

LANGUAGE AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION: STEREOTYPES AND IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN A DOLL'S HOUSE: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The inter-reliant relationship of language and gender has remained quite a debatable topic in sociolinguistics because of its controversial nature. The present paper aimed at exposing constructive and deconstructive roles language can play in the process of gender construction against and in favour, respectively, of societal and cultural norms. While drawing insights from Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (1997, 1998) and Spender's Dominance Model (1990, 1997), the study shows how certain stereotypes about men and women are perpetuated through language of literary text in the play, A Doll's House (1879) by the father of modern theatre, namely Ibsen (1828-1906). Followed by explanation of these issues, the study has determined whether the text of the respective only tends to create stereotypes or it can be a powerful tool for breaking those stereotypes and reconstructing identity.

Keyword: Gender, Language, Stereotypes, A Doll's House, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Dominance Model.

INTRODUCTION

Since the chief target of sociolinguistics is to explore the interpretational bond between language and society, therefore it involves evaluation of effects they cause on each other in a mutual relationship. Additionally, one of the main aspects of sociolinguistics is to unearth the impact of language in carrying out and accelerating cultural practices in a society (as language has a

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pertinent role to play in keeping the flow of the norms intact). In this study discourse has been used as synonymous with text. The point significant to mention here is that the text under consideration not only depicts the culture of the specific society it was set in but also the workings of that cultural system to weld some hard and fast rules (gender related norms in particular) in its followers' minds. Gender identities are also the part of that system assigned to males and females through discourse (Butler, 1999). In general, Ibsen (1879) has portrayed beliefs a patriarchal community holds regarding male and female gender roles. The present study is an attempt to explore the issue of gender identities with reference to *A Doll's House*. The respective play (written by a Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, who is well known as father of the contemporary theatre) is more or less a societal play which has made an excellent effort of exposing unequal distribution of rights in a patriarchal society. It is a three-act play based on bitter societal realities of nineteenth century European society. All in all, the play deals with the issue of man's domination over a woman, especially wife under an influence of a stereotypical mindset of a husband as male dominated society gives an upper hand to men in treating their wives as their possession. However it concludes with the protagonist Nora, leaving her husband, Helmer, and children because she wants to discover herself.

Research Question

The present research tries to find out the answer of the following question:

- What constructive and destructive tasks does language carry out in the procedure of gender construction against and in favor of societal/cultural stereotypes in *A Doll's House*?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As an area of study in sociolinguistics, the researches revolving around gender related issues and its societal construction with the help of language are concerned to expose how these nuanced process creates different recognition in a society. Although the research in this area of language and gender was first stimulated by feminists, however in terms of linguistic studies, the mutually dependent correlation of language and gender was first investigative in *Language and Women Place* (1973); a ground breaking work by Robin Lakoff. In *Language and Women Place*, Lakoff (1973) has focussed on verbal cues which women pass unconsciously ultimately showing their inferior place in a male dominated system. To put in other words, the choice of words women made depends on the cultural and societal norms which were instilled in their minds all over their lives. The selection of relatively second-rate words in their conversations (in contrast to men) clearly depicts a marginalized psychological attitude of women. For that reason, Lakoff's idea of women talk in relation to their position in society was termed as Deficit Model. According to Lakoff, culture is psychosomatic in its nature and it manifests itself through words (as cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 1). Followed by Lakoff, Spender a book in which the sole emphasize was on men's talk and how the words used by them are taken as mark of their superiority. While analyzing English language, Spender (1998, p. 12) proposed *Dominance Model* which throws light on men's dominance in the words associated with them in English language, for instance a man can be masculine, brave, strong and fearless however in contrast to it emotional and dependent verbs and adjectives are coupled with females. Another approach to the studies about language and gender is what has come to be known as the *Divergence Model/Difference Model*. An additional name for it is two culture matrix because it celebrates difference between men's and women's talk depending on the distinct and subjective experiences they have been through (as cited in Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 326). This

