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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DECONSTRUCTING THE PERCEPTION OF 'GENDER' IN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The concept of gender was introduced in our early stage of learning English and Bengali prescriptive grammar. In the field of gender, the difference between English and Bengali is related to pronoun. As in case of English, the pronouns, which are used for 3rd person singular number (he, she, it), are assigned to sexual perception.ⁱ But in Bengali there is no gendered pronouns. In both of these languages all the non-living things come under the category of Neuter Gender and among the living things some nouns (in case of English some pronouns too) assigned to masculine referents, come under the category Masculine Gender (boy, bālaka etc.) and some assigned to feminine referents, come under Feminine Gender (girl, bālikā etc.). And the rest unrecognisable nouns are Common gender in general (baby, śiśu). This is the simple perception of 'Gender' in language because these languages do not have any masculine or feminine perception for nouns, unless they refer to biological sex. But there are many languages who have gender for each and every noun. They are called 'the gendered languages.' According to Wikipedia "In linguistics, grammatical gender system is a specific form of noun class system, where nouns are assigned with gender categories that are often not related to their real-world qualities. In languages with grammatical gender, most or all nouns inherently carry one value of the grammatical category called gender; the values present in a given language (of which there are usually two or three) are called the genders of that language."ⁱⁱ Such as, Sanskrit, Hindi, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian etc. According to Jemma Prior, gendered language is commonly understood as language that has a bias towards a particular sex or social gender.ⁱⁱⁱ So most of the time it is said that language through its communicative functions biases the social gender representation. This paper aims to highlight that the idea of 'Gender' in a language is assigned with two different linguistic aspects suggested by Gottlob Frege, i) Sense and ii) Reference. In this paper an attempt is made to establish the different perceptions of Gender between 'the gender of a word' and 'the gender of the object which is referred by the word'.

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Introduction:-

Language, which acts as the primary medium of communication between people, is one of the breeding grounds of patriarchy. The fact that women are subjected to certain roles is arguably because of the rampant usage of gendered languages. To put it simply, the way we speak reveals many facets of our behaviour and biases.^{iv} This statement is clearly talking about the gender problem within a language. This argument goes further when we dip into the queer and feminist views of languages. The primary argument begins with the gendered pronouns, such as, he, she etc. According to queer and feminist views these pronouns nothing but strengthen gender binarism classifying gender into two distinct forms, ignoring others. Most of the time the word 'man' is also used as a pronoun and more specifically as a gender-neutral pronoun. But according to Mercier this nonbinary attribute of man is much more complex. Either it is assigned to i) someone of unknown sex or, ii) a collective perception of mankind (including man and woman). This usage of 'man' overshadows the existence of 'woman' from language. The Sanskrit word 'puruṣa' expressing the meaning of 'individual' becomes also problematic with this argument. As the solution, an inclusive society can be built by the usage of the pronouns like 'they' (specially in singular) and 'their' considering these to be gender neutral pronouns. Frye argues that the sexual representation of Singular personal pronouns is irrelevant in a lot of cases. Constant mention of such words assigned with biological sex concretize the importance of sex (or a particular sex) in all areas. Theorists like Spender mentioned this as sexism in language, "There is sexism in language, it does enhance the position of males, and males have had control over the production of cultural forms."^v

The problem with the gendered pronouns goes much further while dealing with the gendered nouns and gendered adjectives in other gendered languages, like Sanskrit, Hindi, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, etc. In these languages each and every noun has its particular gender and the adjectives, associated with that noun, follow the gender of the noun (ex. Sansk. *sundarīnārī*, Latin. *pulchra puella*). For this, most of the people try to avoid these languages and shift to English.^{vi}

In this paper the perception of gender and sex within a language will be questioned again. And to those questions some answers will be given accordingly to deconstruct the perception of gender within Language. Along with that an attempt is made to trace a reason of gendering a language.

Gender in Languages:

Most of the time the arguments, which are spoken of, mention 'language' (both in singular and plural form) without any proper indication of which language. And sometimes it is specific about English. But most of the time the examples from English language are being stated while arguing against the problems of languages in general (not specifically English). If the gender problems of languages are acknowledged, there must be specific mention of the language which is being talked about. Suppose in English, the problems with the proper feminine pronouns. It is said that there is no proper feminine pronoun in English, because the pronoun 'she' has been made adding an 's' before 'he'. Same argument goes with 'man' and 'wo+man'. This can be acknowledged as a problem specified to English (also Sanskrit *sa>sā*, *nara>nārī*). But this is not a common problem among all the languages. Suppose German uses *er* for 'he', *sie* for 'she' and *Mann* for 'man', *Frau* for 'woman'. So different words are there. These specific details should be understood because the construction of gender among various languages are very different to each other. So, the gender problems should not be spoken of in general but in specific manner.

