



Deciphering the Politics of Language in Select Poems: A Contemplation

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Abstract— Language and the issues related with the language, have always been relevant in the history and contemporary times. Language is not merely a method of communication but rather an epitome of existence, identity and culture. While language and culture are interdependent, all the aspects connected to language pave a trajectory for the growth and death of a particular language. Language is a social, political and psychological construct. Today, though the world is still struggling hard to cope with the language of power and politics, English, we are witnessing the language debates persistent in countries of diversity and vernacularity. In the history, though English was introduced as a colonial weapon, today it has transformed as a language of survival, status and hegemony. Language has a wide scope of introspecting itself through the lens of caste, identity and hybridity. The mother tongue and the other tongue have always been in rivalry signifying the fight for existence. This paper will discuss the different debates on language, politics of language constructed in the Indian society on different platforms of culture. In order to present the vivid dimensions, the poems “Which Language should I Speak?” by Arun Kamble, “Language” by Sananta Tanty and “Search for my Tongue” by Sujata Bhatt are chosen.



Keywords— Language, identity, politics, cultural hegemony, and colonial influence.

The Politics of Language

Since evolution language has been an integral part of our lives, culture, identity and existence. The development of language over the eras has transformed us into more sophisticated social animals. The history of language represents the establishment of various languages on the basis of regionality, culture, explorations, trade, commerce, migrations and colonization. Gradually, over the years and generations, the world has witnessed the rise and fall of various languages where some languages were cannibalized and some other could survive. Languages survive when they are in use and vogue. Most of the languages are obsolete as there is no community to communicate in that specific language. These languages belong to the minority culture. The languages of the majority and power, survive as they are placed in the center, whereas the minority in the periphery. The purity of language is another issue to be related to the growth and survival. The juxtaposition and amalgamation of languages

could destroy the authentic purity of languages and would lead to the death of a minor language. The hybridity in the languages could hinder the purity of a specific language when a dominating language is merged with a non-dominating language.

The debates over the politics of language are dependent on the concepts of identity, caste and alienation. Language exists in culture and community, suffers because of diversity and deteriorates when overpowered. In the contemporary times, there are many issues connected to language as the language is influenced by gender, identity, alienation, religion, class and caste. The issues of regional languages versus the national language are prevalent in present times to witness. In the countries of multiculturalism like India, the question of national language will always persist as every state has its own regional language. No language can be declared as national as it is not spoken by the majority. Language is resisted according to the majority and minority culture, individual

and community. The language of the minority communities survives through the individuals, as their identity wholly rests on the language they speak. Language and identity are interrelated aspects. We identify ourselves as individuals, through the society and belong to it. To endorse,

It is the individual who is most concerned with identity: the individual is directly affected by socio-cultural conditions – all of those listed above and more – and who feels an immediate connection with them, indeed, who either ‘identifies’ with them or not. And, of course, it is individuals who collectively make up a community, and who are therefore primary; there is no community without the individual. (Pugh 4)

Every individual might struggle through the linguistic otherness and be othered when one fails to embrace the main language positioned in the center or power. An individual, speaking English has more identification and recognition than the individual speaking several regional languages. The issue here is not just about the language of binary oppositions and regionality, but also about the identity wars between the genders denoted by the language. If the language of the center and periphery are antagonistic, so are the languages of men and women. Women are hardly heard and listened to whereas the voice and language of the men dominates and is accepted as commands to be followed. We have several examples of words being generalized and applied to the other genders commonly. Words like mankind, chairman/men, president, actor, man Booker and proverbs like Manners maketh a *man*, Practice makes *man* perfect, etc., showcase the politics of language in the matters of gender. The male/female differences in language are ample. To note,

