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Pakistan**

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Language and Feminist Issues in Pakistan

Tariq Rahman

Introduction

Verbal behaviour is part of socialization. One learns one's role in life, including one's place in the power structure, from the way one talks and is talked to. Thus in rigidly hierarchical societies servants and children, for instance, may be expected to show verbal deference to employers and grownups respectively. Brown and Gilman (1960) called the pronouns of deference *vous* forms and those of less power or intimacy *tu* forms. Thus, in Pakistan too, social inferiors are addressed as *tum* (or *tu*) while they are expected to say *aap* to their superiors. In other words, our address system reflects our power structure.

Verbal behaviour also reflects the role of women in the power structure and, more importantly, the philosophy upon which this role is contingent. This philosophy is loosely termed patriarchy i.e the domination of males. Feminists have only recently turned their attention to how it is sustained and reinforced by language. Goffman (1977) suggests that the arrangement between the sexes in Western – and by extension all patriarchal – cultures is on the model of the parent-child relationship. The husband loves and *controls* the wife. Similarly androcentric generics – use of general words so that the male appears as the norm while the female is the deviation, the marked case – are said to reinforce male domination. The feminists using the English language wrote manuals suggesting the adoption of non-sexist terms some of which are given below:

Box 1:

Conventional terms	Non-sexist terms
Officers and their wives	Officers and their spouses
Mankind	Humanity
Manpower	Personnel
He	He or she (s/he)
Miss	Ms
Chairman	Chairperson

Recently there has been a decline in the use of androcentric generics, at least in written English. However, Cooper rightly points out:

The women's movement shows us that social movements have linguistic consequences, whether or not such consequences influence nonlinguistic behaviour. It has, in any event, proven easier to change written usage than to change the practices and attitudes which subordinate women (1989: 20).

However, the desire for changing linguistic usage is a psychological response to devaluation and subordination. Even if it does not change the structure of society, it does decrease women's feeling of being peripheral or dominated. That is its rationale and justification.

Such linguistic matters have not been given any attention in Pakistan though here, too, language does reflect and support social realities. The aim of this article, then, is to study how the use of Urdu and Punjabi in Pakistan reflect the subordination of women. For this purpose the article relies on literary sources, unstructured encounters, interviews and general observation.

The Image of Women in Literature

In Urdu poetry the beloved is addressed as if she were a male. The reasons for this are complex, and one of them was to ensure that mystic poetry does not become sensual. The mystics' beloved is, of course, an immanent deity and He is symbolized by a beautiful boy (see Rahman 1989). However, the Urdu *ghazal* did become erotic in Lucknow and the beloveds of poets were courtesans. The image of the beloved was that she was indifferent to the lover or played 'hard to get'. She was fickle and either playful and mischievous (*shokh*) or bashful (*sharmili*). And, of course, she was extraordinarily beautiful.

Besides the *ghazal*, which presented an idealized and romantic picture of the relations between the sexes, there were *hazal*, *rekhti* and *Vasokht*. The *hazal* was indecent, the *vasokht* was a story with many erotic descriptions and the *rekhti* was different from all other forms of poetry. While all the other forms were addressed by males to or about the female, the *rekhti* purported to be the voice of the female. It was actually written by men, notably Insha Allah Khan Insha, Jan Sahib and Nazneen of Lucknow. However, the feminine voice created by the poets used words which only women used, discussed sexual matters with friends and intimate maid servants and presented a negative image of themselves (Siddiqi 1974). Then there was the image of the good woman, the lady of the house, in Nazir Ahmad's novels. These women were modest, docile, pleasing in manners and accepted conventional values without demur. Above all they were chaste and innocent and were, in no sense, like their sisters in the *rekhti*, the *hazal*, the *vosokht* or the *ghazal*.

The point to note is that in every case the image is made by males. It is a response to aspects of a male-dominating society. These males wanted the women of their household to be naïve and docile so that the ideal constructed for them is based upon these ideal values. They also wanted romance and flirtation, and the beloved of the *ghazal* is meant to satisfy this want. However, coming down from that courtly love pedestal, they also wanted earthy lust and for this there was the woman of the *hazal* and the *Vosokht*. And, sometimes, they wanted to laugh at women and effeminate males. For this there was the caricature in the *rekhti*. In other words all aspects, all images, of women made them the playthings of men.

In real life it was assumed that she was weak (emotionally as well as physically) and less intelligent than men. That is why the expression 'talking like a woman' meant that one was not talking in an intelligent, informed or responsible manner.

