''පුමිතිරි'' - ස්ත්‍රී-පුරුෂ සමාජභාවය පිළිබඳ විද්‍යුත් සඟරාව
Online ISSN: 3051-4924
https://journals.sjp.ac.lk/index.php/pumithiri
වෙළුම: **1; II** කලාපය; 2024 නොවැම්බර්; පිටු: 27-36

WOMEN AND/IN LANGUAGE

Madhubhashini Disanayaka Ratnayake
Department of English Language Teaching, University of Sri Jayewardenepura
madhubhashiniratnayake@sjp.ac.lk

Abstract
This paper goes into fundamental levels of discourse to analyze some of the ways in which women have been discriminated in society. The methodology used here is to give everyday examples of what women undergo and discuss why this is so. The points given here are made within a framework of practice and everyday experience rather than theory, as the idea is to unravel to any citizen why some of the hierarchies and stereotypes put in place in society with regard to women are hardly questioned or challenged. Culture, media, literature, and language itself, in this case Sinhala, are shown to contribute towards the construction of female identity which works against them most of the time, often driving women themselves to use indirect language to express what they want. In conclusion, it can be said that these hierarchies are put in place to serve those in power, be it in the basic economic sense or in the symbolic sense. It is recommended that we learn about the power and the dynamics of language not only to understand how naturalized some stereotypes have become, but to realize that language is social, and not an objective, scientific phenomena, and thereby can undermine the self-identity of some groups in very fundamental ways.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Inequality, Language, Power

Introduction

This title I find exciting. It reminds me of Helen Cixous' "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/ Forays" where she went underneath language to show the hierarchies put in place by common binaries that are posited through language itself: Day/Night, Activity/Passivity, Father/Mother and so on. "Thought," she says, "has always worked through oppositions" (Cixous, 1975, 560) and that "'victory' always comes down to the same thing: things get hierarchical. Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organization subject to man" (Cixous, 1975, 560).

This is not difficult to understand with regard to any language. Let's take Sinhala in this instance. Look for a moment at what is meant by 'pirimikama' (masculinity) and 'gehenukama' (femininity) or 'gahanugathi' which roughly means the characteristics of women; the positive connotations of the first and the negative meanings connected with the second is immediately apparent to a Sinhala speaker. Like every other culture, the 'feminine side' is at the lower level of the hierarchy constructed through language.

What I hope to do in this article is to look into what language, being language, can do to the identity of women – taking Sinhala as an example. I will show how a network of carefully thought-out ideas – ideology, in short - is so powerfully built into our cultural ways of thought

(expressed as and through language), that it looks as if these are truisms that had always existed as natural laws. Also discussed will be how these ideas are reproduced and maintained by the cultural productions that aid in this process. It is important that we discuss what stereotypical portrayal actually does to us – for undoubtedly, in every portrayal of us, we are also called upon – hailed (Althusser, 1989 [1970]) - simultaneously, to act a certain way, to be a certain way, for we are all already subjects (Althusser, 1989 [1970]), asked by society which has decided what we should be or at least look like being. This is vital to be thought about, as all this is crucial to identity formation; any kind of identity really - man, woman, gendered being, class-ed being and so on - but in this article I will speak mainly of what kind of woman a Sinhala one is generally supposed to be.

Interpellation

First, what does it mean to 'be called upon by society to be a certain way'? Louis Althusser has called this kind of hailing/calling, "interpellation" which is "a kind of hailing that has the formative power of configuring one's identity in a particular way and of making one accept this concrete configuration as what one is" (Medina, 2005, p.168). It is the dominant ideology [current in society at that time] that drives the kind of hailing which compels the individual to be that subject (Althusser, 1989 [1970], 95), he says, pointing out that this process starts even before a person is born (Althusser, 1989 [1970], 97), as is clear by how parents and the rest of the family group get ready for a birth of a child in a particular context that has specified what that child will be culturally, that term encompassing many aspects like economic status, religion, gender dynamics, and ethnicity among other things.

If the idea of the subject precedes the appearance of the subject itself (Medina, 2005, 169), then this idea has to be constructed as one of the fundamental frameworks of the being of a person. As Judith Butler puts it

> *to be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible. One comes to "exist" by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. One "exists" not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being recognizable. The terms that facilitate recognition are themselves conventional, the effects and instruments of a social ritual that decide, often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects. (Butler 1997, 5)*

Why we need to discuss this lies in the fact that this ideology is not seen or recognized as a driving power at all. Althusser has shown that "Interpellation involves an ideological imposition whose ideological character is hidden" (Medina, 2005, 169). The invisibility of the ideological system is its greatest power.

