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TOWARDS A GENDER-FREE LANGUAGE: A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PARTS OF SPEECH OF FOUR INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Gender, a cultural construct, has a strong influence on language. Grammatical gender, an output of that influence, plays fundamental and stricter roles in the syntactic structures in some languages like Hindi and Urdu. On the other hand, grammatical gender is significantly less strict in some languages like English and Bengali. This paper probes into how Bengali and English are different from Hindi and Urdu in this respect. A socio-cultural perspective on the parts of speech of these four Indo-European languages has been briefly analyzed with an especial focus on some Sanskrit vocabulary being used in Hindi and Bengali alike. The male-female power asymmetry as apparent in the syntactic structures of Hindi and Urdu versus Bengali and English is shown with examples to suggest how efforts may lead us "towards a gender-free language" if we intend to do so.

It is an accepted fact that *gender* is a cultural construct. Language in its evolutionary origin was free from the pollution of gender. Later on, however, with the rise of hetero-patriarchy, the grammatical or linguistic gender was invented and imposed upon language. Speech was an instrument of power under the stewardship of the patriarchal society. For language, therefore, Male-female power asymmetry became as much a linguistic matter of concern as a discourse site for assertion. Gender became a way of defining and demeaning woman.

Lynne Tirrell in her essay "language and Power" observes that women are paradoxically constituted by discourse and yet erased by discourse (Tirrell in Jaggar & Young 140). Constituting the image of woman as well as erasing her image through discourse is done by

marking or branding woman with defining words, phrases, affixes, etc. Gender is formed through this marking. For example, originally the words *Nar* and *Nri* (= man) in Sanskrit and *Man* in Germanic/ English were used for both male and female persons. Later on, with the rise of patriarchy, gender-marker was invented to change these words into *NARI* (= woman) and *Woman* (<wif + man) respectively. Thus the concept of womanhood or :myth of woman" is a socio-cultural construct, as Simone De Beauvoir explains in her pioneering book *The Second Sex* (1949) that men profit from the myth of their superiority which arises from the "otherness, the alterity of woman." She clarifies:

> One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine (301).

Monique Wittig in this context remarks:

> Language as a whole gives everyone the same power of becoming an absolute subject through its exercise. But gender, an element of language, works upon the ontological fact to annul it as far as women are concerned. The result of this imposition of gender, acting as a denial at the very moment as one speaks, is to deprive women of the authority of speech, and to free them to make their entrance in a crablike way, particularizing them and apologizing profusely (81).

Logic, grammar and systems of meaning and use of words strictly guide language. Gender being a socio-cultural construct, has affected more or less almost all the languages of the world in different modes and degree. The more the society is patriarchal and sex-discriminating, the more deeply its language gets affected by gender. On the contrary, the society which is more liberal and humanistic, and less concerned with sex differences, is likely to develop a comparatively more gender-free language.

When Otto Jespersen remarks in his book *Growth and Structure of English Language* that English is a masculine language, he shows the same male ego and the same gender-bias which once Sanskrit grammarians and linguists adopted in thinking about everything in terms of gender.

The Indo-Aryans developed a culturally hierarchies and refined language, known as *Sanskrit* (i.e. refined/purified), which is extremely gender-conscious and gender-discriminatory. It was because of the cultural pattern of the ancient North Indian Aryan-dominated society in its *vedic* and *puranic* phases where all objects in Nature and the Universe were viewed and expressed as either masculine or feminine. The people developed such a sex-differentiating attitude to man and woman that all animate and inanimate objects were invested with gender binaries. Even the stars and planets were invested with either male or female attributes or

identities. The Sun (*Rabi* or *Surya*), the Moon (*Som* or *Chandra*), the Saturn (*Shani*) etc were regarded as male; *Bhadra, Rohini, Bishakha* etc. which are different lunar mansions, were regarded as female. This gender bias was so deep-rooted that they even could not imagine God as independent of gender. That's why, we find couples of gods and goddesses like *Shiva-Parvati, Brahma-Saraswati, Visnu-Lakshmi* etc. The worship of Phallus or *Shiva-linga* is suggestive of such a hetero-patriarchy.

