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The Reversal of Sexist Language: Analysing Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalia's Daughters*

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Abstract: *Language reflects culture and collective thought of a society. Feminist stylistics has been one of the major interests of feminist linguistics. The goal of feminist stylistics is to reveal gender concerns and patriarchal patterns inscribed in texts. The following study aims at analysing the subversion of patriarchal language by Brantenberg (1977) in her novel* Egalia's Daughters*. The novel satirises the gender constructs in an imaginary place named Egalia, a matriarchal society. Brantenberg deconstructed the English language by subverting its sexism and coining words and phrases to suit the need of the novel. The use of matriarchal language in a society ruled by women brings into sharp focus the sexism prevalent in the current use of the English language. The purpose of the research is to foreground norm through studying its deviation.*

The research is focussed on analysing the lexical and semantic elements that represent matriarchy. Purposive sampling from the text was done. Word level analysis taken from Mill's (1995) three-layered model of feminist stylistics was conducted on the text. The ideological and semantic implications of lexical items were analysed. The findings revealed lexical items which the author deconstructed. The analysis can help explore ideological underpinnings of gender constructs.

Keywords: Gerd Brantenberg, *Egalia's Daughters*, Sara Mills, feminist stylistics, matriarchy, stylistic analysis

1. Introduction

The roots of patriarchy are deeply entrenched in our society. Patriarchy permeates most of our social practices. It manifests itself in a variety of forms and in all spheres of life. More or less all the institutions of society—such as economics and politics—are controlled by men. Language is one such institution which has the unmistakable imprint of masculine hold on it. The dominance of men over language and discourses results in partial views to be propagated through language and sexism embedded in language have been the interest of feminists since the past few decades.

The term feminist stylistics is applied to the study of language from a feminist perspective. The concern of feminist stylistics is to point out various areas and levels where men have employed language as a tool to reach their own ends of subjugating women and to develop and promote, knowingly or unknowingly, discriminating attitudes towards women. The current study will explore how language can act to smother the voice of more than one half of the population and further sexist ideologies.

The work under consideration is Gerd Brantenberg's dystopian fiction *Egalia's Daughters.* Gerd Brantenberg (b. 1941) is a Norwegian feminist author. Her works, mostly satirical and humorous in tone, are characterised by a critique of capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity (Gerd Brantenberg, 2009). From the very onset, she advocated alternative sexuality (Garton, 1993). Her

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major works include *Egalia's Daughters* (1973), *What Comes Naturally* (1986) and her St Croix trilogy (1979-1989) (Garton, 1993).

Her novel *Egalia's Daughters*, first published in 1973, is the focus of the following study. A dystopian novel, *Egalia's Daughters* presents a world in which gender roles are topsy-turvy. In Egalsund, men are subjugated, and women have control over the major societal institutions. Brantenberg has reversed the sexism in the English language to suit the reversed roles in the world of her novel. The novel shows her sharp insight into the fabric of society and how gender constructs are deeply ingrained into it. In her novel she has satirised sexist attitudes and deconstructed gender constructs.

▪ 1.2. Research Objectives:

The goals of the study are to

1. understand sexism in the English language,
2. analyse how language can be manipulated to further the sexist agenda,
3. find out the malleability of the English language to bend towards a matriarchal pattern,
4. analyse Brantenberg's coinage of matriarchal language, and
5. understand norm through deviation.

▪ 1.3. Research Questions:

▪ The research aims at answering the following questions:

1. What lexical and semantic elements in *Egalia's Daughters* represent sexist language according to Mills's three-layered model of feminist stylistics?
2. How do these elements correspond to sexism present in the current use of the English language?

2. Review of Related Literature

According to Montoro (2014), feminist stylistics is a sub-branch of stylistics which makes use of the tools employed by stylisticians in analyses of texts to find out how gender is represented through the use of language. Since both the items in the phrase imply more than one meaning, the term itself can stand for a range of ideas. Modern stylistics aims at developing frameworks and methods for making objective and replicable inquiry into language. Moreover, they see language not as an exclusive entity; rather it is perceived as integrating other disciplinary areas. The same concerns occupy feminist stylisticians.