A Practical Test: Unravelling Biases

To demonstrate that often ideological biases are unseen and unrealized, it will be interesting to test this out through the reactions/emotions the reader himself or herself might have. Unusual as this is in a journal article, let's see if we make this reading be something that combines theory and practice, and start with unravelling some of the instinctive biases you might hold yourself. Let me start by asking you what you feel about the statements given below. Do they ring true or not to you? Is any a declaration you can relate to?

a) A woman who laughs loudly and looks like she is having
b) some kind of fun is not a good mother.
c) We cannot imagine young girls in shorts making Vesak kudu in the privacy of their home.

d) A man praises his wife for being a very mature understanding woman because she does not question his extra marital affairs.
e) A mother is a sexually desiring being.

Whatever the answer you feel like giving "naturally" is part of the cultural frameworks within which we think and feel – which is nothing natural, in fact, but frameworks constructed very purposefully to suit whatever dominant ideology that prevails within society. However, they have been so "naturalized" so as not to appear constructed or culturally determined at all.

The Role of Culture

To use the above to show how much within the cultural coordinates we think and feel, let me analyze some of the reactions I am assuming some of you might have had (which is of course a guess). For the Vesak card example, I doubt we can imagine girls in shorts making Vesak lanterns; all the images of young women that we have so far seen near Vesak lanterns would have been depicted in a half-saree – that it has no parallel in reality, which may be a girl in jeans or shorts, as much as a girl in a frock, is kept hidden; it doesn't matter - it wouldn't do for cultural preservation to show in images what may be real. What would happen to (d) if we ponder over the fact that in our culture, one of the best honours to be given to a mother is considered to be the saying "Gedera budun amma" [The Buddha in the home is the mother]? It will also be good to consider what all this actually means to a woman as well, as effecting her everyday practical life. Images that circulate in a particular society will make sure that anything that doesn't fit the framework of what is expected will be ridiculed, ostracized, and looked down upon so much that stigma can easily be attached to the women who do not conform. Statements (a) and (c) I will be dealing with later, when I speak in more detail about the value given to quiet, 'noiseless' women.

Cultural Productions

Constant reproduction of such ideology is needed to make sure that such ideas are kept in place in any culture, and constant effort is needed to make sure that things don't change, the often-found cultural policing being an example of how 'radical' or non-conformist ideas are kept in check from 'contaminating' the 'purity' of cultures. Some powerful methods of doing so are through art, in commercial films and teledrama; or advertisements. Taking the example of Sinhala teledramas first, giving just a cursory and even simplistic look at them to make my point, (for, it is at the simplistic level of thinking that most of these ideas circulate anyway – many sophisticated intelligences might not question things at this level, which somehow might seem 'the way things are naturally'), one can say that they form some of the basic stereotypes about women found in society today. These are watched on television by many, adults and children alike, though this tends to be an activity done by a particular socio-economic class that forms the majority in Sinhala society.

The first teledrama that dealt with middle-class urban family life that subsequently became the staple setting for many soap operas in Sinhala, was Doo Daruwo, which came out in the 1990 and was very popular among Sri Lankans, running for over 200 episodes. It put some well identifiable characters solidly in place, especially with regard to women: 'the mother', long suffering and stoic in her efforts to serve the family; 'the good daughter' in her long skirts and no make-up; 'the burgher/bad daughter-in-law' with her mini lengths and painted face, and so on. This was more than a quarter of a century ago, but still, if one sees a long-skirted hair-braided young woman in a teledrama, we know she is virtuous; anyone who shows a knee is a danger

signal, out to catch men. Then, the 'good mother' has to cry; girls who wear make-up are 'bad girls' as are those who are loud or have bold laughs; 'good girls' show sad, pained faces and shed tears. These are utterly simplistic definitions, true, but they form the stereotypes that are repeated ad nauseam in our cultural productions.

Some Sinhala Language Words/Phrases As Violence

Toni Morrison says in her 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature that "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence" (Butler, 1997, 6). External insults can be dealt with easier, perhaps, than the guilt we feel about our own selves – and as we are also caught within the same ideology that affects the rest of the society of which we are a part. Self-condemnation is so easy to come by, and can debilitate one altogether. Either way, it is violence towards the self that language can endanger.

