



The Politics of Linguistic Masculism Landless Farmers and Sex Bias in Bangladesh

LANGUAGE, when used for communication, may turn out to be a significant political weapon: for it, in one way or another, seeks to achieve domination and subjection. The king, of course, has his own language — own idioms and rhetoric, as the ministers and MPs, today forge their own language to justify their ways to the public. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, the speeches of Claudius register unmistakable regal, magisterial accents even in times of crises and disturbances. He uses energetic imperatives and reproaching rhetoric, because he is the king. But, this is not certainly the case with the graveyard digger, whose syntax and thoughts are down-to-earth and simple, but suggestive. In fact, it is possible to show such linguistic differences, within a single language-system, on the basis of social classes reflecting respective political interests.

Yes, difference and interest are the two important functions of a community's language which can certainly surface that age-old divide between man and woman — between their languages, between their speeches and writings. Feminists today, particularly the Anglo-American and French ones, have been increasingly stressing language as a key-issue in women's struggle for identity and freedom. What actually accounts for this telling accentuation is the very realization that language itself may turn out to be a political force, generating the power of defining and categorizing, dominating and subverting areas of difference and similarity, and that women remain oppressed and marginalized in a male-constructed language-system. Indeed, there have been, meanwhile, considerable reactions against what has come to be known as *linguistic masculism* based on the dictatorship of patriarchal speech, and some of these feminists have ardently advocated in favour of a revolutionary linguistic *Ansar-e-Ladler*, for example, calls on women to invent a language that is not oppressive, a language that does not leave speechless but that loosens the tongue.

Is Bengali a male-dominated language aiming at establishing the hegemony of linguistic masculism to the extent of marginalizing space for women? The question is no doubt a relevant one but certainly difficult; for, there is no singular answer. It is true that language resists freezing and fixity: it is constantly changing, evolving. But, how far have these changes eliminated those elements of language which have remained more or less hostile to women?

True, changes have evinced their own politics: changes themselves have accommodated some non-changes within them, which deserve observations at a time when women seek to change the oppressive language-system itself. In the Bengali language, to start arbitrarily, one finds more vituperative rhetoric and railing adjectives to describe the moral and other forms of aberrations which could possibly be committed by women than those ones attributable or applicable to men. A recent survey reveals that our language itself facilitates abuses more for women than for men, giving the impression that women are to be abused and that they are perpetually vulnerable to moral aberrations (mostly in the religious sense of the term). Let us take the Bengali word 'patita' for the English word 'whore'. It is certainly meant for women, and it has several synonyms in the Bengali language. But, there is no masculine counterpart for

The writer, who teaches English language and literature at Jahangirnagar University, here underscores the need for looking into the inherently masculinist dynamics of the Bengali language on the one hand, and into women's politically marginalized access to the full lexical — rather linguistic — resources, on the other. Having taken 'silences' and 'unsayables' as the margins of a language, the writer maintains that women's struggle for freedom involves a movement away from such margins so as to deconstruct the 'centre', constituted by the dictatorship of patriarchal speech, and that the whole task is a political one.

this word, capturing the similar semantic intensity of denigration. Yes, semantic disparaging is undoubtedly one form of linguistic violence perpetrated upon women in general. The nominal word 'ramani' (meaning 'woman') has been reckoned a potentially euphonic sound by the poets at least starting from Madhusudan, but recently feminists have expressed their dissatisfaction with the use of this word, for they have put their finger on a semantic reductionism the word encourages: it, as they maintain, reduces a woman to a mere plaything, connecting her with only 'raman' or copulation. The zone of oppressive semantics could be extended considerably, and it certainly demands a comprehensive reading. But, here, an example or two would suffice to indicate the nature of such oppressions and violence unleashed on women as language itself sanctions. The Bengali language can fairly easily supply strong adjectives and nouns to describe the strengths of man, but when he