Other studies have identified systematic male-female differences in many languages. These range from differences in vocabulary, differences in linguistic forms (e.g. phonology, morphology and syntax) to whole communicative styles, e.g. politeness, directness, etc. However, alleged differences in male and female speech represent only part of the picture. Scholars must also look at how men and women are spoken about, and how ways of speaking and acting fit into cultural beliefs about the roles of women and men. Gender stereotypes are sets of beliefs about the attributes of men or women, e.g. men are stronger and more aggressive, women are passive, talk more than men, etc. Stereotypes are often associated with and not easily separated from other salient variables such as race, class, culture, age, context, etc. Stereotypes about how men and women speak

reveal insights into our attitudes about what men and women are like or what they are supposed to be like according to the norms of a particular culture. Many languages have proverbs and sayings that indicate gender hierarchies in which men are more highly valued than women, and women are stereotyped as stupid, overly talkative and fickle. (Romaine 3)

Among the many issues of language, alienation from mother tongue is considered as one of the prominent. The problem of alienation from language leads to identity crisis and is the major aspect of diaspora. The exile and alienation at homelands during colonization were also due to the imposition of English language. The sense of belongingness with to mother tongue being shattered, the migrants were often traumatized, as their identity was in stake. The experience of being silenced and muted was torturous for the migrants. To substantiate,

One repeatedly encounters poignant stories of having to forget one’s language in order to assimilate or acculturate to a new environment. Sadly, this forgetting often includes losing one’s roots. As powerfully said by Benjamin Baez, losing his original language meant losing, the intimacy associated with Spanish and the closeness to my family and past it allowed. I lost, essentially, all the ‘sights and sounds’ associated with my native language. This loss of language, which inevitably leads to loss of cultural identity, carries with it many dangerous implications. In the words of the renown linguist, Joshua Fishman, when we take away the language of a culture we take away, its greetings, its curses, its cures, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its rhymes, its proverbs, its wisdom, and its prayers. (Rovira 4-5)

Another issue related to politics of language is caste. The interference of language with the caste is a societal, cultural and historical concept. In the societies like India, caste plays a predominant role. An individual is observed through the lens of caste and caste is a yardstick to measure one’s identity, status and caliber. Every religion and caste have its own cultural influence over the language. Relation of the language with the Subalterns and Dalits reveals, the issues of language in the lower strata of society. The questions on the language and speech of subalterns and Dalits have been debated in the academia, even after their voice and silence being represented, the issue is still relevant and prevalent in the present. The language of the Dalits and Dalit literature has its own linguistics to follow,

which is widely different from the mainstream narratives and unjustifiable in translation. To quote,

Language serves a greater purpose than just a means of communication. For a vast majority of Dalits, who may not have access to formal education or training in language, their ability to express and interact with the world in their own language offers a valuable insight. The lack of a formal language training gives the freedom to conceptualize and frame ideas which the written word may not be able to capture sufficiently. Dialects and variants of mainstream languages are more commonly spoken by the lesser numerous groups, which may also be backward or lower castes in composition. In an attempt to get these voices out into the mainstream, many researchers and scholars have attempted to translate literature written by Dalit authors from their regional language to other languages. While the idea of translating a piece of work is noble, some of the challenges of translation need close attention. The linguistic vocabulary of Dalit scholars is located in their personal experiences and occupations marked by their caste status. The world of the Dalits has never been a part of mainstream society; they lived on the periphery, outside of the village society. Many a times Dalit writers derive words from the dialects they speak, thereby in mainstream translation one cannot find the analogy between the source text and the target text. (Ingole 41)

The issues of politics in language with reference to caste, identity and alienation have also been represented in Indian English literature. The poems chosen here depict an individual's experiences on language and denote the trauma and frustration.

“Language” by Sananta Tanty

The poem “Language” by Sananta Tanty portrays the crisis of identity in a very sarcastic manner. Sananta Tanty is a poet from Assam who belongs to the downtrodden community. The poem highlights the poet's struggle for identity through language, connectivity to nature and society. At the beginning lines of the poem, he denotes about the language, his father and mother have given him. “The language my father gave me I stored in my mother's womb/and the language my mother gave me I stored in Earth's womb./ So the anatomists have declared that/ I do not have a language.” (Tanty, lines 1-4)