model comes to existence from the studies conducted by a psychologist and a linguistic, namely Jonathan Grey (in *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus: The Classic guide to Understanding the Opposite sex*, 1992) and Deborah Tannen (in her landmark book, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, 1990) respectively. Furthermore, adding a new dimension to it, *Doing Gender* emerged as a milestone that has directed attention of the researcher towards performative nature of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is not incorrect to assume that language and gender related researches are being done from different perspectives. Sunderland and Litosseliti (2008, p. 1) referring to *The Handbook of Language*, observe that gender researchers explore it keeping a number of things in mind, for the case in point linguistic context, culture, grammar, origin, tone and stress while talking, vocabulary opt by an individual and connotations those word carry, pragmatic eclecticism etc.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical viewpoint for the present qualitative explanatory desk-based research is based on the observations of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This hypothesis holds the belief that it is not just society that impacts language, but language also influences society (Wardhaugh, 1998). Moreover, in order to explore the issue of gender construction through language, the research has drawn insights from Spender's *Dominance Model*, which is based on the view of dominance of men through language for their interests. In addition, the study has also discussed the issue of 'reclaiming language' based on Penelope's (1990) views regarding need to reinvent language for women.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The study under consideration deals with the issue of language and gender construction as it is represented by playwrights in the texts,

which tend to create and strengthen certain beliefs regarding gender identities. In order to explore this issue (that how language tends to produce, additionally promote societal identities), the text undertaken is Ibsen's play—*A Doll's House* (1879). The characters of Nora and Helmer are not mere individuals, rather they are representative of a typical, very frequently seen relationship between men and women at home in patriarchal societies. Here it must be pointed out that since sociolinguistics is about the study of relationship between language and society, therefore home is also a place that is not separate from society, rather it is an essential part of it. In fact people's initial socialization starts from home. It is home, indeed, from where an individual acquires the basic concepts of life and living. As Miller (1969, p. 33) has argued that 'the chief unit of a patriarchal institution is a family. Additionally, it is both a mirror of, and a connection with the larger society; put simply it is a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole'.

In order to show how text tends to construct certain stereotypes about male and females, the focus of the paper is not on the themes of the play but on its language. The words, phrases, clauses and sentences of this play have been marked out in order to show that how language is a main factor in the construction of gender identities. For instance Nora's husband calls her as: "Is that my little lark twittering out there? (Ibsen, 1879, p. 4) In this sentence, words like "my", "little" and "lark" connote to the patriarchal concepts associated with woman. Additionally, "my" refers to the sense of possession by male gender over female. This promotes the belief that a woman is considered a property by her husband or brothers, fathers and later her sons. A woman's own feelings, emotions, desires are of no value and she has to lead her life according to the 'man made language'. As Spender (1998) suggests that it is men who are in the position of control, including the language with which they represent women. She says that 'the gendered stereotypes which constitute the folk wisdom of a society are constructed, perpetuated and legitimized by language.'

A number of words, phrases and sentences have been found in *A Doll's House* (1879) which indicates how Nora is treated as a possession or a thing by her husband. Following is an exhaustive list of words, phrases and sentences uttered by Helmer which refer to his control over Nora (Ibsen, 1879).

Is it my little squirrel bustling about? (ibid., p. 4)
When did my little squirrel come home? (ibid.)
Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again? (ibid.)
My little skylark must not drop her wings (ibid., p. 5)
Is my little squirrel out of temper? (ibid.)
My dear little Nora (ibid., p. 6)
You extravagant little person! (ibid.)
A sweet little spendthrift (ibid., p. 7)
My sweet little skylark (ibid.)
My little songbird (ibid., p. 30)
My little Nora (ibid., p. 31)
My obstinate little woman (ibid.)
My precious little singing-bird! (ibid., p. 33)

