

Brief Communication

Probing Language and Patriarchy in South Africa

Tsoaledi Thobejane

Institute for Gender and Youth Studies, University of Venda, South Africa
E-mail: Daniel.thobejane@univen.ac.za

KEYWORDS Post Modernist Epistemology. Male Andragogy. Masculinity

ABSTRACT This paper focuses on the views of participants who were interviewed regarding codified meaning that is found in language. The paper addresses some of the arguments made by Feminist paradigms in de-constructing patriarchal hegemony that perpetuates itself in language and culture. The undergirding argument is that language can be used as a tool of oppression or liberation. The goal of this paper is to expose some of the de-humanizing aspects of language, and to foster a dialogue that aims at ending gender discrimination. The study used a qualitative research methodology to gather the viewpoints of the participants regarding some patriarchal epithets that may be found especially in Sepedi language largely spoken in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Participants in this study were purposively sampled. The participants' observations are that language is the backbone of power relations in every society. It is through language that some patriarchal belief systems continue to be perpetuated even in our modern day communities. Participants are of the view that women are at the receiving end of these patriarchal tendencies. There has to be a paradigm shift in dealing with gender stereotypes that perpetuate male hegemony in our respective societies.

INTRODUCTION

Speech (or language) may be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with the desire for power. Speech is not merely the medium which manifests, or dissembles desire; it is also the object of desire. It is no more than a verbalization of conflicts and systems of domination. It is the very object of man's conflict (Hill-Collins 2000). Almost all languages harbour some patriarchal epithets, some of which stem from what we may call hegemonic masculinities. In the South African context, there has been an emotional and psychological scarring of women such that many are convinced that they are indeed second class citizens. They actually believe that such belittlement and denigration accurately describes who they are. The victims of patriarchy have internalized it to an extent that they feel it natural to be relegated to second class citizens. This paper offers feminist ways to work within and yet challenge dominant discourses that are hegemonic. Lather defines Post-Modernism as a form of consciousness-raising that can lead to a more accurate self-understanding of the ambiguity of our po-

sitions as "engaged intellectuals" concerned with using our knowledge and engagement in potent ways (Lather 2007).

The Decoding of Meaning: A Post Modernist Perspective

Feminist movements from the first world and second world (North and South) have been at the forefront of the struggle to get the issues of women's subordination on the agenda in many societies. These movements helped the world to critique patriarchy and to deconstruct its knowledge claims in all disciplines. Lately, the post-modernist school of thought sharpened our understanding of women's social positions around the world, and ushered in a new understanding of gender inequities and how these are constructed and perpetuated. But for us to understand how certain masculinities feel bequeathed to suppress others, we must first unpack our languages and the cultural nuances these carry by critiquing some of the patriarchal epithets inherent therein. If feminism is to liberate women from the grip of patriarchy, it should address all forms of oppression. Gender politics intersects with production of knowledge within

communities by way of “coining” language that forces a certain ontological standpoint vis-à-vis women in general. Language is the engine of reason. Language forms part of the production of knowledge. Reason which comes in a form of language can present itself as universal. The continued silencing and disauthorization of women is found in spoken language. Foucault (1972), Hooks (2000) and Hill-Collins (2000) argued that power is widely dispersed and operates intimately and diffusely. Especially, it operates discursively, through the ways we talk, write and conceptualize. For instance, most of the theological laws have barred women from ordination. In as far as language is concerned, one thing is often said in place of another; that one sentence may have two meanings at once, that an obvious meaning, understood without difficulty by everyone, may conceal a second esoteric or prophetic meaning that a more subtle deciphering, or perhaps only the erosion of time, finally reveal the meaning.

In agreeing with the Post-Modernist deconstructive praxis as postulated by Hill-Collins (2000) and Hooks (2001), there has to be a concerted effort by all, to revisit some of our long held beliefs regarding gender. Language is the terrain where differently privileged discourses struggle via confrontation and/or displacement. By fixing the world conceptually, language at once frees thought to think and permits it to think in only one of an infinite number of logically possible ways.

Patriarchal language always seeks to position women only in relation to men. Feminism, as a movement fighting for the liberation of women, advocated for the struggle against patriarchy and sexism as a way of bringing the oppression of women to an end. At the core of this struggle is the creation of women’s studies (such as Third world feminism, African Feminism etc.) as an academic discipline meant to connect this social movement to an academic discipline. Fundamental to this struggle was that women all over the world were left out of what is termed “codified” knowledge (Chimay et al. 2009). With this codified knowledge, it is meant that traditional academic disciplines generated knowledge only from a point of view of men. This androcentricity is fundamental to the oppression and subservience of women, and is at the heart of the patriarchal knowledge that is found in any discipline of study today (from theology, philosophy, Biology or Anthropology, to mention just but a few).