In such a society where gender-discrimination was legitimized by religion, myth, literature, culture and politics, the linguistic pattern is likely to be affected and determined by the gender norms. Sanskrit language and its linguistic patterns including its phrases, its syntax, its semantics etc express this gender discrimination. Here nouns, adjectives, verbs etc are thought and expressed in terms of gender. To support my arguments I have discussed some Sanskrit words as consulted in Vaman Shivram's *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* and Monier Williams's *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.

The Sanskrit word *Purusha* originally meant God (=*Vishnu / Ishwara*), the agent or subject; and the word *Prakriti* (=Nature) was the object. The meaning of *Purusha* included also all members of a family i.e. husband, wife and children in the sense of agents or consumers in respect of *Prakriti* or natural objects. But later on, *Purusha* began to mean only male, and woman was likened to Nature or *Prakriti.* A wife is figuratively called *KSHETRA* (= fertile land, body, place etc); the word *Kshetree / Kshetrin /Kshetirka* means *farmer* and also *husband; Khetranja* / *Kshetravid / Kshetriya* means an agriculturist and also an adulterer / husbandman / lustful frequenter to woman; and *Kshetraja / Kshetrajata* means a son begotten on the wife of another.

Thus, man became a subject or agent, whereas woman became an object. The former remained active, the latter was made passive. Man began to be glorified almost as a god and lord of woman. So, such words like *Pati* (also *Pati-deva*= husband as god), *Swami* (=lord) etc meaning *king or lord or god* began to be used for man. The husband is also a *Karta* (= doer / lord), a *Bar* (= blessing / gift from god), a *Dayita* (= lover, adored man), *Dhaba* (= master / lord / one who causes to tremble), *Bharta / Bhartri* (= lord / master / superior / leader / chief / supporter / protector), a *Parineta* (one who marries / controls / takes), etc. One the other hand, a wife is called a *Stree* (=one having a low sweet tone / a wife / a woman), a *Bharya* (= bearer of *bhar* or load / a lawful wife), a *Dara* (= a ploughed field / one who has a hole or cleft or rent / one who is made *dirna* or torn suggesting sexual intercourse), a *Dayitaa* (= wife / one's beloved woman), a *Jaaya* (= wife / who gives birth to child / where man is born), a *Patnee* (a woman under the protection of her *Pati* or master or lord), a *Kalatra* (one having a low sweet tone / a wife / the hip or loins), a *Badhu* (one who is made *badhwa* or tied or wedded / one who bears a load), Grihini (one who remains in and takes care of the *griha* or home), a *Purandhri* (the place that bears load / wife), etc.

Adoring one's wife and following her suggestions was disapproved of in that society; and the husband who did this, was hated as *strayna* (=possessed by the wife), *stree-bashya* (= subdued by the wife), *varya-anugata* (= loyal to wife)*, stree-jita* (= conquered by wife), etc. On the other side, adoring and following the dictates of the husband was praised as *patni-dharma* (=religion or duty of a wife towards her husband) / *pati-seva* (=devotion to a husband); and such a wife was called *pati-brata* / *pati-parayana* (= devoted, faithfull, and loyal wife)*, pati-prana / sati / sadhwi* (= a chaste and virtuous wife), *etc.* So comes the worshipping of a husband by a wife through bowing, touching his feet, washing his feet with her own hand, and soaking wet of his feet with her long hair, etc.

Woman is defined as *Promoda* (= pleasing / delighting woman), *Ramani* (= pleasing / gratifying / charming woman with beauty / sex / amorous sport), *Lalana* (= a wanton / fondling / dallying / caressing / dangling / desiring woman),   *Angana* (= woman with a beautifully shaped and attractive body), *Ramaa / Raamaa* (= attractive and amorous woman with whom sex is done), *Vama* (=lovely woman), *Mahila / Mahishi* (= worshipping woman), *Sairindhri / Sairandhri* (=receiver of *siir* or plough / phallus, woman at other's home / room), *Kamini* (= woman who is lusty/ desirous/ libidinous / amorous / fulfilling the lust of man), *Abala (*=weaker sex */* woman without speaking power), *Yoshit / Yoshita / Yoshaa* (= serving / devoted woman), *Banita (*= who prays / asks for / depends on / serves), *Vamaa / Vamini* (= angry woman), *Sharvari* (= night / hunted and accepted), *Pratip-darshini* (= seeing perversely or adversely),etc. The sexist discourse employs the pornographic language. Witting's remark is applicable here, 'I have chosen pornography as an example, because its discourse is the most symptomatic and the most demonstrative of the violence which is done to us through discourses, as well as in the society at large' (9-10).

