



**The Scope of Feminist Linguistics for Literary Texts: An Analysis of
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions***

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Abstract

Often literary analyses include a discussion of figures of speech, characters and thematic issues from a theoretical perspective but issues of language and gender have received little attention from literary commentators. Drawing on the writings of Robin Lakoff and Deborah Tannen, two celebrated feminist linguists, this paper seeks to highlight how concepts from the area of language and gender can provide deeper insights about literary texts and the interaction of characters. To this effect, the present study examines three aspects – conversational style, the polysemous meanings of linguistic strategies and the use of sexist language – explicating these in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*.

Keywords: feminist linguistics, sexism, linguistic strategies, conversational style, literature

Introduction

The area of language and gender broadly deals with an analysis of gender, its practices and asymmetries through the lens of language. In the past few decades, the area has developed considerably, from its monolithic conception of gender as just one of the variables in a linguistic study to a contextualized and textured understanding where gender is the main focus (Sunderland 21-22). Moreover, the notion of gender has been expanded from predominantly being focussed on women to the inclusion of men, LGBTQ and other genders. Jennifer Coates (5-6) is of the view that studies in language and gender can be grouped under three distinct periods, each characterised by gender in relation to power. First was the deficit and dominance approach that comprised an

examination of language to highlight how women were disadvantaged and how men exercised power in speech; then came the difference approach that emphasized the different styles of men and women's talk and lastly, we had the dynamic approach that drew upon a constructionist perspective, exploring how people performed their gender in talking and writing – 'doing' gender, not 'being gender. These approaches together can also be known as phases of feminist linguistics (Sunderland 10). Although, nowadays more research is available using the constructionist view, yet the works from the earlier phases are invaluable for their conceptual content and clarity. In this article, therefore, I examine the writings of two linguists from the deficit and difference phases – Robin Lakoff and Deborah Tannen – respectively and attempt to highlight how concepts from their works can be utilized in the appreciation of literary texts.

Literature, according to linguists, makes use of language as a sort of "enhancement" or "creative liberation" (Leech and Short 6) where language is intensified to produce a certain effect. Stylisticians are interested in what authors do with language (Simpson 98) yet literary analysts and commentators often focus on just figures of speech and vocabulary (Tannen 195) when it comes to employing linguistic tools, whereas there are a plethora of concepts to choose from such as speech acts, presuppositions, implicature, politeness strategies, sentence constructions, speech styles, ideologically loaded words etc. This paper focusses on three concepts, sexist language, conversational style and polysemous meanings of linguistic strategies in interaction, to show how their use can enrich our understanding of literary characters and their interaction. An explication of these concepts given by Lakoff and Tannen, is followed by analyses of select extracts from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions*.

Feminist Linguists on Language

The writings of Robin Tolmach Lakoff properly commenced research in the area of language and gender (as part of the deficit/dominance approach) through her iconic work *Language and Woman's Place*. Herein, she examined in detail how English language was sexist against women, degrading them and portraying them negatively. Lakoff cites plenty of examples to support her argument. When men refer to women as follows it shows a kind of ownership and dominance "She's my woman, see, so don't mess around

with her” (Lakoff 62). Both the words, ‘master’ and ‘mistress’ refer to owners of a house and carry some sense of power but ‘mistress’ also carries a sexual/romantic connotation, as if subordinating her to the man (Lakoff 63). Even titles show rank and relationship status when it comes to women. While the word ‘Mr.’ is neutral, ‘Mrs.’ highlights a marital relationship, giving more information than required, reinforcing how language views and genders women in particular ways that are not neutral (Lakoff 68-69). An understanding of sexist words in any literary text can reveal how any gender is marginalized and represented in stereotypically negative ways, exhibiting a lack of power. In another work Lakoff (“Stylistic Strategies” 114-116) discusses different conversational styles and how their use portrays social and power relations. Styles can vary on a continuum from distance, deference and camaraderie. Distance shows a speech style that is markedly formal, polite and impersonal whereas deference shows respect but involves a power game where it appears that one of the participants has a choice but in fact it’s not so since the other one wields a lot of implicit power and gives overt and covert messages to do as directed. Camaraderie, on the other hand, shows a relation of openness and friendliness where participants might use slang, jokes and nicknames to refer to each other. An analysis of such speech styles used by literary characters can depict the power they possess and how they exert control over others.