When we go against a stereotype, the cost can be swift and high, especially in this age of social media where anyone in society has a chance to throw stones at anyone who they think is a danger to their conceptions of 'correct behaviour'. Social media lampooning is very common, Facebook memes especially seem the province of very misogynistic groups; comments like "You are very pretty sister, your loud [hakara] mouth is what spoils it ['hakara' actually means much more than loud: loud, unpleasant, uncouth etc.]" is one that caught my eye recently; female body exposure considered excessive gets shared with merciless comments, enough examples can be found at any given moment. Again, how this dislike finds expression is through words. A powerful insult in Sinhala is "ammage redda' which translates as "the mother's cloth" [what is tied around the waist presumably. There is no mention of a father's sarong, by the way, in any insult.]; there are words a plenty in Sinhala that demean women at various levels of 'looseness': badda, hutti, vesi and so on - they have found circulation in social media in written form as well, at present.

Apart from the insults, in Sinhala, advice like "sina noma ven dasun dakwa" [Don't smile/laugh in a way in which your teeth can be seen] i.e. 'don't laugh loudly', 'don't even smile in a way that shows your teeth', still relegate women to realms of silence. Women in leadership positions still have to navigate through rules of social etiquette and decorum (I am differentiating between social decorum and real courtesy here, the latter being classless and humane in my view, which again would be subject to where I am located in society), often covered by the term 'lady' or 'lady-like'; in English phrases like "Be a lady" or "Act like a lady" act as restraints/self- restraints on how women are allowed to behave. These phrases, like the one that tells men to "Act like gentlemen" are more classist that anything else, but the feminine form could act a great restrictor on women in general, with different terms voicing the concept.

Idioms play their part in constricting the power of women – take this Sinhala saying for example: "the brains of women are the length of a spoon-handle" [genunge mole handimite digay], or the phrases in English such as "like a girl" which are often used as an insult, 'don't cry like a girl'; 'take it like a man'; 'boys don't cry' all being phrases that work against the dignity and strength of women.

What we need to understand is that in the final count, all these language games are about power. Each of the above sayings are linked to who remains/is seen as powerful, both as an ideal and in practical terms; a powerful confident woman is very likely seen as a threat – and it is easier to diminish her power by making her feel "unnatural" when she is being assertive, or

unhesitant even. It's about who stays in control, in power.

Ancient Roots To This Kind Of Ideology About Women: The Kavyasekeraya

Perhaps one of the reasons that such stereotypes are firmly established in our culture today is that the literature written by Buddhist monks – which forms the earliest literary work found in the Sinhala language - do not often look at women very positively in their work (perhaps their vow of celibacy makes it difficult to do so, if one would hazard a guess as to why this should be so). Jathaka Tales such as the Andhabhoota Jathakaya are examples of such writing (though, they do give scathing critiques against men too, about what they do when caught in the throes of sexual jealousy, for instance).

And this literature acts as foundational knowledge that defines the ethics and morals of the Sinhala Buddhist society very often. One key text within this context, is the Kavyasekeraya written by Reverend Rahula in the 15th Century, which specifically has a behaviour code for women, given by a certain character there. In that poem, while the Bodhisatva's story is being told, the sub-story is of a poor Brahmin family having to give the young daughter in marriage to an old Brahmin as they could not keep the gold coins entrusted to them for safekeeping by that old Brahmin (Wickramasinghe 1963 [1948], 154 – 160). After the marriage ceremony the girl's father gives her some advice on how a married woman should act. What was written then was obviously applicable to that time, and would not be mentioned in this context if those values are not still being held as the ideal of good behaviour for women, in 2024.

The following list is from what is prescribed in those verses, taken from a speech that Anne Abeyesekera gave in 1997 at a woman's conference where she said that these "Traditional concepts which have formed attitudes for generations, are not easily relinquished – even by women"(https://www.sundaytimes.lk/971102/plus7.html). She had pointed out that they had been in the Grade 9 Sinhala text book till recent times. Numbered below for easy reference are ten of these guidelines:

1. "Do not go out without your husband's permission; when you go out, do not walk fast and see that you are properly clad.
2. "Be like a servant to your husband, his parents and his kinsmen.
3. "When your husband returns home from a journey, receive him joyously and wash his feet; do not relegate this task to servants.
4. "Do not spend your time standing at your door, strolling about in gardens and parks and do not be lazy at your household tasks.
5. "Protect the gods in your house. Do not give anything away even to your own children without your husband's consent.
6. "If your husband's attention seems directed elsewhere, do not speak to him about it, let your tears be the only indication of your sorrow.
7. "Seek out your husband's desires in food and see that he is constantly satisfied, feed him and ensure well-being like a mother.
8. "When you go to your husband, let it be like a goddess, beautiful, clad in colourful silks, ornaments and sweet smelling perfumes.
9. "Be the last to go to bed and the first to rise. When your husband wakes, see that you are by his side.
10. "Even if your husband appears angry and cold, do not speak roughly to him; be kind and forgiving. Never think to look elsewhere for your comfort." (Abeysekera, 1997)

There is irony in the fact that this advice is being given by a man who is "selling" his own daughter to pay off the debts owed by him to the old groom. Given the relevance of this kind of moral code for women even in the 21st century Sri

Lanka, he is still to be heeded, apparently: see how easily they fit current codes of behaviour for "good" women (they don't even have to be married now) if I rephrase them in more current terminology:

What (1) says is 'Be properly clad: always. Any part of the body showing, unless it's in a traditional dress like the saree, can attract names like 'baduwa' to a girl.' (2) Housework is still considered the province of women despite both husband and wife going to work or the girl child's work even if both male and female children are students. In (4) comes the guilt associated in women in being "unproductive" – strolling around gardens doing nothing when we can be sweeping the house or cooking or folding clothes, anything that women SHOULD be doing, really. (6) is where the idea of the silent woman equals (=) good woman comes in, one that affects (a) and (c) in the first list I gave here. The general advice of the conservatives would probably be thus: 'extra marital affairs, don't raise a fuss, ignore if you can.' 'Don't be loud.' 'Being abused by the husband through domestic violence? Going to the police to complain or raising your voice to broadcast this fact to the world is what a "bad woman" does. These things happen. Men are like that.' (7) goes into uncomfortable territory. Getting the mother-figure idea into a relationship that is or should be first and foremost sexual, seems not a good idea. Why would grown men need mothering? At a cursory glance, (8) seems the only one in the list here that seems to be on the side of women, but it is only when the woman is with her man that she is told to do this, not for herself. Trophy wives are to be admired. In current society in Sri Lanka (9) is very much the norm, even though both might be working at their careers.

And in (10) we see how this advice can lead to women in bad moods being looked at very negatively, labelled hysterical, neurotic and so on; fiction is replete with them. Literature, it has been admitted quite some time ago, is political as Chatherine Belsey and Jane Moore say in the introduction to The Feminist Reader, adding that "there is no innocent or neutral approach to literature" (1989, 1). A well-known literary trope in the West is perhaps the 'mad woman in the attic' figuration: madness locked up and kept out of sight like Bertha Mason in Charolotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. Hysteria and madness have long links to women, Shoshana Felman has shown in her article "Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy". There is a particular image that women are supposed to adhere to:

> *From her initial family upbringing throughout her subsequent development, the social role assigned to woman is that of serving an image, authoritative and central, of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/a mother/a wife. (Felman, 1975, in Belsey and Moore, 1989, p. 134)*

She quotes Phyllis Chesler from Women and Madness (New York, 1973, p xxii) who says that "What we consider "madness", whether it appears in women or in men, is either acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype." (Felman, 1975, in Belsey and Moore, 1989, p. 134). There is no way of protesting the role one is assigned in society without being labelled mad (Felman, 1975, in Belsey and Moore, 1989, p. 134) - that is the tragedy.

What are the Consequences of all this in Everyday Terms? – One Example

Let's take an instance of what these unwritten credos, unspoken, unclear but focused, can do towards the oppression of women. This is in no way a generalization, and it may be true of just a small group, but this is a way of language I have observed in some of us, and seems worth referring to. Cultural etiquette also plays a part in all this, and not just gender oppression, but cultural contours are what determine the behaviour of women, sometimes at their cost.

As mentioned before, silence/non assertiveness is often equated to 'goodness' in women in Sinhala culture (and many other cultures too, clearly). Loud assertive women are not the ideal, an idiom that specifies what the ideal children should be in the Sinhala speaking world posits 'a talkative son and a pretty daughter'; from childhood this is what the norm has looked like. When women are asked to cloak their emotions like that – to avoid assertiveness at all cost - one thing that can happen, for example, is to use indirect means to get what one wants done. Maybe women might avoid direct requests and ask in rather convoluted ways, which can unfortunately even be through a complaint, which might then lead to the comment that "women 'whine' a lot", or even that they are activating the 'hata hathara mayan' [64 wiles] to get what they want.

