

THE COMMUNICATIVENESS OF GENDER AND IDENTITY FORMATION: THE DIALECTIC OF WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION

Chris-Biriowu, Theresa, Belema

Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Rivers State University, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the manipulative use of language by the patriarchy on the subversion of the identity of women as it relates to women’s representation. The paper also discusses on how the power structures maintain the status quo through hegemonic and performative means. Concepts such as language, representation, feminism and patriarchy are specifically discussed. The ways through which language belittles women were extensively examined and the roles of politics and power structures play in sexism were also tackled. In concluding the discussion, the paper is of the view, that the issues that the female gender face results from the structures have been put in place by the dominant ideology and that women must reclaim and rewrite language if they seek to emancipate themselves.

KEYWORDS: *Women, Gender, Feminism, Language, Representation, Patriarchy*

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INTRODUCTION

A critical investigation into language use and the function of power as it relates to the origin of the categorization of sex, gender and identity formation, reveals that such categories resulted from the patriarchal point of view. The limitations of this kind of thinking emanates from the fact that such conclusions purposefully refuse to search for “the origins of gender, the inner truth of female... a genuine or authentic sexual identity...” (Butler, 2002: xxix). The patriarchy instead has focused more on those identity categories that are as a matter of fact, the brainchild of politics, institutions, religious and cultural practices, and discourses that stem from diverse and multiple subjugating points of constructed origins. The clamour for the emancipation of women by feminists arose from the ideology of such institutions on the female gender. Feminist theorists assert that communication plays a significant role in societal expectations of how males and females should behave. There exist a patriarchal bias in the foundations, culture and traditions of language, and feminists challenge those foundations and ask that we open our eyes to the hidden terms, masks and assumptions. (LittleJohn& Foss, 2009). Feminist theory believes that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued” (p.1). Political representation of women could either mean a system that seeks to project women in the public sphere as political subjects, or could be the “normative function of language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women” (p.1). For the feminist theorists, the needs of women are better understood by women and they are in a better position to determine how women ought to be represented as they know firsthand the level of oppression and victimization that women have had to endure in the hands of the patriarchy. Feminist

theorists claims that subjugation of woman lies in the language and politics of the patriarchy. Language, according to Gouldner (1976), is an intervening variable that plays a role of standing between the inputs of dominant institutions and people's behaviour in everyday life and politics. Language functions an agent that affects both public discourse and behaviour. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how dominant structures have been able to subvert identity, subjugate women and sustain power through language and politics.

Feminism and Feminist Issues

Feminism has been given different definitions by scholars but the universally acceptable means of describing the movement as defined in (Naasen, 2016 p.4) is the "political, cultural, or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women". Feminism is an offshoot of the patriarchal dominant institution. The issues of feminism are situated in its urgency to establish a universal status for women in order to strengthen the appearance of feminism's ownclaims to be representative. This has occasionally instigated the shortcut to a fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women's 'common' subjugated experience. Although the claim of universal patriarchy no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did, the notion of a generally shared conception of "women", the corollary to that framework, has been much more difficult to displace (Butler, 2002). Feminism is still a force to reckon with in modern times despite the shift in interests and values.

A Brief Background

From the 1880s when the movement began, its struggle was for the extension of the rights of women in the public sphere. Feminism at that time sought to liberate women by giving them the rights that were enjoyed by other members of the society which included the right to education, the right to vote, and the right to become useful and contributory members of the society. Early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf were known for their scholarly contributions to the movement. This was known as the first-wave feminism. The second-wave feminism emerged in the 1960s and most of what people know as feminism today is as a result of this wave of feminism. Feminists here took the struggle to a different level by stating that 'the personal is political'. Second-wave feminism acknowledged that the oppression that women face extended to the private sphere and that their struggle included the fight against domestic violence, abortion and contraception rights, relationships, childcare, emotions, the body, and sexuality (O'Shaughnessy, 2017). Debates and arguments ensued in the 1980s about the roles of gender and the construction of sexual identities. This gave rise to the Third-wave feminist movement. The fight for this set of feminists was more against the first and second wave feminism than it was against the patriarchy. They challenged the earlier feminist's struggles, terming them 'one-sided' and 'racist'. Bell hooks is a third-wave feminist who spells her name in lower-case to portray her feeling of double marginalization (first as a woman, and then as a woman of colour). The issues of third-wave feminism is centered upon the fact that they believe that the earlier feminists did not take into account the challenges that the women of colour have had to endure which they believe are quite different from those of the whites. Post feminism is a contemporary feminist movement that emerged with a different agenda – rejecting the practice of feminism altogether – with a group claiming that the struggle against the patriarchy is no longer necessary, and another taking a postmodern and post structural critique to earlier approaches claiming that the earlier feminists were essentialist, misguided, extreme, flawed and caught up in dualisms (2017).