Another celebrated linguist from the difference approach is Deborah Tannen who is known for her argument about men and women’s conversation being different due to their differing conversational styles. For instance, women engage more in collaborative and emotional talk in comparison to men. Women therefore are geared towards intimacy while men prefer independence (Tannen “You Just Don’t Understand” 10-11). A notable contribution of Tannen has been in providing a taxonomy of multiple linguistic strategies and how their use in every context depends on the participants and their power relations. Tannen claims that meaning in conversation cannot be deduced solely from language structure but from the context and culture (Tannen “Relativity of Linguistic Strategies” 21-22). She discusses five strategies – indirectness, interruption, silence, topic raising and adversativeness – and their meanings in talk. Through the use of these strategies one can display power, equality, distance, solidarity, closeness etc. and that is why they are open-ended in terms of generating meanings (Tannen “Relativity of Linguistic Strategies” 27).

Indirectness can show the defensiveness of a speaker to verbalize what they want or it can indicate a lot of power to get what they want without saying things explicitly (Tannen “Relativity of Linguistic Strategies” 32). Silence and interruptions in talk also perform similar function, indicating powerlessness or power. One cannot stereotypically say that because one is silent they are weak or have power because they interrupt the other in talk. Hence, “taciturnity can be an instrument of power” as claimed by Tannen (“Relativity of Linguistic Strategies” 37). Similarly, adversativeness meaning verbal aggression is commonly associated with men and their predisposition towards getting into conflict while submissiveness is associated with women. However, Tannen (“Relativity of Linguistic Strategies” 40-42) in her study of young boys and girls found that adversativeness can be used to create a sense of belongingness by boys to communicate with each other. They signal closeness by arguing and fighting with each other. Thus, each strategy is relative, having more than one meaning and needs to be explored in context. The application of these strategies in literary texts can reveal a lot about the intentions and motives of the characters, the difference in what they mean and say and the overall power relations between them to achieve their interactional goals.

Analysis

The analysis consists of short dialogic extracts from Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, exhibiting the multiple cross-currents in interaction. The focus will be not on the linguistic form but on the conversational strategies and sexism used in the extracts. One of the earliest glimpses of sexism can be seen in Draupadi and Dhristadyumna’s education when the tutor dissuades the former from studying.

Dhristadyumna: “And most of all,” Dhri took a breath and continued, “he must bring renown to his forefathers by avenging the honor of his family.”

Tutor: “O great prince”, he said now, “kindly ask your sister princess to refrain from prompting you. She is not helping you to learn. Will she be sitting behind you in your chariot in battle when you need to remember these important precepts? Perhaps it is best if she no longer joins us during your studies.” (Divakaruni 23)

This dialogue is from the context of the education of Dhristadyumna and Draupadi. While Draupadi was quick at learning, her brother took more time and often she had to prompt him as is evident in the text when she tells him that the key to the answer is about forefathers. Herein, we see that the tutor employs markers of deference such as ‘great

prince', and 'kindly' to signal his low economic status but he is sarcastic and adversative when referring to Draupadi, highlighting that she would not be in the battlefield when her brother would require all the learnt knowledge. This is a polite form of aggression maybe owing to the teacher's low rank but it is sexist and degrading to the female gender showing their role was confined to household chores. One could also say that the tutor was being adversative to create solidarity with the prince simultaneously alienating Draupadi from their group. Thus, we see a mix of adversativeness and respect as a character's speech can perform multiple functions.

An instance of camaraderie can be seen when Krishna beheads Sisupal. In the mayhem, everyone believes Krishna to be hurt and so does Draupadi. She, thus reveals her true feelings for him on seeing him alive and his reaction shows how different conversational styles can be at work in a text.

Draupadi: "When I thought you had died, I wanted to die, too."

Krishna: "You'd better not let my dear friends the Pandavas hear that! It could get me into a lot of trouble!"

Draupadi: "Can't you ever be serious?" I said, mortified.