This kind of language – one that hides a direct request in more complicated forms - I would like to call "The language of guilt" as it plays upon the fact that it is a feeling of some guilt that is hoped to be ignited in the listener that would then drive the action that person is expected to do. 'You haven't come to see me for a long time", 'You haven't drunk the tea yet", "I have to get up now and bring the clothes in", and so on, can be rephrased as "Come and see me", "Drink your tea", and "Could you bring the clothes in, please?" but their assertiveness may seem culturally and gender-wise inappropriate, therefore what I call the 'language of guilt" can be safely utilized in this context according to this way of thinking. Within this whole network of cultural 'niceties', the language of guilt seems a currency found rather often here, be it among parents and children, teachers and students, and even between partners.

This kind of language use can create harmful ways of being, within networks of unhealthy and often toxic relationships that one doesn't even recognize as such, so ingrained as being a natural way of life have they been presented to us throughout life. Making oneself small, or society making one small, both are harmful, it takes away the power one can have. This is why we need to interrogate harmful language biases and biased cultural constructs whenever we can. In this regard, it will be helpful to see how language does what it does so powerfully, for most things hinge on it, in the final count.

Language as Reality

Language has more power than we ordinarily assign it. Judith Butler asks, "Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms?" and says that "If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power" (Butler, 1997, 1-2)

Since the time of structural linguistics and Saussure, we have accepted the idea that it is language that creates reality – that it is not simply a case of things being out there which we grasp through labels/words that are pinned on them – but that there is a concept that we create for what exists outside to which we attach a sound/image which we call a word (Saussure 1989 [1916], 4 – 5). The famous Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis also states that the "individuals' fundamental perception of reality is moulded by the language they speak" (Hornsby, 2014, 56). How much language matters in how we apprehend reality is seen by Sapir saying that

> *The 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are*

> *distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Sapir, 1929, in Hornsby, 2014, 56)*

Or as Sapir's student Benjamin Whorf puts it,

> *We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – and agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of the language. (Whorf, 1956, in Hornsby, 2014, 57)*

It is his use of the word nature that we will be discussing next. The invisibility of ideology is very often because these socially constructed concepts, reproduced through time, take the hue of being part of the natural order of things, when it really isn't. All it is, is, that it has been 'naturalized'.

Natural versus Naturalized

The word 'nature' in what Whorf has said, is very significant here; natural verses the verb 'naturalization' – to make natural. The existence of such a verb is a useful thing to keep in mind - making things seem natural when they are not. There are natural phenomena in the world, connected to biology if it is connected to human beings; so, for example only a woman can breastfeed her baby or there is greater physical strength normally, though not always, associated with men. Yet, it is not only a woman who can make the milk in the kitchen for the baby; making the woman the cook of the family, or the washer of clothes, or the one required to do more 'parenting' in a family – these are what has been "naturalized" in society. This is why we can say that while sex (male/female) is biologically determined, gender is a social construct.

The dominant ideology that drives the kind of thinking which makes inequality look natural, is put forth (unobtrusively) very often by the powerful: men, religious figures, those in charge of education and so on. This leads us back to the invisibility of ideology that Althusser had posited as being one of its fundamental characteristics. And how do they do it? Althusser calls the mechanisms which pass down these ways of thinking Ideological State Apparatus (1975?) - educational institutions, media, religious institutions, family, and all cultural apparatus. And each one of us is molded by these, there is no way we can step out of these networks; there is no way we can step out of language.

Profit in a Consumer Culture

Taking the media, for example, we can see how powerful it has become in forming the opinions of people (though now social media can exert an equally or even more powerful influence on the ways a society thinks). It ultimately runs on money, so the ideology of who owns these institutions matter, as well as the advertisements that provide funds for programming. Advertising connects this whole process of ideology dissemination to the capitalist enterprise of profit. It makes sense, in an increasingly consumerist world, that, to keep selling the products that have always sold well in society, the same ideologies have to be passed along: as Althusser says it is the reproductions of the relations of production that really matter (Althusser, 1970, in Latimer, 1989, 64 - 66).