Montoro goes on to say that Sara Mills was by no means the first to see language through a feminist lens. Significant work had been done before her but she was the first to put forth a developed model of feminist linguistic analysis and name the implementation of it feminist stylistics. Mills, as cited by Monotoro (2014),did not divorce linguistic analysis from the readers' perception of a text. Therefore, a feminist stylist seeks to understand how gender is inscribed in texts, whether it is overt or covert, and how readers decipher and react to it.

Carney (1977) divides linguistic sexism in three categories. The first is the prescribed category: the kind of language which is deemed right for women and mostly it is polite, subdued, lacking authority and confidence. The tag question is also seen as a characteristic of women. There is also a range of vocabulary which women tend to use, including descriptions of colour and beauty, and which men would hardly do. A 'decent' woman will always use the language which 'fits' her position in society. The second category is the language which marginalises women by presenting the point-of-view of men as normal or standard, therefore relegating women to a diminished or lower position. A common example is the use of generic pronoun *he* and terms like *chairman* to refer to both men and women. This lack of reference or ambiguous reference makes women feel neglected and 'invisible'. He says that this kind of terms is being replaced with more gender-neutral terms and this change only shows the vitality of a living language. The third kind is the language used to describe women. It involves the use of titles to show women's marital status and certain honorific terms like *lady.* Adult women are referred to as girls, a practice which reduces them to the status of childish and less intelligent of human beings.

Trends in feminist stylistics have changed along with the concerns of feminists (Ufot, 2012). Earlier, feminists attempted at proving likenesses between men's and women's behaviour; correspondingly, feminist stylisticians focussed on how men and women wrote similarly. But as the feminists have transferred their attention on finding the likenesses between both the sexes and celebrating them, so have feminist stylisticians focus more on the differences between the writings of men and women. There have been claims that there is a distinct 'women's writing'.

Weatheral (2015) cites Lackoff's observation that sexism is to be found in the manner of women's talk and the manner in which women are addressed. In the 70s and 80s, feminist linguistics analysed the structural units of language. The current feminist linguists are focussed more on discourse analysis of language to see the role of patriarchal power in implementation and projection of sexist ideologies.

3. Theoretical Considerations:

The study will employ the three-layered model of feminist stylistics propounded by Mills (1995). In her book she analyses how gender concerns underlie language and its structure. She presents various views regarding how language controls and imposes on the way we think and perceive. Her proposed model analyses language at the three following levels:

1. Word level: at this level, she describes sexist tendencies in the lexical and semantic levels of language for example the use of gender-specific words, derogatory connotations for the words used for women and the lack of female equivalents of terms and ideas resulting in lexical gaps to describe experiences of women.
2. Phrase/sentence level: it involves analysing the presence of phrases and presuppositions that stereotype women, the role of agency and transitivity and ideology.
3. Discourse level: Mills does not consider analysis at this level as "truly linguistic", because it deals with the textual elements that make up the larger level of discourse, how the message is conveyed and how it is interpreted by the reader/listener.

Since the current study is confined to the word level, it will be discussed in detail below.

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Generic pronoun: According to Mills (1995), the generic pronoun—which she calls he-man language—is the most common manifestation of sexism in the English language. The traditionalists argue in favour of the pronoun by saying that it is not used generically, but rather as a common pronoun for both sexes. Studies have shown that people tend to visualise males, rather than females when the male pronoun is used generically. Also, the use of the generic pronoun, instead of clarifying the referent, creates ambiguities and confuses the readers as to the gender of the referent. Moreover, when the generic pronoun is used for occupations with which authority and self-assertion are attributed, the readers assume the referent to be a male, while the common assumptions are that a female is the referent for certain occupations as that of nurses and secretaries. This points towards the prevailing stereotypes.

