

The power of words can move a nation to war, or spread the spirit of love and hope, and in-between, arouse a whole range and scale of passions and emotions in men that may change their fortunes forever. Its usage, a social construct by all means, is, as ever, a slippery slope. Spontaneous or unconsidered utterances in this age of unbridled communication are a tricky business. One knows how political correctness still holds sway despite being frowned upon for its widespread misappropriation in taking sides on the wrong side of history. As for the old-school spontaneous “plain-speak”, it lost traction in social-digital media, where words are particularly “stylised” for the desired communal effect. In articulating oneself, one cannot passively fall back on habit and custom. If you are to be taken seriously, you must keep abreast of the “in-vocabulary”; in that way, it is an ongoing process of performative re-skilling, if you may. Far from being abstract notions composed in the head, articulations are multi-dimensional, embodied acts generated within the ambit of a certain time-space context.

So in social networks, one must carry the stressful burden of a profound and acute awareness of the determinative protocols that supervise one’s interaction with others. The socially adept conversationalists are constantly engaged in a guessing game in order not to be checkmated in any given situation, since it is common knowledge that his/her interlocutor is masquerading an adopted language that takes a bit of wit on his/her part to volley. “Banding words”, despite its association with playfulness, reads more like a violent game, which burns one out—a curious case of “word-stress”.

On another note, time—be it a dimension holding the universe and beyond together or what the corporate Mad Hatter chases in order to remain ahead in the race towards an elusive goal—has always been held responsible for the shifts and changes that mark the history or evolution of words. History? Isn’t it always already inflected with memory and hindsight? The past becomes a narrative strung together with words, albeit seen through the semantic lens of the present. But the present is also a consequent of the past, as the shape-shifting social ego is but a receptor that seamlessly gleans and re-enforces itself in a landscape of shifting hermeneutics or changing legibility of meanings. In such a state of flux, how are we to know if the words we hear carry any familiar, fixed meaning?

Segueing back to the question of the reliability of words, it is undeniably looped in a chain of referential, connotative springing from contexts that spasmodically change their contours with each iteration. Taken out of context or emplaced in a totally different configuration of social relation, the same utterances relay differing messages. Even term of endearments can be quite vexing to a receiving ear if it is perceived to be a part of a hierarchising tactic “putting you in your place”.

In every field of social production, notably those which are

WORDS, WORDS EVERYWHERE, BUT NOT ONE TO TRUST...

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technology/information-driven, it is an incontestable fact that the boon or bane of the all-consuming matrix of social media looms large with its own scheme of sociality—in which the channel of communication is a language disembodied from the real-time community culture, and conversely, is somewhat generic, and intensely encoded, unlike the fluid, sinuous exchanges of words that animate the daily splay of quotidian life. What apparently seems to govern this virtual playground is the pseudo-politics of a sub-language, paradoxically stripping—with due respect to immeasurable exceptions—the unwitting user of his agential role in expressing one’s autonomous opinion, only to latch him onto a pre-furnished virtual circuit of articulation. In fact, without a wisp of a doubt, the visual is the text here—semiotics of signs imbuing words with esoteric meanings. Not saying words is not always caught up in the maze of a signifying field, but it is probably a utopic nostalgia that compels one to naively rely on words as they used to be (before structuralism and every possible celebrational theorisation that led to a complex system of analysis) to convey meaning, however much may they be steeped in underlying or overlaying intimations, with less critical communicability. Something to be taken at face value and trusted.

Words, thus, with their subterranean labyrinth of endless meanings sometimes hover portentously, poised to break the surface of the complacent civility and sacrosanct stability of so-called polite society. Should an aggrieved member of society vent his disappointment with some measure of vehemence, this so-called misconduct is more or less tolerated, if not with a silent grunt, then with a mild reprimand. Because bandying (cuing from what was previously said) words has become a national habit that comes unfailingly garnished with violence and crude innuendos. Missives fly in the air like dandelions in autumn. Those who navigate through the vagaries of life with some degree of dignity do so with the help of deft manipulation of words or the symbolic order that elevates us from a state of unconscious to a conscious assimilation of subjecthood.

Those who read “Alias Grace” would remember the novel based on a real-life story to be fascinating for its fantastic fabulism—a minor servant girl accused



and convicted for murder! Her confessions liable to be interpreted in light of legal, medical and spiritualist discourses of a historical era are plotted cleverly by Margaret Atwood to expose the inevitable run-in between truth and falsehood. Makes one wonder whether words really have any true value.

Throughout this hypothetical rambling, the term “word” won preference over that of “text”, which is ontologically laden with signs/significations that precariously invoke multiple legibility that run the whole gamut of sensorial as well as paradigmatic perceptions. Texts glare out of billboards, the dubious fine print on bank statements, and of course machine-readable bar codes—it’s a sticky area! Who would not pitch for plain and simple words per se taken in simplistic parlance, which poses less threat and causes little angst, any day?

Now, to diffuse the seriousness, let’s turn to colloquialism or its distant cousin—slang! Its trajectory over time seems to emulate the Darwinian theory of evolution, in so far as it follows “survival of the wackiest” choice of words. “Polapainra ajkal boroi pera dey!” Well, these wisecracks on my part often meet with blank stares owing to their sheer unintelligibility. Shame on me for being a relic from the Jurassic era!