is described as weak, he is characterized by such adjectives and nouns which are grammatically and semantically applicable to women only, clinching the point that weakness itself is feminine. The semantic onslaught on women is further borne out by the fact that a great number of positive adjectives do not have their feminine counterparts in Bengali, and that such adjectives are exclusively reserved for men. Here, it is not possible to go into the details of the explicitly male-dominated parts-of-speech and their semantic associations, which can certainly constitute a rewarding area of research in the field of feminist linguistics, but the essential point can be taken up readily. The point is this: the Bengali language, as it has developed its lexical resources, its grammar and semantics over hundreds of years, has not yet shaken off its spell of linguistic masculism manifested in the politics of weakening and

downplaying women's power and strengths. Yes, our perceptions of women as 'weak', 'little', 'insignificant', 'powerless', 'dull', 'childish', and so on, have been sufficiently coloured by our language-system itself, by the male hostility of grammar and semantics. True, the dwarfing of women is primarily a linguistic exercise with a telling political implication. But, the inherently masculine nature of a language does not always constitute the real political problem for women as such. It has been sufficiently argued that the act of developing *gendolect* or 'two separate sex-specific languages' may further enhance an unhealthy discrimination between man and woman and that 'there is absolutely no evidence that would suggest that the sexes are pre-programmed to develop structurally different linguistic systems'. Others have argued that language itself is not oppressive, but it is made oppressive. What is therefore more important than anything else is women's 'access to language,

until the 1970s, when the women's movement fuelled political activity. As educational levels increased and women became an integral part of the work force, groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) promoted equal rights and decision-making opportunities for women in all areas of their life. Political gains since the 1970s have been substantial. In 1971 there were only seven women mayors of US cities. In 1992, the number has risen to 374, or approximately 14 per cent of the mayors in cities with populations over 10,000. CAWP figures note that among the 100 largest cities in the United States, 19 have women mayors, including San Diego, California; Washington; and Fort Worth, Texas. According to CAWP statistics, 60 women have been elected to state executive positions (18 per cent of the total) including three governors and seven lieutenant governors. Five of the 50 states have women attorneys general to deal with crime. More women than ever before are involved in fiscal and budgetary issues in govern-

ment. Eighteen states have 21 elected women officials serving as state treasurers, auditors or controllers. The US Congress has witnessed only slight progress since the mid-1970s. In 1975, 19 women comprised four per cent of the Congress. Today there are 30 women in office there, a scant 5.6 per cent total. Indications are that the traditional barriers to election may be crumbling. Voter discrimination against women has declined substantially since the 1960s, when many Americans believed a woman's place was in the home. Today, according to polls, fewer than one out of 10 Americans would vote against a candidate just because she was a woman. In fact, women are even preferred by some voters. "Recent public opinion polls show that voters will give women candidates the advantage this year," says Spillar. "Several factors are driving voters' preference for women candidates. Voters see women as outside the corrupt circles and not part of 'business-as-usual' politics."

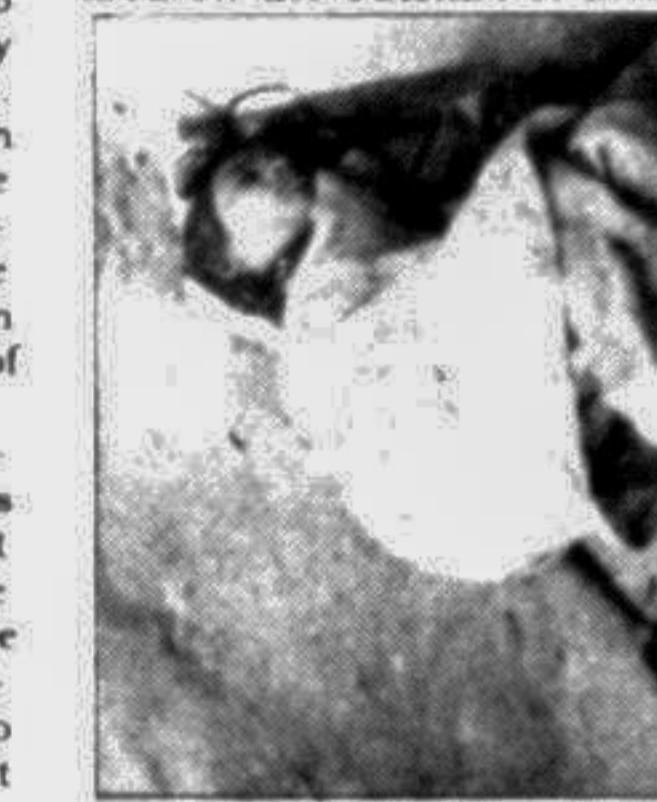
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work almost three shifts per day. Waking at 4 am they light fires, milk cows, if any, sweep floors, fetch water and prepare food to feed their families, then they run to attend their duties in the garment factory starting from 6 am and continuing up to 2 pm. In the evening, they forage for branches, twigs and leaves to fuel their cooking fires, wild vegetables to nourish their children, and grass to feed the cows, if any. Finally, they return home to cook dinner and do evening chores. These women spend almost twice as many hours per week working to support their families as to the men in their huts. Even then, every year, for all their effort, they find themselves poorer and less able to provide for their families' need to survive. As the 21st century draws near, some billion people — more than half the earth's population, like the landless farmers of Bangladesh, live in the