Generic noun: The use of generic noun includes the presentation of the experience of one sex as the norm, for example, the terms 'mankind' or 'man' are used when discussing the whole of humanity. There are certain apparently gender-neutral phrases whose gender-specificity is revealed when they are used to refer to females. Likewise, there are words like 'salesman' with a fixed usage. 'Policeman', 'fireman', and 'seaman' are some other examples.

Women as marked form: The terms used for women often carry affixes, or sometimes diminutive forms e.g. –ess in 'poetess', while those for men are without any affixes. The use of affixes presents women as deviation in a world where everything male is the norm. Such terms trivialise and debase females.

Androcentric naming: The names we assign to things are representative of our view of the world. Feminist have discovered that male experience, being the norm, leads to names for things from a male point-of-view. It is because men have owned and made the language since times immemorial.

Semantic derogation: There are instances in the English language where terms for women have developed a disparaging meaning, or the male term is positive while its female equivalent has negative connotation. One example is the contrast between 'master' and 'mistress', where 'master' is connected with authority and independence while 'mistress' has an additional meaning of someone's whore.

Endearments and diminutives: The endearment terms used to refer to women tend to emphasis their meekness, dependence, fragility, and sometimes sexual availability.

Euphemism and taboo: It has been discussed above that female experience is met with scanty linguistic repertoire for its expression. Certain experiences have been clouded over by taboos and euphemisms. For example, the euphemisms and taboos about menstruation preclude their explicit mention.

Lexical gap: The English language, as created by man, lacks expressions for experiences undergone by women. The vocabulary to represent female experiences of the world is inadequate, as these experiences have not been lexicalised. Such experiences are, therefore, expressed from a male point-of-view. Moreover, many areas of female experience are reduced to taboos. The result is that women find no words to express perfectly ordinary parts of their lives because either they are not allowed or words for them are simply non-existent. This can be seen

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in the description of sexual activity where women are almost always shown as passive or at the receiving end of the act.

4. Methods

The data of the following study consists of the first part of Brantenberg's *Egalia's Daughters* (2004).The study is confined to the level of the word. Brantenberg's use of matriarchal language and her coinage of words as equivalents of patriarchal language has been analysed applying Mills's framework.

5. Discussion

The following section will describe and discuss the lexical items loaded with sexist ideology and their significance in constructing and upholding matriarchy in Egalsund.

5.1. Language

The analysis of language includes the lexical items reflecting sexism in their usage or function.

The Play of Fele and Mafele: The word 'woman' in the English language is considered to be formed by the addition of an affix, *wo*, to *man,* the word 'woman' is thus the deviation of the norm in an androcentric world. In the novel, the words 'manwom' (pl: menwim) or mafele are used to refer to men while women are referred to as wom (pl: wim) or fele. The word formed by adding *man* to *wom.* 'Wom' is the norm and 'manwom' is the devation. The same is the case with 'mafele'.

Generic Pronoun: In the world of Egalia, mafele pronoun is used as the generic i.e. *she* or *her* is used when talking about people in general.

"The Egalian would nod in agreement…reassured that she could sleep soundly."

"What would happen if everybody decided she had to live by the water?"

The noun "the Egalian" in the first sentence here is a generic noun. The reader understands it as a reference to people in general. The pronoun for the antecedent is not generic, instead it is gender specific. The narrator has intended it as an inclusive pronoun, but the use of a gender specific pronoun to refer to both the genders creates ambiguity in the text and may confuse the reader. The second sentence also presents the same problem. The pronoun does not correspond with the antecedent. 'She' is used as a generic pronoun. It also implies that the fele gender can stand for all the humanity. Below is another example from the text:

"Each of them knew she had done miserably in the test…"

The lines occur in a classroom, comprising both fele and mafele students. The pronoun makes it appear as if only fele students were addressed. This can have an added twist to it if we assume that mafele students are brighter in studies than fele students.

By the end of the book we perceive an alteration in this pattern. Instead of using 'she', the editor of a newspaper in the novel uses the phrase 'she or he', but the order of the pronouns still shows who is in dominance.