Urdu was so strongly influenced by these literary images, especially the *ghazal*, that people tended to look at the sexes not as individuals but as stereotypical abstractions. Thus all-male jokes and innuendoes were based upon the caricatures of literature. In fact, language could hardly be used without falling back on these caricatures where women were concerned.

Women's Language (WL)

Apart from language about women in literature or otherwise, which made them abstractions and stereotypes rather than individuals, there is the question of Women's language (WL). This, according to Lakoff, is the use of certain expressions, fillers, tones and other linguistic features which are associated with femininity (Lakoff 1975). The *Rekhti* was full of certain expressions used by women. Among these are:

Box 2:

W L	Approximate Meaning
<i>Hariyan</i>	Used to show disapproval for a man or thing
<i>Zanakhi</i>	Female intimate
<i>Naoj</i>	To show disapproval
<i>Mardua</i>	Man. Pejorative use
<i>Oui</i>	Oh !
<i>Hae</i>	Oh !

These expressions have, however, gone out of fashion. Pakistani women use the following expressions sometimes:

Box 3:

W L	Approximate Meaning
<i>Hae</i>	Oh !
<i>Hae Allah</i>	Oh God !
<i>Uf</i>	Oh !
<i>Uf Allah</i>	Oh God !
<i>Hae Maen mar jaun</i>	Oh ! I am killed !

The use of these expressions apparently serves two purposes. One is to differentiate the female sex from the male through distinctive linguistic features. This reinforces the view that the sexes are different and have, therefore, different roles. This need not in itself have been unjust, but in South Asia it generally means that women are forced to get the worse of everything in the name of natural differentiation between the sexes. Thus even an overworked housewife will not expect her husband to help her with household chores or child rearing. She will be the one to look after his parents but not vice versa. In other words it works out in the interest of males, in the interest of patriarchy, and not vice versa.

The other function of WL is to signal emotional instability, powerlessness and lack of responsibility. All the expressions in Box 3 above indicate lack of power and courage. They come from someone who is unable to face a distressful situation with calm and fortitude. Once again, then, their function is to make women appear powerless and less capable of courageous and stoical response to crises than men. Effeminate men and *eunuchs* (*hijras*), who are seen in the same way, use these expressions too. In fact when such characters are shown in dramas, they are distinguished by the use of such WL expressions.

The nineteenth century reformers wanted to change the WL of their times which, in their view, was associated with ignorance, superstition, backwardness and inability to change with the times. Thus Altaf Hussain Hali, the writers of women's magazines and Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi join in teaching women standard Urdu rather than the *begmati zaban* (ladies' language) they used (Minault 1998: 69; also see Minault 1984).

It should, however, be pointed out that these expressions need not be actual verbal responses to stressful or traumatic experiences. They are generally used as fillers also. In such cases, of course, the image of women remains the same. However, such use may be emotionally liberating too. As this is a point feminists overlook, it is worth mentioning.

The non-use of spontaneous expressions, or expressions showing one's helplessness or distress, by men is contingent upon their *macho* image. But this image ties them down to unnatural behaviour. They cannot cry, they cannot express tender emotion nor can they acknowledge that they are distressed and helpless in a given situation. Women can do all these things and are, thus, more spontaneous and warm. That is why

they find it easier to maintain relationships than men. However, this freedom of expression is bought at the cost of acknowledging and advertising one's weakness.

It has also been observed that women educated in English-medium institutions or exposed to Anglo-American culture do not use these expressions. They approximate more closely to Western middle-class women whose language is entirely different. It seems that the feminist movement, because of its emphasis on the similarities rather than the differences between the sexes has reduced the distinctiveness of WL in Anglo-American culture. Thus Pakistani Anglicized women, even when speaking Urdu, are prone to using less WL markers than indigenously socialized women. As the exposure to Anglo-American culture increases as one goes up the social scale, upper class women use less WL than middle and working-class ones.

The Form of Address and Patriarchy

The address system in Urdu and Punjabi is asymmetrical. The husband uses the less deferential form of addressing his wife while the wife responds with the more deferential form. Let us look at the forms of address given below:

Box 4:

Language	Tu – form	V – form
Urdu	<i>Tum</i>	<i>Aap</i>
Punjabi	<i>Toon</i>	<i>Tusi</i>

Urdu also has a form conveying even less respect than *tum*. It is *tu*, but it is not used by middle class husbands to address their wives. *Tum*, on the other hand, is used by most middle class husbands for the wife who responds asymmetrically with *aap*. Another convention, which is being replaced by Western ones, is that the husband and wife both do not address each other by name. They generally refer to each other with reference to their children (i.e mother of + child's name or father of + child's name). However, Westernized couples do not follow this convention. They address each other by name and they use the symmetrical form of address i.e *tum* for each other.