Though it seems repetitious, it cannot be stressed more that the valence of words is time-sensitive. Going back to

the history of resistance, the pejorative terms “black” and “native” were adopted as identity markers by the subalterns to organise against the so-called masters. However, with time these symbolic instruments of reclamation too donned a new garb (or the emperor’s new clothes?)—one of concessional empowerment in lieu of majoritarian enfranchisement. Or, take for instance the post-truth era of Trumpian carnivalesque, where false statistics are shamelessly and indiscriminately spewed out to furnish a fake claim or to prevalently thwart the most pressing concerns of the time.

On the home turf, we are blessed to have found a mother who succeeded in sweeping the whole of humanity under her wings. Are you still questing for meaning? Or when the “white middle-class man” carries out a gruesome shoot-out and is soft-pedalled into being identified a lone wolf and not a terrorist, you are simply hit on the face by the blanketing blindness of linguistic politics.

Yet dreams are still expressed in words before translating in deeds! We need to continue to hear multiple voices speaking multiple narratives, especially when the world progressively seems to be overcast with a pall of gloom. Let words light up all corners of darkness. Let hope survive!

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OPINION |

A week ago, on November 7, I was at the Shaheed Minar, among thousands who joined a rally—the final event marking the centennial celebrations of the Soviet Revolution. I looked for portraits of Alexandra Kollontai, Elena Stasova, Nadezhda Krupskaya and other brave women who took part in the October Revolution in Russia a century ago. I looked for portraits of Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Begum Rokeya, Ila Mitra, Simone de Beauvoir—women who have led campaigns to bring about revolutionary changes in society and in the mindsets of people in their own countries as well as in the international sphere. Was it too much to expect the presence of the great women of history there?

The processions were ablaze with a revolutionary zeal that day, teeming with red flags and festoons, the air frenetic with passionate slogans. In this city of millions, we are used to suffering from



ARE WOMEN NOT REVOLUTIONARIES?

TASLIMA AKHTER

TRANSLATION: ABDULLAH NADVI

extreme alienation, but on November 7, we did not feel alone; rather, the rally imbued in us a sense of camaraderie, courage and determination. We felt a renewed vigour inside us—to ignore the risks, to challenge the status quo, to change the world. Even if it cost us our lives.

People from the working class constituted the majority. On two sides of the arena were two giant portraits of the Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin. His portraits loomed over us from the far corners of the Shaheed Minar as well. On one side, there were portraits of Mao, Stalin, Engels and Marx. Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury and Dr Ahmed Rafique sat on stage, along with leaders of different progressive leftist parties—Comrade Mujahidul Islam Selim, Khalequzzaman Bhuiyan, Mobinul Haider Chowdhury, Saiful Haque, Zonayed Saki, Tipu Biswas, Mosharraf Hossain Nannu, Hamidul Haque, Shamsuzzaman Milon and Shawkat Hossain, among others. Ostensibly, there was only one woman sitting on that stage—Moshrefa Mishu.

Men and women (their presence was significant), in waves, were joining the assembly. Some came with anti-imperialist festoons; some were holding their party flags. All over, people were holding placards with different demands, slogans and portraits of the great revolutionary leaders of the past. But no one had portraits of the women who contributed to the Soviet Revolution and to the revolutionary transformation

of the world.

When the post-assembly rally was marching to Paltan from Shaheed Minar, I observed that many leftist parties had erected decorated gates in front of their offices to celebrate the centennial. Here also, only male leaders were represented.

It seemed strange. I had so many questions in my mind. Who is the authority of a revolution? What qualities must someone possess and what contributions must that person make to be considered a leader? What qualifies as a contribution, anyway? How many meetings must a person preside over, and how many theories must they churn, to be remembered as a leader? I am not speaking solely about the October Revolution; so many women have fought in the struggle for revolutionary changes—as leaders, organisers and academics. Have we really acknowledged them enough?

Let us leave out the bourgeois parties for the moment and focus on the leftist progressive parties of Bangladesh. Even today, the presence of women in key leadership positions in these parties is insignificant. The number of women contributing as organisers and as academics is also insufficient. Perhaps that is why women themselves forget to pay homage to those who have influenced revolutions and revolutionary thinking. We fail to ask the difficult questions about representation and exclusionary politics, and thus, we forget the flagbearers of women’s emancipation even as we celebrate and envision an equal and just world.

As long as the number of women in central committees of parties does not increase (and I am not talking about increasing this number through quotas), as long as the front-row seats at



assemblies remain occupied mostly by men, as long as women do not theorise revolutions, it is only natural that we will keep forgetting to remember our history. Till we see more women become authoritative figures in politics, history, science, literature, economics, this will go on. And we cannot change the status quo if we wait for the men leading the political parties to give us the “opportunity” to lead. We have to create and sustain women’s leadership through our own qualities and capacities.

The struggle of a woman is to establish herself as an authority in her family, community, party, nation and so on. At times, a woman’s struggle is much more difficult than that of a man. Every day, women sacrifice themselves so that the men in their lives and communities may become better leaders, historians and writers. Often, women make these sacrifices unconsciously, unknowingly,

but they are not acknowledged by state and society. Their work does not get acknowledged either. There is no pride in such sacrifices.

It is true that the task of remembering revolutionary women at the rallies of the October Revolution Centennial falls primarily on the women. But the responsibility is not theirs alone. The struggle for equality lies with both men and women. The struggle must go on—within ourselves, within our communities within our progressive parties; we cannot hope to change society, to be radicals, while ignoring one half of the population. We call upon those men and women who dream of rupturing the structures of power, to take up this challenge.

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