologist Emile Durkheim described language as a social process. Also language as a part of communication construct meanings. Saussure as a father of structuralism viewed language as tool of mind, society, culture and pedagogy. However, beyond that Saussure related language to the sign system of semiology to understand the socio-psychological aspect of it.
The system of sign: sign is something that has the power to construct meaning. The scientific analysis of the system of signs is called semiology. It is semiology that first analyzed the anatomical structure of a sign bearing a meaning. Sign consists of two elements that are **signifier** and **signified** (Barthes, 1967)**.**

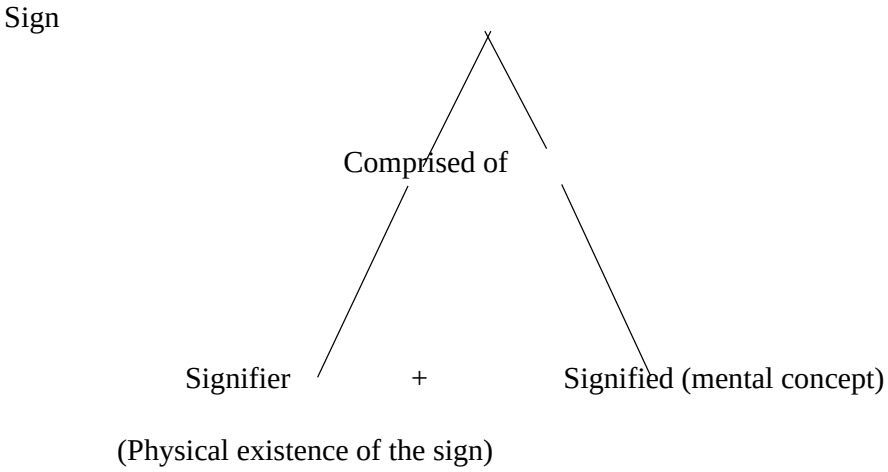


Fig 1: Saussure's model of meaning

(Source: Chattopadhyay, A. 2010)

Signifier is the material form of what sign suggests and signified is the mental concept of it. For instance, when we say 'bird', in our mind a two-winged creature that can fly comes to our mind because the two-winged object is named or identified as bird in English to distinguish it from different flying objects. The instance signifies that the sign refers to the object that is linguistically interpreted in our mind.

When signs bear or carry meaning they also carry inherently attached social value or principle or stigma attached to it because of its nature being historically discursive from a one perspective. Lacanian psychoanalysis theory of language puts a special emphasis on the object and sign relationship and how unconsciously the sign system works. Without the system of sign and language the object remains unidentified. Here comes the problem of identification of femininity in the social structure of patriarchy where meaning is constructed with preconceived notions. A child develops his identity or develops its conscious with language. Thus, the role of language in performativity and subjectivity of woman calls for reintroduction of feminist critical theory of reproduction of meaning and sign system. For instance, the portrayal of half-

naked woman body as a secondary object to male desire in some deodorant or perfume advertisement, automatically signifies the women as a sex object to men degrading her dignity and status as a human being. That is why feminist revisiting of the linguistic and language theories showcases the sex differences and how sexism derives inevitably from sexist form of signification process of language (Cixous, Cohen and Cohen, 1976).

Language, male dominance, and the idea of linguistic Hegemony

It is crystal clear that the discursive knowledge production through different subjects like literature, religious scripts, history etc. is highly affected by the prevalent male domination over these genres. The political economy behind the hold of power also to be taken under consideration of the class studies by feminist discourse. From different content analysis and theorization of different case studies, the establishment of the fact that male dominance does prevail has been done. However there still lies a question of how the male dominance does prevail? In order to find the answer of how or understand how the whole system of dominance work, the ideological inclusion of the idea of 'hegemony' can do the justice. Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci coined the term 'hegemony' to analyze the inclusion of materialist theory to the very realm of ideology by hijacking the idea-producing social institutions during the rise of fascist government in Italy. The Marxist base and super structure formulation helped to understand the power structure of the then Italy's political regime.

Hegemony is an ideological tool not only to understand the nation state matter or the social pattern of power structure but also how one particular in authority or position gains and maintains it (Lull, 2003). Hegemony works through persuasion, consent and moral leadership. Patriarchy as male dominant gender and class gains and maintains power through producing and reproducing the ideas of patriarchy as moral and standard norm. The proliferation of media industry and mass society has added a new arena of hegemony that is definitive towards the production and reproduction of culture and shaping public opinion in an electoral space. The domination of cultural agents and representatives of patriarchal ideology should be viewed as a hegemonic domination of a particular gender class over another gender that is women. Language plays a

significant role in mediation of patriarchal values as the political economy of the media industry is controlled by male domination where the silencing process of the voice of woman is being done prominently.