Krishna: "It's difficult," he said. "There's so little in life that's worth it." (Divakaruni 166-167)

This brief extract shows the camaraderie style employed by Krishna while Draupadi is horrified and agitated. Her confession of wanting to die reinforces the same. However, Krishna changes the mood and the topic of conversation from serious to jovial, by finding more meaning in Draupadi's words than she spoke and by jocularly insinuating a romantic relation between them. Draupadi too understands this but is embarrassed by Krishna's casualness and accuses him of the same. He, in a matter-of-fact tone states that there is hardly anything in life worth being serious about. More meaning is created than is spoken through the strategy of indirectness. Krishna states the philosophy of detachment in his last comment and also implies more meaning to Draupadi's confession. Even though she accuses him, it is superficial since the camaraderie and lightness is clear in the talk.

Indirectness and adversativeness can be seen, though not in the lighter vein, in the next extract between Kunti and Draupadi. Throughout the novel, Divakaruni gives hints that

the two have a formal relationship of deference where either one gets an upper hand, depending on context.

Kunti: "I knew it was too much for you, going up that hill each day. But no! Always you must do something different from the others. Maybe tomorrow you should stay with us in the tent. You're no longer that young, you know."

Draupadi: "I'm fine," I said shortly, not trusting myself to speak further. (Divakaruni 280)

This conversation takes place during the time of war when Draupadi returns after eavesdropping the conversation between Bhishma and Karna wherein the latter confesses that he has feelings for Draupadi and that Kunti tempted him to join the Pandavas with the condition that he would be Draupadi's husband and thus have a conjugal relationship. This sexist offer by Kunti enrages Draupadi and when she returns she is accosted by Kunti's aggressive remarks on walking up the hill, being disobedient and stubborn. She uses the words 'maybe' and 'you know' in advising Draupadi to stay behind in the tent which can be taken as a suggestion couched in the form of an order. However, Draupadi's short response to Kunti's volubility shows the dominant party in this talk, hinting that even though Kunti has more power as the mother-in-law yet she too is aware of Draupadi's unrelenting attitude. Her response also shows indirectness and social distance. Instead of agreeing or disagreeing, Draupadi's statement clearly shows that she wants to evade Kunti lest she betrays her seething anger and this can be taken both as a sign of power (by Kunti) or her powerlessness. Hence a conglomeration of aggression, power and indirectness is evident in this extract.

Kunti: "You're too trusting!" Kunti burst out. "Just like your father—that's always been your—"

Draupadi: "I think Yudhisthir's right," I broke in. "Duryodhan's made an effort to put old enmities aside. It's only right that we do our part." (Divakaruni 177)

Here we see a clash between the two women not in terms of explicit adversativeness but in terms of displaying dominance via interruption in talk. On being invited to the dice game, Kunti intuitively senses malice on part of the Kauravas and dissuades Yudhisthir by accusing him of being too naive. Though the simple act of trusting someone can be

praiseworthy sometimes, yet here it is not construed so. Kunti's exclamative statement reinforces her agitation. She interrupts her own speech and is later interrupted by her daughter-in-law. Though no harsh words are exchanged between the two, yet the act shows the power that Draupadi holds over her husband. She advises Yudhisthir to attend the game of dice by stating that the Kauravas have offered a hand of friendship and that they should reciprocate. None of the women explicitly state that Yudhisthir should attend yet both affirm their opinions. Thus we see that there is no straightjacketed interpretation since multiple strategies combine to show the nature of talk, characters and their motives.

Conclusion

Drawing on the writings of Robin Lakoff and Deborah Tannen, this paper highlights how concepts from feminist linguistics can provide deep and nuanced insights about characters and their interactions in novels. An analysis of conversation styles, linguistic strategies and sexist language shows that characters respond differently to every person and even to the same person, as seen in the two conversations between Kunti and Draupadi. Social rank plays a strong role but not in a classical way where a lower status is not equated with weakness as depicted by the tutor's speech. Like in everyday talk, even in literary texts, context plays a major role and participants mix different styles of speech, indicating various forms of power and solidarity. Often, more is intended than is stated and meaning is gathered indirectly from the context and/or preceding action. Most importantly, power does not reside with a protagonist but differs according to situation as they try to accomplish different interactional goals through the use of one or more conversational strategies. Such analyses underscores that an attention to the linguistic aspects of dialogue can enrich our understanding of literary texts.

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