Woman is also defined as one whose domain is within home or house: *Antah-purika / Antah-purabasini / Pura-nari / Pura-lakshmi / Pura-angana / Pouristree / Purastree / Pura-mahila / Pura-bala / Pura-basini / Pourangana / Asuryampashya.* The last word *(Asuryampashya)* attempts at glorifying woman who confines herself in the house never looking at the sun.

This short philological analysis is enough to show how the patriarchal society in India polarised man and woman in a power relationship of subject/ agent and object respectively. This resulted in the invention of gender-markers in Sanskrit and its offshoots. The legacy of this gender-controlled linguistic pattern including nouns, adjectives, and verbs etc in Sanskrit has been inherited by Hindustani languages including Hindi and Urdu which are spoken in the cow-belt where the society is extremely male-dominated. On the other hand, Bengali and English (notwithstanding their several counts of similarity and difference) have fewer burdens of gender markers. I have tried to explain this with a number of examples. These two languages are in the process of degenderisation as a result of growing humanistic, democratic and

feministic sense among their users. It is the deep-rooted gender-bias that does not allow Hindi or Urdu to evolve into a gender-free language.

Let us cite some examples of Hindi/Urdu Syntax governed by the gender norms.

(1) Gender in Preposition:

Examples: -	Masculine	Feminine
i) Bengali--	*Sonia'r Baba;*	*Sonia'r Ma*;
ii) English--	Father of Sonia;	Mother of Sonia;
iii) Hindi/ Urdu--	*Sonia **ka** Bap;*	*Sonia **ki** Ma*.

Here even the preposition *Ka* (= of) in Hindi is genderised i.e. made feminine by the changed form *Ki.* But in English and Bengali such gender discrimination does not occur.

(2) Gender in Pronoun:

Examples: -	Masculine	Feminine
i) Bengali--	*Aamar / Tomar / Tahar Chhele;*	*Aamar/ Tomar / Tahar Meye;*
ii) English--	My / Your / His Son;	My / Your / Her daughter;
iii) Hindi/ Urdu--	***Mera / Aapka / Unka** Beta;*	***Meri/ Aapki / Unki** Beti.*

Hindi possessive pronouns like *Mera* (=my), *Aapka / Tumhara* (= your), *Unka*/*Uska* (=his) are thus changed to feminine gender *Meri* (=my), *Aapki / Tumhari* (= your) and *Unki*/*Uski* (=her) respectively. In Bengali and English this does not exist except the case of *His / Her* in English.

(3) Gender in Adjectives:

Examples: -	Masculine	Feminine
i) Bengali--	*Ratan Besh Bhalo chhele;*	*Sania Besh Bhalo Meye;*
ii) English--	Ratan is a very good boy;	Sania is a very good girl;
iii) Hindi/ Urdu--	*Ratan Bada Achha Ladka Hai;*	*Sania Badi Achhi Ladki Hai.*

Here Hindi adverb *Bada* (= very) and adjective *Achha* (= good) are changed to make feminine forms *Badi* and *Achhi* respectively. In English there are no separate feminine forms of adjectives. In Bengali too, the tendency to genderise adjectives is diminishing. In fact, in recent times, Bengalees hardly ever use such a feminine form like *Sundari* (=beautiful), but use the original word *Sundar* with no gender-marker to describe a woman. They say, "*Sundar Nari* (= a beautifull woman)." Since adjectives describe common human traits, to make feminine forms of adjectives is unnatural, artificial, and ludicrously patriarchal. The strict maintenance of this tendency in Hindi and Urdu a la Sanskrit, and gradual slackening of the same in Bengali and English may provide us with useful socio-linguistic explanations thereof.