It is unfortunate for Bangladesh that every year the number of landless farmers are increasing at a very alarming rate. One of the main reasons for this rapid increase of the number of landless farmers is the abnormal growth of population among them. A farmer, for example, who had five acres of land ten or fifteen years before with five children, had good days during his life time. But after his death when the five acres are divided among the children, they become the owner of one acre each. The next generation of this family thus becomes completely landless. This is a process through which the farmers are gradually becoming landless whose number in Bangladesh is now over 55 per cent of the total population of the farmer community. More the number of children, more the possibility of becoming a landless farmer and this has become the fate of these uneducated class of people. When a farmer becomes landless, he finds himself in a very desperate condition, as he does not have any resource to support himself and his family members through his income. The only source remains with him is his physical existence and he finds no other alternative than to depend only on the physical labour which he can put every day on the land of others.

Under this frustrated condition, the women in the landless farmer community cannot sit idle. They, under the pressure of the necessity of merely the procurement of food for themselves and their children, also go out of the house and put their labour as the maid-servant to some farmer's house, whose economic condition is comparatively better. But even then, gradually the condition becomes so worse that both landless farmers and their wives find themselves completely helpless when they do not get any work on the land or at home of the other people of the village. Having placed under such helpless circumstances, they usually rush towards nearby towns or cities to save themselves and their family members from starvation. This being so, the towns and cities become crowded by exodus of the landless farmer from the villages. When these people reach the towns and cities having almost nothing to support themselves, they take shelter in the small huts constructed by leaves in certain areas of towns and cities where thousands of landless farmers assemble to find their abode of living. Dhaka, the capital, is largely exposed to such a problem. In the towns and

cities, while the husband goes out for day-to-day work either as a rickshaw-puller or for some other work as a day labourer, his wife goes out for work in some house as a maid or to some factories in order to share the economic responsibility of the family. The fate of their children in such families become precarious as they hardly get any food, not to speak of any recreation, and are left almost un cared. Besides, there are other aspects which deserve consideration. Due to the development of garments industries in and around Dhaka and Chittagong, two major cities of the country, about seven hundred thousand workers have been employed in this purely private sector, out of whom about 85 per cent are the destitute women. Almost all of these women belong to the landless-peasant's class rushed from the villages. These women have a very hard life to lead. Let me cite an example: Most of the women of an area on the outskirts of Dhaka



Is it the shelter for landless farmers?

therefore, remains undervalued and the essential contributions the women make to the welfare of families and to the nations remain unrecognized. So while the growing scarcity of resources in Bangladesh within subsistence economy increases the burden of women and erodes their productivity, little is being done to reverse the cycle. Ironically, by failing to address the pervasive sex bias that discounts the contributions of women, development policies and programmes intended to alleviate impoverishment and to redress the environmental degradation that usually follows, actually are making the problem worse. Sex bias is a worldwide phenomenon, but it is especially pernicious in Bangladesh where most of women's activity takes place in the non-wage economy for the purpose of household consumption. On the outskirts of Dhaka, for example, women

