

Gender and Communication in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

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ABSTRACT

It is a well-known fact that gender differentiation is all pervasive. It permeates all spheres of life. The domain of language is no exception to it. In the early 1970's, linguists and psychologists began to give great attention to dominance and differences in male and female communication. Robin Lakoff, a well-known linguist, finds link between language and gender in her book *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) in which her theory affirms that there is a distinct male and a female language. Her theory was supported as well as challenged by other known theoretical approaches.

This paper aims at addressing major theories of language along with gender and tracing its applicability in Manjula Padmanabhan's play, *Lights Out*. The study of expressions in language spoken by male and female characters in *Lights Out* will search linguistic features which can be used to redress gender traits.

Keywords:

gender; communication; linguistic features

Gender impact on social milieu is a common observance. Its impact on language is traced by linguists who come up with diverse theories on gender and language. Some of the prominent gender and language theories are Robin Lakoff's deficit theory and O'Barr and Atkins situational specific theory.

Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) states that language is fundamental to gender inequality. She observes that "marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both

the ways in which women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of" (Lakoff 45). Her theory acknowledges that variance in male and female speech is due to gender. Lakoff's analysis states that the male language is stronger, more prestigious and desirable. Certain linguistic features of women's speech give the impression that they are weak and powerless as compared to men's speech.

Her model suggests certain

grammatical and lexical patterns which typify women's speech. As per her findings women's speech is marked by frequent use of hedges, empty adjectives, hyper correct grammar and pronunciation, more use of 'wh', tag question, use of indirect commands, request and apology. Repeated use of these distinct linguistic features indicates uncertainty and lack of authority, unassertiveness, grip of insecurity and nervousness in women's conversation.

Lakoff's theory was challenged by William O'Barr and Bowman Atkins. They theorized that language differences in male and female speech are situational specific. The speech patterns, as noted by Robin Lakoff, are not limited to women alone. Also, it does not feature in every woman's speech. Speech behaviour according to them reflects social status, class, and power position, which have a key role in discerning speech patterns. Thus, the differences in male and female language is situational specific relying on who has the authority and power in a conversation rather than the gender of the people involved.

Prior to application of gender and language theories on Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, it is essential to know the storyline of the play. *Lights Out* deals with a sensitive issue of gang rape. It delineates male and female reactions to the deplorable state of a rape victim. Leela and

Naina are the major female characters of the play while Bhaskar, Mohan and Surinder are male characters.

The analysis of the play features visibility of female speech traits as per Lakoff's theory in Leela's utterances. Her short incomplete dialogues suffixed with a question mark or exclamatory marks are noted throughout the play. In the opening scene Leela anxiously asks her husband about reporting the matter to the police and panics becoming aware of his inaction.

Leela's conversation is filled with prolific use of ellipses and broken sentences. Successive utterances like "Oh....! Bhaskar --- Tell me! Did you... do it? (LO 3) No! You didn't! Forget? (LO 4) How could you forget? (LO 4) have you tried?" (LO 4) express her anxiety, indecisiveness and submissive stature in the play. With the minimal use of words Leela conveys her thoughts and emotions. There are hardly a few dialogues where Leela ends in three sentences. Leela's one of the three-line utterance has four en dashes, an exclamation mark and two question tags.

"Leela: I know, I know — you've told me they're not interested in cases like this, they don't bother about minor little offences—but—but— I'm frightened! Can't you see that? Isn't that enough?" (LO 5).

En dash expresses her fumbles to grope for a proper word or a phrase in her

utterance. Perhaps it results from the stress she undergoes of her inability to rescue the rape victim. Frequent use of question tags in Leela's conversation affirms her weak decisive power. Leela is projected as a timid and a dependant character. She intends to seek attention and approval of her husband. Moreover, her husband's inaction provokes her to initiate conversation by asking questions.

The dialogues between Leela and her husband show male dominance. Hence, the male dialogues are comparatively longer and more assertive. The male characters make minimal use of grammatical and lexical patterns unlike Leela. The choice of words, sentence structure used by male characters along with the tone and tenor reflect smack of manliness, authority and power. A commanding and authoritative tone is noted in their close ended sentences. One of the male characters, Surinder, uses harsh words and abusive expressions in his conversation to express authority and power.

Unlike Leela, her friend Naina's dialogues do not depict nervous anxiety. Initially, she too gets shocked to see victimization of a woman in front of her eyes. Her first reaction to the ongoing crime disturbs her to such an extent that she finds it difficult to utter phrases with sexual overtones. En dashes in her utterances clearly project her uneasiness and inhibition

to use the word 'rape' for the crime. Gradually, she gets a hold on the situation and daringly puts a stop to the irrational utterance of Bhaskar and Mohan. Her fumbling is gradually replaced by assertive, direct and authoritative tone. The quoted lines from the text exemplifies power not timidity in her speech:

"What ritual? That's not ritual! That's a--a- (LO 35) You 're...you're mad! just one look outside the window and you will know it's a rape!" "Three men holding down one woman, with her legs... what would you call that a poetry reading" it's a rape, isn't it?" (LO 39).

Naina's hold on situation led her to use the language with power in her subsequent utterances. As a result, her utterances show less of question tags, minimal use of en dash and ellipsis. Compared to Leela's narrations, her dialogues are straight forward and attacking. Her forceful utterances are capable of communicating thoughts without being harsh. Dialogues between Naina-Bhaskar and Naina-Mohan projects shifting of power from men to women, reflected in the weak language of men.

The research finds that Leela and Naina display more of emotions through language while Bhaskar and Surinder display authority. Inhibition and dominance found in male and female communication validates

that gender differences in language do exist in the play. Softness, timidity and inhibition in female language at places is in total contrast to the coarse, harsh and dominant male language noticed in the major part of the play. The differences in male and female language exhibit linguistic features as mentioned by Lakoff in her theory, it is more an outcome of the situation rather than the outcome of male dominance.

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