These patriarchal beliefs are perpetuated by, amongst others, some theological viewpoints that suggest that a woman was made or created in the image of a male God, or from a man’s rib, as propounded in the popular story of the Garden of Eden (The Holy Bible, Genesis, Chapter 1: 3).

The Research Paradigm

In further seeking clarity and voicing the feelings and yearnings of women, this paper focused on the standpoint research paradigm to argue for the epistemology of women. Reflexivity is a distinctive characteristic of feminist and qualitative research methodology. Reflexivity requires the researcher to interrogate his/her research, its context and the manner in which the research is conducted. It is always essential to reflect on the relationship between ontology and epistemology, by asking how the understanding of the world shapes and influences the understanding of knowledge for the researcher (Ackerly et al. 2006 quoted in Okere 2017).

This research was conducted amongst the Pedi speaking women who reside in Mokopane, a town that is situated not far from Tshwane (formerly known as Pretoria). Tshwane is about 100 kilometers (about 95 miles) away from Johannesburg. Purposive sampling of these women was embarked upon in order to record authoritative voices regarding the topic under study. This research methodology was employed in seeking the voices of these women in as far as coded meaning of language is concerned. Five participants took part in the study which was largely based on structured and semi-structured interviews. The textbook model of social science interviewing, which considered the interviewer as a cold data collector and the interviewee as “data provider” was highly discouraged in this process. Participatory research, according to Cresswell (2002) is, ideally, conceptualized and planned jointly by the researchers and those to be researched, with the possibility of those being researched conducting some of the research and with a joint process of analysis and writing up.

This research sought to promote an emancipatory social science which aims at reliable and democratic ways of knowing. The method was chosen because the paper sought to move away from the conventional research that leaves the research participants powerless and a bit aloof. The researchers wanted to make sure that the participants are empowered by the process. The researchers’ involvement in this research

was, from the outset, mired in the outsider-insider dynamics of doing research.

Credibility of the Research

Many researchers and philosophers have argued and struggled with what it means for evidence to be credible. An important component of credibility is what is defined as knowledge and which methods are used to obtain, discover or create knowledge. In the process of validating the credibility of the data, the researchers interviewed women who were in their 50's and who have also participated in many cultural events in their communities. This is in line with the opinion that for evidence to be useful, it not only needs to be credible but "actionable" as well, which is deemed as both adequate and appropriate for guiding actions in targeted real world contexts (see Cresswell 2015; Ackerly et al. 2009). This research sought to highlight the problematics of patriarchal language, and to engage women in actionable research that seeks to expose gender stereotypes.

The following themes emerged during the interview that was conducted amongst the five participants:

- (i) Language that valorize patriarchy
- (ii) Gender as a determining factor in the socialization of men and women
- (iii) Language and power

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

What follows are the views of the participants concerning the themes that emerged during the discussion.

Culture and Patriarchy

When confronting the issue of patriarchy, it appeared to the participants that gender roles and the power attached to men seemed to be obvious. Men, according to the participants, were the ones who held immense power. Even in Dance, they were the ones who walked around to pick their partners. The role of the women was largely reduced to being mostly sexual objects. Participants argued that even though they were aware of some of the gender stereotypes, these were so deeply embedded such that many of the women still allowed the men to define the space, the direction and the speed of the music when dancing to cultural songs. This observation is in line with Hill-Collins who argues that

male andragogy is deeply entrenched in our culture (Hill-Collins 2000).

Participants tended to be aware of the language that seems to be too demeaning to women. All of the participants reiterated the notion that gender continues to play a role in relations of power, relations of production, emotion, attachment and sexual desire as amplified in the narratives found in most of our languages.

Gender as a Determining Factor in the Socialization Process

Gender, according to the participants, plays an important role in the socialization process of their communities. They argue that there are gender stereotypes in certain languages that need to be revisited by our society. Ramaite (2010), in supporting this viewpoint, argues that

"Most languages are sexist, and this implies that languages 'represent' or 'name' the world from a masculine viewpoint, and 'in accordance with stereotyped beliefs about the sexes'. The male representation, as well as the monopoly of naming has detrimental effects on relationships between women and men, particularly when men feel threatened by what they regard as 'women being too presumptuous for their gender' or when they believe that 'women do not know their place in a man's world' (Ramaite 2010:13).