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theories are developed when individuals come to a realization of the power relations that play a part in the

subjugation and oppression of a class of people. Feminist standpoint theory understands the issues that girls and women have been subjected to by the patriarchal society. Feminist standpoint theory is majorly concerned with “identifying cultural values and power dynamics that account for the subordination of females and highlighting the distinct knowledge cultivated by activities that are typically assigned to females” (LittleJohn et. al, 2009). For these theorists, women are neither biologically nor genealogically designed to be more nurturing, homely or weaker (physically/emotionally than men). Rather, social ideologies and power structures assign these attributes to the female gender, rendering them less valuable to the society than their male counterparts. The conditions that girls and women are made to live by are not natural but created from social and political forces. Feminist standpoint is a critical look at the women's activities and circumstances by contesting, analyzing, engaging in intellectual squabbles and ultimately challenging the subordination of women. “A feminist standpoint disputes privileging of men's interest while devaluing, marginalizing, and otherwise harming girls and women, and their interests “(LittleJohn et. al., 2009: 397). Feminist standpoint is an intellectually motivated political movement that rises against the existing subjugating power that puts women in unequal and less than favourable situations. Standpoints do not presume to be innocent because the world in which they struggle to change is not innocent. Standpoints are held with adequate knowledge of the unfair nature of power relations, social structure and dominant ideology. Feminist standpoint is premised on the knowledge of uneven power relations and the consequences of these power on the living situations of girls and women.

The Politics of Language and Gender

The dynamism of feminist discourse has challenged the relation between gender and politics. Gender cannot be separated from the political intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. The political assumption that the basis of feminist struggles must universally align, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form, is discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination. This assumption has been proven wrong in recent times. Feminism today has gone from public, to personal, to political. Even then, its fight has become more culturally and racially based. Recent feminist discourse “suggests that earlier perspectives on sexuality were restricted and restrictive” (O'Shaughnessy, Stadler & Casey, 2017: 312). The subject of women's struggles is ephemeral and has changed overtime such that there is a great deal of materials that questions its viability. There is very little agreement as to what qualifies – or should qualify – as the subject of emancipation and/or the liberation of women. “The domains of political and linguistic representation set out to advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject” (Butler, 2002 : 4). This means that the basis for which a structure is represented is dependent on the formation of a subject. Feminist theory assumes it is crucial that adequate language that fully represents women is developed to foster women's political visibility. Foucault (1973) points out that the juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent. This dominant structures of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms—that is, through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control, force, and even “protection” of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice.

Consequently, the structures that have such regulatory and control power construct the language in such a way that with it, they subjugate the subjects, bringing them under their dominance. This implies, according to Butler (2002), that the juridical formation of language and politics that represent women as “the subject” of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics (p.4). In other words, feminism is ironically embedded and intertwined in the very political system that is supposed to foster its emancipation. This therefore, creates a political

problematic such that struggling for the emancipation of women in such a system will obviously prove self-defeating. Feminism then, has to understand the politics and how women are perceived, represented, and misrepresented in the very system from which they seek emancipation. An example of such political misrepresentation is the assumption that the term “women” denotes a common identity, therefore a unified problem.

Sex, Gender Role and Identity

In the discussion of identity formation and representation, it is imperative that the distinction of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ is made known. According to the biological essentialist school, “sexual difference is a biological distinction based on male and female genitalia, and chromosomal and hormonal differences” (O’Shaughnessy et.al, 2017). The differentials in gender according to this school, is based on the genetic, biological, physiological and psychological tendencies. For the biological essentialists, the differences in men and women are inevitably determined by their biological makeup which affects their emotional and physical reactions. Hormones make women more emotional, nurturing and gentle while men are, due to testosterone, more competitive, aggressive and smart. The ideology of the essentialists endorses the domination of the patriarchy and heterosexuality. Butler (2002) claims that policing gender by way of positivistic categorization is “sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality” (xii). An opposite ideology is the social constructionist school that claims that gender is a socialization effect. Gender for them, is a product of the environment one finds him/herself. “Gender is the supposition that individuals socially identified as males and females tend to occupy different ascribed roles within social structures and tend to be judged against divergent expectations for how they ought to behave” (LittleJohn et. al, 2009). For the social constructionists, gender stems from the different ways that males and females are raised from infancy to behave. For example, a baby boy is clothed in blue and other darker colours and given electronic and mechanical toys to play with whereas a baby girl conversely, is clothed in pink and other brighter colours and given dolls and stuffed animals as the ideal toys. In Nigeria, boys watch sports on television with their fathers while girls help their mothers in the kitchen. Boys do the heavy liftings and are raised to be protective of their younger siblings (especially the female ones) whereas girls are brought up to be more nurturing and domesticated. Feminist view of the overall differentiation of gender and sex (and the roles that are consequently constructed) is a tool for the subordination of women and should be resisted, discarded, overthrown or rendered ambiguous (Butler, 2002). According to LittleJohn& Foss (2009), in a study carried out by Margaret Mead in three different cultures, she discovered how different cultures assign gender roles:

The Arapesh required both males and females to be nurturing, cooperative and peaceful; the Mundugumor demanded that both male and females be aggressive and violent; and the Tchambuli expected females to be dominant and impersonal but the males to be emotionally dependent and concerned with personal adornment (p. 434).