(4) Gender in Verbs:

Examples: -	Masculine	Feminine
i) Bengali--	*Ratan Pade/ Podchhe;*	*Sania Pade/ Podchhe;*
ii) English--	Ratan reads/is reading;	Sania reads/ is reading;
iii) Hindi/ Urdu--	*Ratan Padta Hai / Pad Raha Hai;*	*Sania Padti Hai / Pad*

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Rahi Hai.

It is almost a common case in Hindi to govern verbs by gender markers. Here verb forms *Padta Hai* and *Pad Raha Hai* (= 'reads' and 'is reading') are made feminine in *Padti Hai* and *Pad Rahi Hai* respectively. Assigning femininity to common human action is also unnatural. The same activity like eating, reading, writing, etc are made feminine in the cases of woman agents. This is absolutely non-existent in English and Bangla.

Of course, there are some alternatives in avoiding gender-discrimination or *linga-vaishamya* in describing action in Hindi. In some cases where the action of a person, whether male or female, is described with respect, gender does not interfere in the verb. Examples may be cited: *Saniaji Gayethe* (=Sania had gone), *Aap Bolenge* (= you will speak) etc. The action of persons (in plural number) is also described in the similar way: *Hamlog khel rahe thhe* (= we were playing), etc. Another way to avoid genderisation in describing action is to use the empty word *Ne* between the *subject* and the *verb,* for example, "*Aapne Kaha* (= you told)," "*Saniaji ne kha liyaa* (Sania have eaten)." This illustrates that though Hindi has a strong foundation of gender-discrimination or *linga-vaishamya,* yet we can anticipate that a feminist movement towards elimination of all sorts of socio-cultural discrimination on the basis of gender may take place in future and this may bring a change in the use of linguistic gender-markers.

(5) Gender in Nouns:

All objects, animate or inanimate, are considered either as male or female in Sanskrit, and so in Hindi. Nouns accordingly govern the Hindi syntax and phrase structures following the gender rules. Even nouns indicating profession, are made either feminine or masculine in Hindi. Similarly, in Bengali following Sanskrit-Hindi pattern, gender markers have been used to make some nouns feminine: *Chhatra* (=student) – *Chhatri* (fem.), *Shikshak* (= teacher) – *Shikshika* (fem.), etc.

In previous years, both in English and in Bengali, gender in such cases was strictly maintained. But in recent times such gendering practices are being gradually eschewed. For example, feminine forms like *Poetess, Actress* etc. are hardly used in English nowadays; such markers have now been substituted with '*poet*,' '*actor*' etc. As a result, we are frequently coming across such sentences as "*Debjani Chatterjee is a good poet*," "Vidya Balan is a brilliant *actor*" etc. In Bengali also, we can discern a similar process of 'de-genderisation' whereby gender inflections or gender affixes are avoided. For example, a bengalee says, "*Trinamul-Neta Mamata*," "*Congress-Neta Sonia,*" "*Avineta Madhuri.*" But, in Hindi, the speakers and writers are unable to embrace this change due to the linguistic constraints of gender. So they can say only, "*Trinamul-Netri Mamata", "Congress-Netri Sonia", "Avinetri* Vidya Balan.*"

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In languages, male identities are always unmarked while the female identities are marked. The original words were the stem words used both for male and female. For example, *Man* is the stem word used earlier both for male and female; later on a gender marker (prefix) was added and the new word became *woman*. So if we go back to the purity of languages, we must discard the gender-markers or gender-marking prefixes and suffixes. In modern English and Bengali, de-genderisation of language is in progress.

As regards the process of eliminating gender, Bengali scores over English in one aspect. Though English pronouns are, by and large, free from the gender-specification, the third person singular pronouns still maintain gender, e.g. he/ she, his/her and him/ her, whereas in Bengali there is no such female pronouns. Third person singular pronouns in Bengali are *Se/ Tar / Takey* etc. used for both male and female.