Language is a tool or medium through which human interaction takes place. In human society the communication process consists of message as one of its elements among the others. The message actually carries a meaning in it encoded by the sender. Now the whole signification process takes place without taking women's account in it as a truth. The language of the mediated contents of the media or culture industry is sexist and cause signification of false consciousness among public. The mythification of sexuality and identities has been the matter of subjugation of the patriarchal dominant paradigm. For instance, the sexual objectification and dehumanization of women in television advertisements, is violation of sexual consent culture demolishing women conscience. Promoting stereotype gender roles through glorification of women as mother, daughter, sister and mother of nation confines identity of women in the limit of being inferior to men. The signification process of signs and codes encoded in languages and linguistics enables the linguistic hegemony and male dominance in culture and society.

Language, Culture, and Sexuality

It is apparent from the above discussion on hegemonic systemic operation of language as a sexist male dominant system, that representational linguistic codes should be examined. Calling it sexist showcases its tendency to promote one and only sex as a norm and powerful. The media industry and the mass culture work as an agent of the systemic oppression. Cultural aspect of defining sexuality is an important domain that needs to be analyzed. Language as a cultural system for constructing sexuality and cultural identity of women is equally problematic in the given configuration of language-culture relationship and socio-political structure (Cameron, 1992).

Defining culture: towards the relationship of language and culture: The word culture is very complex to be defined. Many cultural theorists have tried to understand what culture is or what defines culture? One subsequent solution to understand culture is to go by its structural pattern of development. According

to Abir Chattopadhyay (2010), "culture is a psychological figuration or pattern that involves tradition [comprising of some overriding proclaimed texts coverting plenty of common narrative], social beliefs [an empowered fall out of ethno-religious and political grand narratives], individual identity, and own territorial feeling [often merged into ethno-religiocity]." As observed by Raymond Williams culture is defined as an inner process of development including social norms, transformations, and human psychology. However, it is to be noted that in the context of political and social frames grand narrative or dominant narrative can be perceived as culture. The binary distinctions of culture divide it between popular culture and mass culture. It is not to be misunderstood that the domination of popular culture over others often overlooks the class struggle and identity crisis.

The formation of ideas happens through language in human beings. They can think and practice intra-personal communication. It is language through which culture is perceived. Sociolinguist theorists believe that culture and language are related inherently as language bears the cultural norms that forms the very idea of culture. It presumed as thinking where the social beliefs, imagination, social values and culture exist. Thinking is related to language as the meaning is coded in language. Theorists believe that there are two definitive theories that prominently establish the relationship between culture and language. The first one is coordinative relation where it is believed that language is a part of cultural system. The other theory is of subordinate relations, which explains that cultural change leads to change in language.

1. In order to understand the inter-relationship of culture, language and sexuality, the understanding of sexuality is important. The definition of sex and gender and sexuality differ from each other as sex is biological, gender is social construct, and sexuality is sexual preference and behaviour also a socio-cultural construct. Clearly the use of language in popular culture does have a part in creating sexuality, and sexual behaviour as language has the power to produce semiotically encoded meanings that can culturally influence or construct certain meaningful behaviour. Language represents sex and sexuality (Lakoff, 1973). Women sexuality is always restricted by socio-cultural norms, mass-media portrayals and religious influences. For instance, with the lack of sex education,

India still has no place for women orgasm. Discourses are not based on firsthand experiences. Male assumptions have always been engaged when it comes to acquire what women sexuality is, since women are not even allowed to talk about it. The subjectivity of women agency is very much lost in case of women sexuality. Linguistic formation or subject-verb-object order of grammar in language has been dominated by male narrative. For instance, man proposes to woman, man fucks a woman, man thinks NO means yes etc. the sentences show different domination and violation of women sexuality that are being communicated through language. These are the specific instances of popular language use in popular culture and society contextualizing the need of feminist critique of grammatical use in language. Gender role and sexual roles are being determined by the linguistic patterns also determining women sexuality. The widespread ignorance of female physiology, sexuality, and desire has put women sexuality in crisis. Different communities with different socio-cultural conditions including myths, stigmas related to women sexuality have long violated the rights of women over pleasure, sexual health, and sexual equality. These conditions will be fulfilled if a woman can enjoy her right to experience and identify her own sexuality outside these linguistic oppressions.