However, participants also caution that there are also protest songs that are sung by women in order to unmask the deeper gendered power structures in our communities. These songs, they argued, were composed by women for women, and are performed during weddings and when women gather to fetch water in their respective villages. Another participant ventured to say that in every music or language, women are mostly the objects of violence, sex and/or aggression. This is not only found in African songs, but in some western music such as Rock and Blues. In most western music, women act as powerless, and always seem to play the role of seducers instead of characters of stature. This, according to participants, has to be fought in all respects. Their views are further supported by Ramaite (2010:13) when she says that

Gender and language structure has demonstrated numerous ways in which women are ignored, trivialized, and depreciated by the words used to describe them'. Women are denied an autonomous existence through titles that distinguish them on the basis of their marital status such as 'Mrs , Miss', 'Madame, Mademoiselle', 'Senora , Senorita', etc.

She further opines that the African culture also regards men as having been endowed with authority to rule over women, therefore, the sexism in the culture is echoed in language, from the contents of their wage packets, to their treatment by the law', and definitely their everyday use of the language (Ramaite 2010:14).

Language and Power

Participants were all in agreement that language is the backbone of power relations in every society. It is through language that women continue to be vilified and dehumanized. According to one participant, "language is a means of maintaining patriarchal power. Women should represent themselves as subjects of language because their patterns of thinking and understanding are coded by their language. Thus speaking is never neutral. The spoken word, or the formal language, is gender specific.

Their discussion was in line with some of the Gender activists who insisted on re-reading and reinterpreting the central texts that have created our culture. Some of the feminists have actually called for the changing of the masculine ways of writing in science (Foucault 1979). Feminists, by way of seeking to deconstruct the patriarchal power structures in language, are presently searching for feminine styles of writing. Participants called for the banning of some of the traditional sentiments that perpetuate patriarchy, and encouraged governments to motivate for the composition of new cultural songs and language that is full of positive messages for both men and women. The views of the participants fulfill the words of a French feminist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who says that women will always be at a disadvantage in language because the organizing principle of language is the opposition between the masculine phallic presence (or hegemonic masculinities) that lacks any feminine analysis (Lacan cited by Jarviluoma et al. 2003:111). In arguing this point further, Ramaite (2010) employs a discourse analysis, as well as critical language awareness, as consciousness-raising tools to enable language users to be wary of how languages promote and condone forms of oppression and abuse, as well as sexism.

CONCLUSION

Most of our male counterparts usually experience their own behavior as normal and natural rather than to be seen as motivated by cultural

constraints that are a result of patriarchy. In this regard, music and language have a gendered position in our culture. Male hegemony is always visual in language and music. People have internalized and inscribed some things as masculine and others as feminine. Listening to the spoken word (language) and music and its lyrics in general always involve socially grounded identifications that encapsulate gender. In the same vein, the patriarchal power structures in language should be deconstructed by offering a sort of counter language that will amplify the voices of the marginalized. Women generally have failed to assume a positive image in language. In conclusion, we can say that systems of language are also systems of power. Language can also maintain patriarchal power structures. In order to deconstruct male hegemony and hegemonic masculinities, there has to be an effort to revisit some of the texts that are demeaning to women, in our languages and songs.

REFERENCES

- Ackerly B, Stein M, True J 2006. *Feminist Methodology for International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chimay J, Robinson HS, Patricia C 2009. Knowledge management practices in large construction organization. *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management*, 12(5): 431-445.
- Cresswell WJ 2013. *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Donaldson SI, Christie CA, Mark MM (Eds.) 2009. *What Counts as Credible Evidence in Applied Research and Evaluation Practice*. Los Angeles: Sage Publishers.
- Foucault M 1972. *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Tavistock Publications.
- Foucault M 1979. *Power, Truth, Strategy*. Australia: Feral Publications.
- Hooks B 2000. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. New York: South End Press.
- Hill-Collins 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Jarviluoma H, Moisala P, Anni Vilkkio A 2003. *Gender and Qualitative Methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lather P 2007. *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Ramaite E 2010. Feminist perspective of the sexism in language: Illustrations in the Tshivenda, Xitsonga and Northern Sotho language equivalents. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 20(2): 13-20.

Paper received for publication on October 2013
 Paper accepted for publication on December 2016