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Indefinite pronouns 'nowom' and 'anywom' have been used as a replacement of 'nobody' and 'anybody'.

Generic Noun: In the novel, the fele experience is presented as normal. The world is seen from a fele perspective. Hence, the names of things are fele-oriented. The use of 'wom' as an affix is also seen in the terms 'huwom', 'huwomity', 'huwomkind', 'spokeswom', 'seawom' and 'laywom'.

In the very first chapter, Petronius, the protagonist, expresses to his parents his desire "to be a seawom". There is no word in the Egalsund language to describe a manwom who goes to sea. Since the usage of the term is fixed, it engenders curious utterances. Later his sister scoffs at him by saying that he wants to become a "mafeleseawom" or "mafelefrogwom". This is a contradiction in terms as he cannot be both 'mafele' and 'wom'.

"The younger generation had begun to demand higher starting salaries…., they were demanding higher pregnancy benefits."

"It was harder to get people to have first child than a second."

These two sentences lead to the assumption that both sexes reproduce. In the first part of the extract, the phrase "younger generation" is used which should include feles as well as mafeles. On the contrary, the second part of mentions the pregnancy benefits that wim obtained as an incentive for fertilising. It becomes quite humorous because menwim cannot reproduce. Moreover, menwin are shown to be reluctant to have children as the responsibility of child-rearing is theirs.

"Where would we be without the proud seawim who came before us?"

If we look at the context of this extract, the narrator is talking about the achievements of the people who lived by the sea and made the modern world of Egalsund possible through their toil. This sentence seems to exclude menwim as if only wim lived in those communities.

Certain verbs can also be used as generic. The term 'wommed'is used to mean appointment of staff.

Marked Form: The mafeles in the book are marked by the use of specific words or attachment of affixes for them. In the patriarchal language, the affixes like –ess or –ette are attached to the term used for men, while in the novel, the mafeles are usually marked by the affixation of –ass, as in 'mastrass', 'heirass', 'princeass, and 'lionass'. As opposed to the milder –ess, which only denotes something inferior or smaller, –ass has the additional derogatory meaning of a donkey or buttocks. In both these senses, the mafeles are reduced to less intelligent and less human state, of being either an animal or a mere body.

The word "spinner" has been used for fele professor and "spinnerman" for mafele professor. The mafele gender has been marked while the fele gender is unmarked. It is similar to the use of "poet" or "actor" for male and "poetess" or "actress" for female. It indicates that the male term is universal or normal, while it becomes necessary to mark the gender of female through the use of a deviant term.

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5.2. Meaning:

Apart from lexical items, sexism also resides in the meaning of language. Following are the few forms of sexism in the language.

Naming: In the novel, Msass is the matriarchal alternative of Mr. Petronius's mother is frequently mentioned as Msass Bram while his father is referred to using his first name, Christopher. Using the first name for the mafele and the damename (surname) and the title Msass for the fele signifies the belittling of one sex, meaning that the mafele are not worthy of as much respect as the fele.

The one ship mentioned in the novel is named 'Adonis'. The Greek mythology holds Adonis as a beautiful figure. The use of a mafele name for the ship connotes the functions of containing and sustaining of the ship, as is ascribed to women, as well as the fact that the wim are in possession of it.

Euphemism and taboos: The mafele body and experiences are surrounded by taboos. The word "shamebag" is used in the novel for the fele genitals. It implies that the female body is something to be ashamed of. 'Cock' is also used which can be understood as an alternative for 'cunt'. 'Cock' is a taboo in the Egalian world. Petronius receives a chiding when she unconsciously utters such an offensive word. Mafele genitals are referred to using insulting terms or words which show mafele body parts to be only playthings. A few examples are "kite", "pole" and "well-shaped little thing".

Endearments: The terms of endearment used for menwim are also indicative of their insignificance and objectiveness. "My own little everything" and "pretty little thing" are a few instances.