The beginning lines of the poem reveal how the poet is connecting language with earth and womb of the mother. The languages here are explained as the language of the father and mother and he stores it in the womb of

mother and earth. This notifies how the poet is connecting language to his parents and mother earth and that language is acquired from the womb of the earth and mother. The next lines are sarcastic as he depicts that the anatomists do not realize this fact that the language is not on the tongue but is developed in the womb even before the birth. The poet here, throws light on how language is not just what we speak but to what we belong to. He stresses on the truth that our identity is through language. In the next stanza he refers to the language board and requests the board to consider him as a man and that he belongs to the whole world. The poet expresses that the world should not be divided by the languages and that no language is superior or inferior. Language is a deposit of community which has to be passed from one generation to another. The problem and politics of the language board and the anatomists are sarcastically presented and they are the one, who impose rules on the language of individuals and community. The poet is a socialist and condemns capitalism, believes in courtesy, aesthetics and independence. He mocks the linguists and anatomists who protest that he doesn't have a language. The subtle protest of the poet can also be witnessed, who ironically sheds light on the issue of politics of the language practiced by the language boards.

The next poem is “Search for My Tongue” by Sujata Bhatt is a poem to be critiqued from the angle of diaspora as she highlights the pain and trauma of losing her mother tongue in the foreign land. In the opening lines of poem, she expresses her pain of having two tongues in her mouth, one mother tongue and another foreign. This poem illustrates the dilemma of using two languages together which is impossible for the poet. She feels that her mother tongue will rot and die since she doesn't use it but she cannot spit it out. The frustration and helplessness of using the other tongue are realistically portrayed by the poet in the below lines.

“I thought I spit it out/but overnight while I dream, /it grows back, a stump of a shoot/grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins,/it ties the other tongue in knots,/the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,/it pushes the other tongue aside./Every time I think I've forgotten,/I think I've lost the mother tongue,/ it blossoms out of my mouth.” (Bhatt, lines 15-24)

The issue related to language in the poem is about identity crisis. Language denotes identity. The concept of language in diaspora represents many angles as the migrants have to cope with new culture, food, society and language. They have to accept a secondary citizenship and the idea of being othered. In the above lines the poet reveals that she cannot deny the language that lives within her, as it blossoms and ties all other tongues. The diaspora represents

the issues of language and politics of the primary language. The language of the migrants cannot be placed in the mainstream and is positioned in the periphery. The major languages spoken by majority will always find a space in the center and of the migrants in margin. However, the poet concludes explaining that she cannot reject her language because if she does, she is rejecting herself. This poem represents the problems of language in diaspora and how it is not just about the displacement of a migrant but also of a language.

The poem “Which Language should I Speak” by Arun Kamble is yet another poem on dilemma, caste and language politics. In this poem, the poet is questioning the choice of language that is presented to him. Being a Dalit, the poet follows the language of his grandfather which is his tradition. As his grandfather says, “You whore-son, talk like we do. Talk, I tell you” (Kamble line 6), the poet has imbibed the language of his grandfather’s tradition. However, the poet is also rectified by his brahmin school teacher at school, who picks the words through the vedas and reprimands the poet to speak correctly. The poet here is showcasing the binary oppositions of language and their platforms. His dilemma is obvious as he cannot forego his tradition to which he belongs and simultaneously cannot reject the teachings. However, the poet indicates the differences of language by presenting the two platforms of caste and language in society. This dilemma of choosing the language is also the politics that can be contemplated on the platform of caste. Dalits have their own vocabulary and expression which is different from the other communities. The language of the Dalits and their literature is realistic and therefore rude and raw. They cannot represent their stories in the flowery language of the upper castes. Their language cannot be replaced through imposition or enforcement. Therefore, when the so-called upper caste scholars impose their language on the Dalit writing it is the politics of language being practiced by them. The poet’s dilemma here is deliberate and justifiable.

To conclude, the language and politics around the language will always remain an issue in the game of hegemony. The poems discussed here contemplate on the vivid aspects of language, which explore connection to alienation, identity and caste with reference to hegemony. No language can survive if it is not nourished by the speakers. We only need an inclusive society which embraces difference and tolerates every language without comparison and distinction.

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