The examples mentioned above have been taken from the Act-1 of *A Doll's House* (1879). As it is quite evident that the word 'little' in these examples has been used twelve times which clearly gives the concept of a woman as something or someone very tiny, miniature, diminutive and especially the one who can never be self-confident or self-sufficient and the one who always has to depend on others for her existence. In this way language becomes a highly political phenomenon which is linked with power. Spender (1990, p. 106) states that 'the group which has the power to ordain the structure of language, thought and reality has the potential to create a world in which they are the central figure, while those who are not of their group are peripheral and therefore may be exploited'. Thus language difference between men and women represent their social difference in real life. Men plays dominant role in society and this

can be seen in their language as well. In the similar way to lexemes, nouns like “skylark”, “squirrel”, “songbird” and “singing-bird” are also noticeable as they tend to depict Nora as someone who is treated by her husband not as human being with a mind and personality of her own. Instead she is being treated as a colourful and beautiful object for male’s enjoyment and pleasure. In this way language is being used as a tool in society to degrade and belittle women. It creates an impression of women as subservient, possessed and ruled. On the other hand it gives the impression of men as strong, powerful and supervisors of women. In this way most of the negative stereotypes about women as weak, cowardly, dependent, emotional, stupid, talkative etc. are perpetuated by the writers through language. Similarly some positive stereotypes about men as strong, independent and stable are advocated, consciously or unconsciously by the writers. Supporting this view, Lakoff has rightly highlighted the practice of assisting and disseminating gender stereotypes as an instinctive capacity of language (as cited by Mayerhoff & Holmes, 2003, p. 162). All this is done in such a playful and believable manner that audience or readers tend to believe and practice such notions in their real life. This view also conforms to Whorfian hypothesis that how language influences our worldview. To put it in other words, it adds to Sapir’s claim that the world we are living in is subjective in its all forms because we, as human beings, depend on language as a tool of communication. Since language is fluid and nuanced in its nature therefore it does not convey true message one intends to send but an abstract concept which is interpreted by the receiver depending on his worldview (as cited in Burke & Crowley, 2000, p. 397); consequently reflecting that whatever is happening in our surroundings and whatever has happened in our lives (our past experiences, especially the atmosphere in which we are brought up) are also involved in the construction of societal reality we believe in. Actually the stereotypes about gendered notions of a society are constructed through language but are perpetuated through various forms of

discourses. Regarding the portrayal of women in fiction, Lee (2008, p. 11) believes that the only reason to depict a woman as a victim is to deprive her off from an independent life which she equally deserve to have. Nora too has been shown submissive to her husband, as it is evident in her words: "I should not think of going against your wishes" (Ibsen, 1879, p. 9). Here the word 'should' is an important word as it signifies the societal compulsion under which Nora was while living with Torvard. Most importantly it suggests that most of the times want to resist and defend but to an utter despair they are so overly dominated by the fear of being punished/abandoned that they feel bound to go with the flow. In other words, it seems to be coercive act not the one comes into play out of love and consideration. For that reason, another angle to see Nora's and Torvard's marriage is to see it as a relationship based not on mutual compassion but more like a master slave relationship. For instance, at another place Nora says to her husband, "As you please, Torvald". Having said that, roles assigned to male and female by a writer in text tend to create stereotypes related to gender identities. Thus gender is created with a help of a day-to-day basis of language use. Nora in the play is regarded by her husband who cannot use her brain like other people of her gender, as he says about Nora, "*The same little featherhead*" (Ibsen, 1879, p. 4). Similarly, sticking to his derogatory choice of vocabulary, he told Nora, "*you are an odd little soul*" (ibid. p. 6). Let's discuss this phrase of '*odd little soul*', I found this phrase not only a manifestation of a true patriarch but also Helmer's subconscious act of warning Nora, reminding her weirdness to her, he wants her to be cautious and not to breach the boundary. Furthermore, Nora has been shown at home, in kitchen or decorating her home all the time. Despite the fact that Torvald is always seen in library and managing his business. Such depiction by the writer tends to promote and strengthen the view that entitles a man with wit, intelligence and reason, capable of social interactions and working outside. On the other hand it entitles woman with fickleness and half wit, incapable of doing anything serious; more or