spend one-third of their working hours earning wages, but receive less than half the amount paid to men for the same work. Because their cash income is not enough to buy adequate supplies of food and other necessities (which they are responsible for obtaining one way or another), they must work additional hours to procure these goods from the surroundings of the cities and countryside. Such labours and the goods that result, are a direct substitute for cash income and are essential to survival, yet in a world where economic value is computed in monetary terms alone, women's work is not counted as economically productive when no money changes hands. Gender bias is thus a primary cause of poverty specially in Bangladesh because in its various forms it prevents hundreds of millions of women from obtaining the education, training, health services, child care, and level status needed to escape from poverty. This tradition prevents women from transforming their increasingly unstable subsistence economy into one that is helpful to accelerate the speed of economic growth and progress. Sex bias is thus an enormous stumbling block on the road to a sustainable economy.

Sex bias is also the single most important cause of rapid population growth, where women have little access to productive resources, and little control over family income, they depend on children for social status and economic security. A necessary step in reducing births voluntarily, then, is to increase women's productivity and their control over resources. It is a long tradition in Bangladesh that while the male population work outside either on land or in any office or factory or workshop, the women remain inside the house to look after the cooking and household affairs for the whole family. In the family it is the women who play a major role in taking care of the crops harvested from the land. But what is ironic is this that the Bangladesh society does not count the work of the women as productive in relation to the work of the male community working in different fields. By denying the productivity of the women, the whole community of women is being denied of their position in the society.

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Women in American Politics

THE possibility exists that the 1990s will go down in history as the decade in which women made record strides forward in the political arena in the United States. Women are exercising their political muscle in growing numbers by running for elected office, raising money for women candidates, voting and encouraging others to vote, getting appointed to decision-making boards and commissions, and lobbying for women's concerns and causes. "Women are getting more involved in politics at all levels," says Jane Danowitz, executive director of the women's Campaign Fund, a political action committee. "Our number of new donors has doubled. We are now working on a joint venture with the national association of Female Executives, which is an organisation of over 250,000 women in mid-level management positions, to encourage women to get involved in political systems and support women candidates." Women comprise 52 per cent of the United States population, and therefore a primary goal of such groups is to attain political equity with men. "We will not rest until women hold 50 per cent of the decision-making offices in this country," says Katherine Spillar, national coordinator for the Fund for the Feminist Majority (FFM). According to figures compiled by the Center for the American Woman and Politics (CAWP), the number of women in government is four times larger than it was 20 years ago, but at no level of office do women hold more than approximately one-fifth of the available positions nationwide. The most dramatic gains have been at the local and state level. In 1969, there were only 301 women serving as state legislators. According to CAWP, that number has more than quadrupled to 1,375, or 18.4 per cent of the total. The Center's figures also reveal that in six states — Arizona, Maine,

social reforms as child labour laws, public education, health care, and the end of slavery. Women gained voting rights through the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1920, but gains in representation in public office were slow. Women serving in elected office remained the exception rather than the rule

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Susan B. Anthony (left) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (right) fought for women's right to vote in the USA

Access to Justice

Although the media quite frequently raises the issue of rule of law in Bangladesh, it is generally in response to a major breakdown. Unlike the sensational Rima-Munir case, the pursuit of justice by individuals, particularly when they are not backed by power and influence, remains elusive. Lack of access to justice amounts to an infringement of an individual's right and encourage violations. Reports of gender violence appear as fillers in daily newspapers but they fail to record recognition of the crime and its retribution. Cases of violence inflicted upon women and children at the work place or at home tend to be ignored by the community, on the plea that interference amounts to a violation of privacy, and deliberately neglected by the law enforcing agencies. A woman, oppressed by her community and her family, is disenfranchised by legal procedures themselves.

As a result far most cases of gender violence never reach the press. Even fewer still enter the judicial system. Rather than remain silent women have started talking about the violence to which they are subjected — battering as wives or domestic maids, desertion or dowry deaths — amongst themselves as well as to community groups offering legal and social support. In its experience of dispute resolution through negotiation and mediation Ain O Salish Kendra, a legal aid and mediation centre, has supported the struggle of women and children against violence and violations of their rights. In subsequent weeks we will draw upon our dossier of cases to illustrate the nature of violence which marks gender relations and alternative procedures for dispute resolution through which women seek to emerge from their state of disenfranchisement.

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