Beyond rape: 21st century Bollywood action films as popular culture and linguistic discrimination of women causing the rise of rape culture

The rise of Bollywood as a culture industry producing popular culture has been very prominent and successful in India as it is now competing with the growth of Hollywood. With the beginning of twentieth century Frankfurt school scholars Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer came up with the idea addressing the capitalist mode of production of culture (Adorno and Horkheimer 2007). They emphasized on the mass production by the profit making, technologically advanced western capitalists camouflaging the ethics of a culture and jeopardizing the very idea of good and bad. They commercialize stereotypical cultural representation of normative ideologies. Indian Hindi films have always been a feel-good factor to the dominant class. Bollywood as a culture industry producing popular culture had been doing damage to the commitment of eradication of oppression. Popular culture signifies mainstream

dominant ideas as normative and establishes it with culture production. Needless to mention that minorities, with other different identities are the worst sufferer as this capitalist dominance goes on.

Linguistic discrimination in popular culture gives birth to the systemic oppression often known as rape culture. This is done by using certain metaphors, rhetoric, symbols and sentence constructions that bear the derogatory meaning toward women. In this case 21st century Bollywood action films can be taken into account. The rise of the celebrity driven heroic culture is a real example of toxic masculinity. Bollywood famous action films such as *R…Rajkumar*, *Rowdy Rathore*, *Daabang*, have dialogues and songs that project rape culture and misogyny at its best. For instance, in the film *R…Rajkumar* there is a song containing the lines that say: "*biri peeke nukkad pe wait tera kia re, khali peeli athara cup chai bhi to piyare…. Abcd parli bohut…. Ab karunga tere sath gaandi baat*" (I have smoked enough *bidi*, waited for long, have had 18 cups tea, now it is enough, I will do the dirty thing with you). The hero here is tired of waiting for a woman to say yes that he just can't wait to apply his force on her. The above-mentioned sentence nowhere shows the respect for consent of women. The film is one of the highest grossing films in India. It needs no mention that mass media or popular culture influences sexual behaviour. In the film Daabang, the song suggests, " *Munni badnaam hui darling tere liye, munni keg aal gulabi nyaain sharabi, chaal nawabi re, le jhandu bum hui darling tere liye*" which means "Munni has become a slut for you. Munni has soft cheeks, naughty eyes,… Munni's turn into a *jhandu bum* (painkiller) for you." Sadly, it had been the most famous song of its time. This is what the rape culture looks like. The male gaze, objectification of women body, the idea of 'she's asking for it' have been idealized and normalized via popular culture. This culture negates sexual consent communication between men and women. It has been observed that women are always on the part of bearing the meaning that is created by men. According to Laura Mulvey, "The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect. The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form" (Mulvey 1989). Linguistic discrimination and rape culture are the significant result of the domination of popular culture where equality is being

destroyed and a form of social structure is developing where subjugation of women is the only result.

Rape culture is something that stems out from the micro-aggression shown in films and the complete ignorance of consent in the film dialogues. These kinds of movies sexually objectify women and women sexuality. The signs of pleasure are linguistically represented through male perspective. Women have to reclaim the system of language and its codification to liberate themselves.

Conclusion

The feminist reading of language in popular culture is way more than important as feminism can only make a resistance. The support to rise of the politics of resistance would help to resist and somehow change the order. Women should be given the agency to speak, to narrate. Reclaiming language is reclaiming the power over the social production and reproduction of meaning construction. Sexuality is a term that denotes the sexual behaviour that has different colour. Molding it into one frame of analysis or discourse is discriminatory. The politics of female body and sexuality, and the communicative process of language have the signification of sign in common. The feminist analysis of uncovering sexist linguistic forms producing socio-cultural meaning will be fruitful in the field of language and sexuality research. Language that confines identity and sexual subjectivity should be reconsidered in discourses.

Strong arguments should be developed against the cinematic repression of women through discriminatory languages. Linguistic reform through introduction of non-sexist grammar, nouns, and pronouns and employment of better linguistic construction addressing sexes and sexualities will resist the hegemony of male dominated language creating a place for women.

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Bio-Profile of the Author:

M.A., Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Calcutta.
Email: disharisarkar20@gmail.com