When a language is marked as the breeding grounds of patriarchy or to some extent'ssexist, the primary key which must be looked for is history. Language, always being under a spontaneous process of changing and evolving, cannot be governed by human force. Human influence, restrictions or suggestions can be or should be there but those cannot be the primary features for figuring a language. No language, made out of external influences, could ever survive. But on the other hand, the patriarchal influences always found their way to constructing some gender norms. Such as in English there is no feminine word for 'chairman' or 'fireman'. In this case the pages of history should be flipped again. Nowadays various options are introduced to people as their profession. But it is known to all that the scenario is quite different. Limited professions were there to people in pre-modern age in Europe (more specifically, before French revolution, renaissance). Most of the time the male members of the family were associated with the very few occupations. That is why, there are still some words which represent only men entities. Patriarchy is in the centre of this disparity. But the patriarchy in society was intentional (or forced) but the patriarchal stresses in languages might be influenced (by patriarchy) but are not intentional. It grew spontaneously with the patriarchal system of the society.

While speaking of the problems regarding gender binarism of languages, one thing must be remembered that the concept of gender in language is different than the concept of gender in real life. Not all the languages represent the idea of biological sex through their pronouns. And there are some languages which don't use any person pronouns in nominative case. Such as, Classical Greek, Classical Latin and among modern languages Spanish. In case of nominative personal pronouns, particular verb conjugation expresses the exact person and number. As example, *amo* in Spanish and Latin and Italian means 'I love', there is no need of the personal pronoun 'I'. So, in case of 3rd person singular, *amat* (Latin), it represents the pronouns 'she loves' or 'he loves'.

While dealing with gender in language, the distinction of English from other languages must be understood. In the field of gender, the difference between English and Bengali is related to pronouns. As in case of English, the pronouns, which are used for 3rd person singular number (he, she, it), are assigned to sexual perception. But in Bengali there is no gendered pronouns. In both of these languages all the non-living things come under the category of Neuter Gender and among the living things some nouns (in case of English some pronouns too) assigned to masculine referents, come under the category Masculine Gender (boy, *bālaka* etc.) and some assigned to feminine referents, come under Feminine Gender (girl, *bālikā* etc.). And the rest unrecognisable nouns are Common gender in general (baby, *śiśu*). This is the simple perception of 'Gender' in language because these languages do not have any masculine or feminine perception for nouns, unless they refer to biological sex. But there are many languages who have gender for each and every noun. They are called the 'gendered languages.' Such as, Sanskrit, Hindi, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian etc. According to Jemma Prior, gendered language is commonly understood as language that has a bias towards a particular sex or social gender.^{vii} So most of the time it is said that language through its communicative functions biases the social gender representation. The idea of 'Gender' in a language is assigned with two different linguistic aspects suggested by Gottlob Frege, i) Sense and ii) Reference. Based on this idea the different perceptions of Gender between 'the gender of a word' and 'the gender of the object which is referred by the word' can be explained. For this understanding Sense and Reference is important, Thereference of a word is the relation between the linguistic expression and the entity in the real world to which it refers. In contrast to reference, sense is defined as its relations to other expressions in the language system. Thus, there are words that have a sense, but no referents in the real world. Other words may differ in sense, but not necessarily in reference, and vice versa.^{viii} And Referent is the real-life object which is being identified by the Sense or the Word. For the gendered languages each and every noun has its particular gender. And most of the time there is no relation between 'the gender of a word' (Sense) and 'the gender of the object which is referred by the word' (Referent). As example, in German *der Löffel* (spoon) is masculine and *die Gabel* (fork) is feminine. The same thing happens with the other gendered languages, like in Spanish, *el vaso* (glass) is masculine and *la mesa* (table) is feminine. Not only the modern European languages, but also Indian Classical language Sanskrit has also the same gender system. Such as *śayyā* (bed) is feminine, *ghaṭaḥ* (pot) is masculine. Other classical languages like Greek and Latin are no exception. It is known to all that in modern Indian languages, Hindi is also gendered with its gendered adjectives. In case of European languages, they have proper 'Gender Markers' before the nouns. For German *der* (masculine), *die* (feminine), *das* (neutral). For Spanish *el* (masculine), *la* (feminine). The use of different Gender Markers is common in different European languages. These Markers mark or identify only the 'gender of the word' (Sense) not the Referent or the real-life object. Though Sanskrit does not have any Markers but in this case of the Sense is gendered but the Referent is not. In case of English, only the nouns having biological sexual representation, are marked as masculine and feminine or in some cases Common. But in English, the gender of the Sense or the word is not there. So, in English the perception of gender is quite different than other languages.