Many scholars since Mead’s research have ventured into gender studies to understand how societal factors affect human behaviour. A constructivist would argue that it is “the social pressures, not the particular physiology that we are born with, that primarily influence the formation of adult identity” (p. 313). Family, culture, religion, politics and the society go a long way in influencing the identity of a person. Transgender further complicates the issues of identity formation.

The Power of Language

Besides the essentialist and constructionist ideologies of gender and identity formation, scholars have argued that language also plays a significant role in social behaviour, particularly in relation to sexism. “There is the problem that feminism

encounters in the assumption that the term 'women' denotes a common identity" (Butler, 2002: 5). The term "women" has gone from a normal signifier for which it represents (those that are not men) to a troublesome term for contestation and anxiety. Critical feminists argue that just because one is a woman does not mean that that is all that one is. Not only is the term not exhaustive, but it could mean different things in different social, cultural and historical contexts and "gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, and sexual modalities of discursively constituted identities" (p. 6). Language in relation to gender, according to Spender (1980), has the capability of sexualizing and belittling women using particular terms. For instance in the opposite terms, master-mistress, bachelor-spinster, king-queen, courtier-courtesan, and lord-lady; Spender (1980) analyzes that while the male term may keep their value and glamour, the female terms are becoming denigrating. 'Lady' is now used to describe just about anyone while 'lord' still holds its powerful meanings. Also, a 'spinster' has a negative connotation, whereas a 'bachelor' carries a certain social position and value. 'Mistress' and 'courtesan' have become language used to denote negative lifestyles in women as compared to their opposites.

A woman with masculine features (physique gotten from exercise and sports) is referred to as a 'tomboy' while a man who takes part in activities in a female-dominated field (such as fashion and grooming) and/or accessorizes with female ornaments is labelled a 'sissie'. The term 'queen' has been used to label and mock homosexual men connoting that for a man to have any feminine trait is a justification for ridicule. Although, after the struggle of the homosexuals to be called 'gay', they have also incorporated 'queen' and 'queer' as part of their identity (O' Shaughnessy et.al, 2017). Additionally, women now like to be labelled 'girl' which was a diminutive term used in the past by men to reduce women's social standing by categorizing them with children.

Language in marriage is also interesting. The structure of marriage may be culture specific but the totality and universality of the language of marriage remains static. According to Butler (2002), the object of exchange that cements and solidifies the ritual of marriage is women, sent forth as gifts from one patrilineal clan to another through the institution of marriage.

The bride, the gift, the object of exchange constitutes 'a sign and a value' that opens a channel of exchange that not only Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Heterosexual Matrix serves the functional purpose of facilitating trade but performs the symbolic or ritualistic purpose of consolidating the internal bonds, the collective identity, of each clan differentiated through the act (p. 50).

This implies that the bride (woman) is a transactional item on which different families trade, and that her identity is only given to her after the process is complete. She exchanges one patrilineal identity for another upon completion of the rituals of marriage. The woman neither gives her name to the man nor does he share her name with her. She reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence; language communicated through an institutional ritual. The language of marriage supports the principle of performativity. Performativity is a repetition and a ritual through which naturalization in the context of a body is achieved, partly as a culturally sustained temporal duration (Butler, 2002). Gender roles are performative in the sense that overtime, what we know, as supported by the social constructionist, is as a result of the sustained acts and practices of years and generations. That we accept and adopt certain practices is because we believe that that is how things are, have been done, and should be done.

Understanding Language

Rituals are generally accepted because of their supposed origins and history. Language is used to preserve culture, thereby giving the narrative the total and absolute power to forcefully demand standards of gender identifications and cultural

conformity. The totality and closure of language is refuted within post structuralism. According to Butler (2002), post structuralists claim that it is nearly impossible to accurately tell the tale of our origins because language is limited and it is simply impossible for the speaking subject to say all that is meant, and language cannot be simplified. Language limits interaction because within language is confusion, chaos, diversity and misunderstanding. LittleJohn & Foss (2009) posit that post structuralist thinkers acknowledge the subjectivity, ambiguities and contradictions in language which is both as a result of the imperfections of the speech subjects and because “the communicator, far from being self-present and self-contained, is self-divided” (P.779). When language is used to communicate and pass on history and culture, the message is distorted because both the senders and receivers of the language codes generate meanings based on their level of exposure, understanding, and literacy level. The definition of a “woman” and in fact, gender hierarchy are derived from a description that is laid down, executed and explained by the dominant ideology.