Consumerism decides what ideology becomes – or is made – dominant, based on profit making in

the sense of money, flooding society with images through advertising that push different ideological frameworks forward. The world, in the final count, runs on economics and in this, there is a solid reason as to why some things are made to seem essential in the modern world. Beauty standards, for example, seem a construction that has been put in place very deliberately, something that is worth mentioning here as it affects women very intimately. Fairness creams, for example, make billion-dollar industries simply because the idea that fairness is beautiful has been solidly put in place, which is not difficult in countries that have had colonizing people demean the sense of self in the colonized natives. In the way goods are being sold in post-colonial Asian countries, one could even say that multinational companies have taken the place the white masters had had at the ideology making centers. Taking the fairness example, and the fact that language/thought works in binary opposites as Cixous had pointed out in her "Sorties" (Cixous 1975, in Latimer, 1989, 560), we can say that historically white people needed black to be ugly if their fairness needed to be beautiful, and at present, corporations have made sure that the same ideology - whiteness as the ideal and the aim - gets reproduced to sell fairness creams in places where there are billions of dark-skinned people. Even educational institutions advertise their courses in Sri Lanka as if the degree (very often private degrees that cost money) will end up making one white as well!

Profit in the Symbolic Sense

From Pierre Bourdieu's viewpoint, the aim of everything is economic. Profit is not only monetary, there is social capital, political capital and other forms of exchange that doesn't deal directly with money. Language deals intimately with these various forms of capital, according to him. He says,

> *Linguistic exchange . . . . is established within a particular symbolic relation of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer (or a market), and which is capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit. In other words, utterances are not only (save in exceptional circumstances) signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth, intended to be understood and deciphered; and signs of authority, intended to be believed and obeyed. Quite apart from the literary (and especially poetic) uses of language, it is rare in everyday life for language to function as a pure instrument for communication. The pursuit of maximum informative efficiency is only exceptionally the exclusive goal of linguistic production and the distinctively instrumental use of language which it implies generally clashes with the often unconscious pursuit of symbolic profit. (Bourdieu, 1991, 66 – 67)*

Once we realize that language is also about authority, about power – who, in fact, gets listened to, in short – it is not difficult to understand why women have to fight against language itself, to ask for equality. That language itself might not be scientifically objective is something that philosophers like Wittgenstein have also pointed out quite a long time ago, by emphasizing that it is context that really gives words meaning. This context, we might do well to remember, is social (unless it belongs to the realm of literature). For him

> *language involves 'a consensus of action'; it involves shared customs and techniques. This is the core idea of Wittgenstein's contextualism, namely, that to share a language is to share 'a form of life'. As Wittgenstein puts it, what is at the bottom of our linguistic practices, the 'bedrock' of language, is 'human agreement'; and this is a practical agreement: 'not agreement in opinion but in form of life" (Medina, 2005, 90 – 92).*

This is why a shared language, when it is harmful to a particular group, gestures to more than a simple use of words – it is actually a pointer to what that groups believes in, what they think is a natural way of life. Women live in this community, they are part of it, what does it mean for them to have opinions and beliefs about who they should be - often as the lesser powerful in the man/woman binary - directed at them continually, as part of that society's ideology?

Language doesn't just express – it does things. That is why it's so powerful. That is why it needs to be interrogated. The sooner we find out, as women, why we are often made to feel uncomfortable being who we are (in the multivarious ways of being, that this 'are' implies), the better.

References

Abeyesekera, Anne. (1997) "Women: Rights not Responsibilities". The Sunday Times, 2 November 1997 (https://www.sundaytimes.lk/971102/plus7.html).

Althusser, Louis. (1970) "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus" in Dan Latimer (ed) Contemporary Critical Theory. Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Pp 60 - 102

Belsey, Catherine and Jane Moore (1989) "Introduction: The Story So Far" in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds) (1989) The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism. London: Macmillan. pp 1 – 20.\

Bourdieu, Pierre. (1991 [1982]) Language and Symbolic Power. Cambridge: Polity Press

Butler, Judith. (1997) Excitable Speech: A politics of the Performative. London: Routledge

Cixous, Helen. (1975) "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" in Dan Latimer (ed) Contemporary Critical Theory. Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Pp 558 - 578

De Saussure, Ferdinand. (1916). "Nature of the Linguistic Sign" in Dan Latimer (ed) Contemporary Critical Theory. Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Pp 2 – 16.

Felman, Shoshana. (1975) "Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy" in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds) (1989) The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism. London: Macmillan. pp. 133 - 154

Hornsby, David. (2014) Linguistics: A Complete Introduction. London: John Murray Learning

Medina, Jose. (2005) Key concepts in philosophy: Language. London: Continuum

Wickramasinghe, Martin. (1963 [1948]) Landmarks of Sinhala Literature. Colombo: Gunasena and Co. Ltd.