According to some Feminist using 'he' and 'man' as gender neutral pronouns represent the patriarchal base of language. It is about English. In Sanskrit the word *puruṣa* is most of the time represented as 'individual'. Most recently there was a controversy regarding the Mantra "putrāndehi". An article was published from Anandabajar claiming that the Mantra should be rectified as "santānāndehi". It is because the word *putrān* is used as a collective noun in plural form, both for sons and daughters.^{ix} Again the concept of gender was mistaken. Sanskrit cannot be dealt like English. If there is a problem with *putrān* because it is a masculine word, there should be problem with "santānān" because it is a neutral noun. *Santānān* is a-kārāntaklīvaliṅgaśabda (a-ending neutral word) and follow the declension of "phalaśabda". If *putrān* is not inclusive, so not *santānān*. In case of Sanskrit the structure of the language must be understood properly. The words (Sense) have their own genders and the referents have their own. Sometimes they match and most of the time they do not. In Sanskrit pluralization of nouns are inclusive. Such as *pitarau* and *matarau*, they both represent both of the parents not 'two fathers' or 'two mothers.' Same thing happens with 'putrān.' But this argument does not deny the patriarchal dominance over women in the then era.

There are also some interesting cases where biological sex is represented by the word belonging to different gender (the gender of the Sense is different from the biological sex of the Referent). As example, *dāra* is a masculine word (the Sense is masculine), *a-kārāntapumliṅgaśabda* (a-ending masculine noun) and also follow the declension of 'naraśabda' but the word means 'wife'.^x It is not that only feminine Referents are identified with the masculine words or Sense but there are such feminine words which represent masculine referents. Like *devatā* is a feminine word, *ā-kārāntastrīliṅgaśabda* (ā-ending feminine noun) follow the declension of 'latāśabda' but it means 'god', a masculine referent. Same things happen in German, the word 'das Mädchen' is neutral but the referent is feminine 'the maiden'. All these examples prove that 'the gender of a word' and 'the gender of the object which is referred by the word' are different from each other. And in case of gendered languages the gender of the Word (Sense) has nothing to do with the biological sex of the Referent.

Now before coming to the gendered adjectives, it will be relevant to trace a reason of gendering a language. These two might be interconnected discourse. In this case another dimension would be added here, that is Rhythm (or rhyme) or Chanda. It can be said that Rhyme (or Rhythm) is a part and parcel of gendered languages. Again, history would help us to trace the answer. All the ancient literary evidences we have got, such as Rgveda, The Epic of Gilgamesh etc. are in poem format. They are verses, having proper rhyme (or rhythm). So, this can be said that most of the ancient languages were used in proper rhyme. A simple question occurs that what is the easiest way to rhyme a language? Now the concept of 'gendering a word' comes. In English we say 'beautiful girl', there is no rhyme, but in Sanskrit we say 'sundarīnārī', in Latin we say 'pulcra femina'. Another example, in English we say 'the dark house'. In Sanskrit we say 'andhakāraṅgrham' and in Latin 'tenebra casa'. In case of both Sanskrit and Latin we find rhyme in a very simple phrase and it is possible because of the gendered adjectives following the same gendered nouns. If the adjectives rhyme with the nouns, making poetry becomes much easier. And to rhyme the adjectives with nouns, they (nouns) are gendered. In most of the cases feminine nouns have particular gender marker. In Sanskrit certain pratyayas^{xi} (inflections) are added after some masculine words, such as *arya* (masculine) > *aryā* (feminine) and *nara* (masculine) > *nārī* (feminine). It happens in modern day languages too. Like in Hindi we say 'rota hualarḱa' (the crying boy) and 'roti hui larḱi' (the crying girl). Most of the time the adjectives follow the same markers of the nouns, this helps to create the rhyme in the simple sentences or even in the phrases. When the nouns and pronouns and the following adjectives were gendered, rhyme comes spontaneously. And it is mentioned before that Rhyme (or Rhythm or Chanda) is the part and parcel of ancient languages. And the modern languages are evolved from the ancient languages. So, rhyming can also be a cause of gendering languages. But still exceptions are there. Gendering a language is not always a sign of patriarchy. But again, this argument does not deny the patriarchal dominance over the women in the then era. And to some extents language was (is) influenced by patriarchy. Because not a single reason can form or regulate an entire language, there must be other strong influences too.

Notes and References:-

ⁱ By the use of the term sex here, we refer to the normative category of women and men. In the following text, we will use the terms sex or gender identity for women and men referents.

ⁱⁱ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_gender

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/what-is-gendered-language#:~:text=It%20doesn't%20have%20a,particular%20sex%20or%20social%20gender.>

^{iv} <https://livewire.thewire.in/gender-and-sexuality/how-gendered-language-enforces-patriarchy/#:~:text=Language%2C%20which%20acts%20as%20the,of%20our%20behaviour%20and%20biases.>

^v Spender 1985: 144

^{vi} The people, capable of speaking Hindi and English both, avoid Hindi and converse in English instead. They point out the reason to be its gender binarism.

^{vii} <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/what-is-gendered-language#:~:text=It%20doesn't%20have%20a,particular%20sex%20or%20social%20gender.>

^{viii} <http://www.ello.uos.de/field.php/Semantics/Referenceandsense>

^{ix} <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.anandabazar.com/amp/west-bengal/kolkata/this-puja-pray-something-for-your-daughter-also-1.1054533>

^x This word *dāra* is always used in plural form (*dārāh*) that means "wives".

^{xi} These are called *Strīpratyayas*.

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