Language is neither natural nor neutral. O’Shaughnessy et. al (2017), state that language does more than mere describing the world as it is; language also is a construction of the world based on a speaker’s perspective. “All languages are arbitrary and there is no necessary connection between the sounds and symbols that make up any language” (p. 60). Different languages interpret the world based on their own inflections, limitations and biases. In Okrika language for instance, “ere-bara” means the “left hand” while “ere-mbo” is the word for a “woman”. This signifies that to the Okrika-speaking community, just as the left hand is subordinate to the right, so are women mere helpers and subordinates to men.

Although both males and females use the same language, language as described by Spender (1980), is man-made and therefore portrays a male bias. The language that women are forced to speak is a construction of the patriarchy. This implies that women would be restricted and at the same time, dependent on the language, its limitations and prejudices. The obvious sex differences in language use have supported the view that English, a man made language too frequently supports male supremacy. The “monopoly over language is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy, and consequently have ensured the invisibility or ‘other’ nature of females, and this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited”. A supremacist and patriarchal society sustained through enforced language.

We can further understand how language works if we take a critical look at the term ‘discourse’. Amadi (2017) asserts that “we must realize that discourse is structured by dominant ideologies in the sense that every discourse is historically produced and interpreted – meaning that it is situated in time and space...are dominated and legitimated by the interests of the powerful...” Language meanings and interpretations change overtime. Even the interpretations given to man-told history vary from one individual to another and the meanings derived from those tales depend on the receiver’s decoding capabilities. Our consciousness about the power of language are raised when we become aware of the politics, biases, discrimination, misunderstandings and ambiguities within language.

Power and Hegemony

Power in the hands the dominant class is a vital tool for controlling the public (Gouldner, 1976). Hegemony is often exercised through the use of control to establish and maintain power. “This much of the theory of communicative action establishes the importance of legitimate power and of legitimacy within power relations” (LittleJohn et. al (2009: 785). Power is a must have for the execution of dominance and control in a society. It is also the channel through which equity and representation can be attained. It cannot be taken lightly and those who hope to wield it must have understood its usefulness, efficacy and possible outcome. Power is legitimized by the actors through making others their subjects of

subjugation and control. According to Gouldner (1976), those with adequate economic and culture capital have the capacity to exercise and maintain control. Economic capital maintains the economic class so that, as Gouldner (1976) posits, everyone knows and appreciates their place in the society. "Culture capital fashions unequal distributions of knowledge and opportunities to propose alternative explanations and understandings of society" (LittleJohn et. al, 2009: 785). Having a rich culture capital gives enormous power because the power to interpret language is a power of meaning making, dominance and control. Power hopes to preserve language for the purpose of upholding the existing dominant ideology and supremacy. Ideology is a power tool that hegemony uses to promote the dominant idea that everything is normal, neutral, apolitical, natural, and should be left the same. "Critical communication studies describe hegemony as the paradoxical concealment of meaning" (LittleJohn et. al, 2009: 785). Meanings are hidden in the very suppressive ideology that hegemony promotes.

CONCLUSIONS

The grapple for the emancipation of women is a struggle of power relations and social structures. Gender is socially constructed and gender roles are assigned by the dominant ideology. The society plays a significant role in the way individuals communicate, behave and view the world around them. Feminism is grounded in the assumption that language, politics and culture are deterrents that women have to understand and overcome if they are to liberate themselves. Gender issues do not exist in isolation and are not natural. The patriarchy creates the power differentials using history and language to keep women and girls in unfair conditions as compared to boys and men. The ideology surrounding women's representation is political and seeks to subjugate women by setting up structures and regulations that covertly constrain the female gender. Women, according to LittleJohn et. al (2007), must rewrite and reclaim language so that it reflects a woman-centered ideology rather than one grounded in male points of view and politics. Adequate language development is key and the emancipation of women is dependent on it. Considering the manner in which women have had to undergo conditions that misrepresented them, developing language that completely, overtly and specifically represents the female gender is very important if women would have a fair chance at emancipating themselves. If women were to break the silence and develop their own meanings to 'man-made' language, it would give them a louder public voice (Spender, 1980). By critically examining the circumstances that women are conditioned (and sometimes forced) to live by, feminists theorists can rise above the dominant, oppressive agents (language, power, race, and politics) and seek out practical ways of liberating women.

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