less a good for nothing creature who is only expected to stay at home and to become a good wife and mother. All the examples from the text mentioned above show that language is actively involved in construction and perpetuation of gender stereotypes. As Spender is of the view that it is a 'man-made' language that tends to create sexism in language and in this manner making men dominant over women. The above mentioned details reveal that the way writer interweaves a discourse of the text tends to construct gender identity that can be suitable for one of the social groups (Sunderland, 2006, p. 15). After describing and analyzing the issues of gender stereotypes as they are reflected and constructed by a writer in the text, my argument is that a literary text does not only reflect and construct gender stereotypes but it can also be a powerful tool for breaking those stereotypes and reconstructing gender identities. Some literature on the topic of gender and language also talks about 'reclaiming language for women'. Penelope (1990) accentuates on women's awareness of 'lies of the fathers' tongues' and 'patriarchal universe of discourse' (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 318) since according to her, the only way (left for women) to subvert gender stereotypes is to reinvent their language and to revisit their choice of words. Taking insights from Penelope's suggestion, I contemplate that Ibsen has made an attempt of fulfilling this purpose of 'reinventing language'. Towards the end of the play, Ibsen has made Nora to be the flow instead of flowing. Put simply, she broke the rules and embraced the taboo with an expected punishment of leaving her children behind as a cost of her self-actualization (as she has left her house in order to reconstruct her identity by freeing it from gender-stereotypes). As Penelope argues that a woman must be aware of the 'father's tongues' and patriarchy's control, Nora too come to know the 'lie' of her relationship with her husband. That is she becomes aware that her husband only loves her beauty and does not value her emotions. She thus demands gender on equal terms as it is evident in her words, *"I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall.*

There must be perfect freedom on both sides. See, here is your ring back. Give me mine" (Ibsen, 1879, p. 79). Thus, Nora's confidence in her words and her decision to leave her home tends to break the stereotypes about women as always submissive and dependent on men and reconstructs a woman's identity as someone who is capable of taking decisions on her own. In this way as Whorfian hypothesis claims that it is through language that certain negative stereotypes can be broken (Sapir, 1939). In addition, just as identity does not have a fixed status, 'it is perpetually created and recreated' (Khan et al., 1994, p. 2), in the similar way gender identity can also be changed. Spender (1998, p. 31) rightly suggests that meanings are embedded in semantic rules, therefore it is important to shake the roots of these deeply grounded rules, and alter them for good so that meanings could change; consequently bringing change in a society on the whole. All in All, the text of *A Doll's House* (1879) has confirmed the claim that language is the crucial resource new identities are to be made and the old ones are to be resisted depending on the choice of an individual.

Answer of the Query, Explored in the Study, in the Light of the Discussion:

Since the section of discussion and analysis has established that language is good at processes of propagating and resisting societal rules, therefore depending upon the idea it can be concluded that the destructive role played by language, in *A Doll's House*, is establishment of Helmer's dominance over Nora under compulsion of traditional patriarchal discourses of masculine narcissism. Helmer, through his selective choices of derogatory vocabulary, tried his best to instill an idea of male superiority over a female in Nora's mind. However, on the other hand, the productive task carried out by language of the text, in *A Doll's House*, is making Nora realized her true worth, and instigating her on rebelling against the self-defending circle of Helmer's love around her. It is power of words which has assisted Nora in picking up the pace on her way

towards self-actualization; subsequently liberating her from the shackles of patriarchal responsibilities (of becoming a perfect mom and a perfect wife under an influence of sacrificing).

CONCLUSION

All in all, the current paper has highlighted the issue of societal/cultural construction of gender through text at the expense of language. To be specific, with the application of *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis* and Spender's *Dominance Model*, the research paper has analyzed the ways in which language contributes as an important factor in constructing masculine and feminine identities in a society. Furthermore, by taking into account of Penelope's view of need to 'reclaim' language for woman, the article has supported the view of describing language as a two edged sharp sword which is a powerful tool for breaking gender stereotypes, and for the re-enactment of new gender identity (concurrently).

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