Because of this, in English such inanimate objects like Nature, the Moon, the Justice etc are represented in feminine gender and so the personal pronoun in feminine gender *She* or *Her* is used for these objects. But in Bengali, the genderisation does not happen due to the neutrality of genders in the cases of inanimate objects. The English grammatical term *Person* (i.e. 1st person, 2nd person, 3rd person) means any human individual male or female. Following Sanskrit-Hindi grammar, the Bengalees had maintained the term *Purush* for *person* until some grammarians decided to replace the term *Purush* with a new better term *Paksha*, (= party or side) for person that includes *Se-Paksha/ Tirtiya Paksha (=third person), Tumi-Paksha/Dwitiya Paksha (=second person), Aami-Paksha/ Pratham Paksha (= first person).* It is because, the word *Purush* in common use means only the male person whereas the word *Paksha* is gender-neutral. As the daily news paper *The Statesman (*Kolkata) reports: "Changes in Bengali grammar textbooks, particularly those for Class VI that Mr Pabitra Sarkar is said to have pushed through, were vigorously opposed by academicians at an uproarious meeting" of the West Bengal Secondary Education Board on 26 July 2004 (*The Statesman* 27-07-2004). Let me quote another reporting later on by Anindita Chowdhury in *The Statesman* (Kolkata) dated 15-09-2004:

> Purush, which denotes person in Bengali grammar, will be relegated to a mere footnote in the textbooks approved by the Secondary Board. It has instead decided to use the term paksha, proposed by Pabitra Sarkar, despite stiff opposition from a large section of Bengali academicians.

The movement did not last long. And ultimately 'Paksha' was 'out' and 'Purush' was 'back' as the West Bengal Secondary Education Board had "rolled back its earlier decision of initiating changes in Bengali Grammar books for classes VI to X" (*The Statesman* 30-09-2004).

However, such a bold step for the modification of Bengali grammar has not lost its relevance. With a view to attaining a gender-free linguistic environment, further changes to

Bengali grammar may be considered. The chapter *Linga* or *Gender* in Bengali grammar has, it seems, little practical utility or justification; for this chapter perversely instigates the learners to maintain gender in speech or language in the name of using so called *shuddho bakkya* or correct sentences. It may be helpful for the learners in learning words with meaning of natural gender or sex identities like *Pantha* (=he-goat) vs. *Panthi* (= she-goat), *Shanr* (=ox) vs. *Gavi* (=cow), *Morog* (= Cock) vs. *Murgi* (=hen), *Baalak* (=boy) vs. *Baalika* (=girl), etc. This may be learnt from a word-book or dictionary. But a reckless chapter without warning on *Gender* or *Linga* only may pollute the innocent minds of the growing young learners. There is no necessity to utilise the cultural instrument of education in the learning of unnatural gender-discrimination breeding social discriminations. It would be better to drop this chapter from grammar books; or, it may be revised in a judicious way to remove *linga-baishamya* and form a right attitude among learners.

The Bengali intelligentsia has to think over how to eliminate the still existing unnatural and artificial gender elements in Bengali language. A Bengalee says *Nikhil Banga Shikshak Samiti (= All Bengal Teachers' Association),* and here the word *Shikshak (=Teacher)* includes both male and female teachers. But when he/she come to the individual case of a female teacher, he/she conventionally and unscrupulously use the feminine form *Shikshika*. One can also use *Pradhan Shikshak (i.e. Head Teacher)* instead of saying *Pradhan Shikshika (i.e. female Head Teacher)* so far as the common profession of teaching irrespective of gender is concerned. One should develop a conscious attitude so that he/she can avoid the use of artificially shaped feminine forms of professional words like *Adhyapika (i.e. female Lecturer),* and accept the unmarked word *Adhyapak (i.e. Lecturer).*

Grammatical gender, being a socio-culturally produced linguistic feature, is thus stable in different languages today, even in Bengali and English though to a little extent. The age has changed tremendously. And with the change of the society, language changes or modifies itself. Gender and Feminism are much talked about nowadays, and gender-features of language are likely to be scrapped or modified. This change in the use of gender in Bengali and English has already started. Users of Hindi or Urdu language should also initiate the process of sanitization of their language. Thus we may all march towards a gender-free language, towards a *Linga-Baishamya-Mukta Bhasha.*

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