This represents a philosophical change. Whereas conventional society assumed the superiority of the husband, modern society does not. It is influenced by the egalitarian philosophy of the Enlightenment which went against the use of asymmetrical pronouns of power. The shift towards the reciprocal *tum* to indicate intimacy too is in keeping with developments in the West (Brown & Gilman 1960) where the pronouns of solidarity came to be used increasingly as democratisation progressed.

Language and Segregation

One corollary of patriarchy is seeing women in the light of a possession. The man, as head of the household, is the protector of the honour of his women. This encourages segregating them from other, presumably lustful, men. Politeness between males then implies respecting this privacy and not showing any interest, or even awareness, of the other man's female relatives. That is why wives and grownup daughters are not mentioned when men meet each other and express ritual formulas of verbal politeness. Thus, instead of asking about the other man's wife, they ask about his 'house', 'children' or 'family'. This is done by using the following circumlocution:

Box 5:

Language	Circumlocution used
Urdu	<i>Ahle khana, ghar vale</i> (the people of the house) <i>andrun-e-khana</i> (those who are inside the house)
Punjabi	<i>Kar vale; karon</i> (people of the house); <i>Bache</i> (children)

The male pronoun, when used for females, is also a politeness-marker. Thus women are referred to as follows:

1. *Tohade karon akhde aan* [Punjabi]
(From your house were saying)
i.e your wife was saying

Note that *akhdi* would have been the feminine inflection of the verb and *akhde* the male singular form. The speaker has used the male plural form because politeness is signalled by the use of this form.

This curious linguistic feature, the use of the male grammatical forms for respect, could mean two things. First, the speaker indicates that he does not perceive the person referred to as a female i.e as a possible object of his lust. Hence, he shows politeness by leaving the other man's women alone. Secondly, the speaker indicates that he is giving as much respect to the women as is given to men. If this is the origin of this feature, it indicates how low women were placed in Urdu and Punjabi-speaking cultures.

Androcentric Generics

Having reviewed how androcentricity is reflected through language in Pakistan, I come to the issue which Western feminists have made so prominent – namely the use of male terms to refer to general categories i.e, all human beings are called 'mankind' rather than 'humans'. In Urdu and Punjabi too generic terms like man (*aadmi, banda*) are used to include women. In a society where men were visible and women stayed at home (except in the rural areas where they were not prominent), it was only to be expected that the male would be taken as the norm. Whether this distresses Pakistani women or not has not been researched. In my opinion, however, this is a non-issue not only for most Pakistani women but even for feminists. If it does prove painful at some future date, alternative non-sexist terms could, of course, be created by language planners.

The use of pronouns, however, is quite different from English in Pakistani languages. In English *he* meant *he* and *she* and was, therefore, much debated as being sexist (Martyna 1980; 1983; Mc Connell-Ginet 1988: 93). The following pronouns are used in Urdu and Punjabi:

Box 6:

Urdu	Voh
Punjabi	O

As *voh* and *O* already mean both *he* or *she*, the pronoun itself does not indicate gender. It is the inflection of the verb and adjectives which do indicate it. This can be changed, but it would be a far-reaching grammatical change of the type which cannot be easily introduced. In Persian he or she is (oo) [u:] and even the verb is not inflected for gender so that gender is not indicated.

2. *Ou: raft* (Persian).
(he or she went)

However, this does not mean that Iranian society is any less patriarchal than Western society. All it means is that not all aspects of the grammatical system reflect patriarchy in the same manner in all languages.

The salience of the he/she debate, then, is part of the grammar of English; non-English speaking societies cannot give it the importance given to it in English-speaking ones. However, the philosophy behind this issue is reacting against patriarchy, and it is this philosophy which may be used by women everywhere whether in Pakistan or elsewhere.

Conclusion

This article shows that Urdu and Punjabi (as well as other Pakistani languages) reflect patriarchal assumptions and attitudes towards women in Pakistani societies. These assumptions are that women are inferior to men in the social setup. They are also considered less intelligent and less responsible than men. The special words they use reflect these attitudes. Moreover the language men used for them, whether in literature or otherwise, also indicates the same attitudes. The language of politeness and forms of address also indicate the woman's weakness and dependence upon men.

Like other languages created and used in patriarchal societies, Urdu and Punjabi as used in Pakistan are sexist, i.e., they discriminate against women. However, which aspect of these languages are picked up for change by feminists will depend upon the prevalent social attitudes in Pakistan. The right of women to try to change linguistic usages which they resent should be upheld in principle. Which specific usage, or usages, they do desire to change is a matter of detail and can be left to their discretion.

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