Semantic derogation: The order of words also reflects the superiority of one sex. For example, in many places in the novel, whenever feles and mafeles are mentioned together, feles precede mafeles as in "she and he", "the wom and him" and "wom and manwom".

There are certain derogatory terms used for mafeles which have no fele equivalent. "Ladsel" has the connotation of "damsel", a young, beautiful woman looking for a man. "Maidman" (maiden) and "maidmanhood" also have no fele equivalent.

The boy in Ba's class is always referred to with the use of "little" and "tubby" which shows that a mafele is considered lesser, and his body and appearance always define him, which is not so with wim.

In many places, "wim" is used for feles and "boys" for their partners. This attaches more authority, freedom and maturity to feles while making mafeles immature and childish.

When Gro meets Petronius for the first time, her friend sees him with her and expresses her astonishment by saying, "Picked up a cockerel already?" which suggests two things: that menwim are to be "picked up" and the other is that they are no better than "cockerels". These expressions imply the sexual availability of menwim.

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Lexical gaps: In the novel, mafeles are the ones whose experience has no lexical items to describe it in. Any sexual act is described from the fele point-of-view. The verbs used for the sexual activity are associated with feles, signifying that sex is done to, not with, mafeles. Their role is entirely passive and insignificant. One example is the sexual activity between Ruth Bram and Christopher Bram. The author says that Ruth "had had him", which calls to mind eating images or that "she crept into him". Also, there is no mention of what Christopher's part in the sexual activity. Mafeles are at the receiving end. Later on, Ruth Bram says at one place that she "should fertilise [herself]".The act of fertilisation here is purely shown as a fele activity. The mafele seems to have no part to play in it.

Terms for Deity: Working on the ideas discussed by Spender (1990), the terms used for deity can also be studied. Brantenberg has used the female terms and pronouns for God. A few examples are Lady God, Donna Jessica, Mother Creator, Mother God, the Great Allmother or simply Lady. As feles are in control of all the dominant discourses, religious texts also have imprints of patriarchy on them. Resultantly, the terms for God are fele to indicate power.

The herstory of Egalsund: The events of the past in the novel are chronicled by wim. Wim are the chief actors in the records of Egalia while menwim seem to be totally absent from it. We can aptly call it "herstory" of Egalsund, narrated by wim and from the point of view of wim. The ancestors are called "foremothers". An important figure of the past is Sheracles, an equivalent of Heracles, who helped improve Egalsund economically. But the situation of menwim even in her reign was nothing less than deplorable. It is to be noted that Heracles is a Greek word and has nothing to do with the English pronoun "he".

A new language: The novel invents a language of its own. Certain terms are equivalents of English terms having patriarchal roots. Below is a list of the new words or terms.

Housebound (husband): menwim are to stay at home while wim are in possession of business and financial matters. The gender roles in the novels are strictly defined.

Fatherhood protection (marriage): menwim in Egalsund get fatherhood protection, which is the equivalent of marriage. The term suggests fatherhood myths that fatherhood is the nadir of mafele existence. It brings fulfilment to be able to bring up the child of a fele and stay at her home in her "protection", while negating her own personality and aspirations. The menwim who are not chosen by wim for fatherhood protection become either studs or are sent to hard labour. The only acceptable place for menwim is at home.

Peho (brassier): this word, as does "brassier" carry of "breast", carries the first two letter of the word "penis". The peho is worn by menwimin order to hold their penises firmly in place. Pehos are seen by rebellious menwim as a primary symbol of subjugation because menwim are compelled to wear pehos all the time completely disregarding the fact that they are uncomfortable in them. Wim wear no such thing for their breasts. It is improper and indecent for a menwim to be seen without pehoes while wim run along the streets flaunting their breasts.

The word "damename" is used for the last name of a person. A menwom has to change her damename that he got from his father to that of her protector. He has no identity of his own and is known by the name of his mother or wife.

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There are other words which have been coined to signify fele power. A few of them are matriotic (patriotic), queendom (kingdom), lordie (lady), gentlewom (gentleman), sheroism (heroism) and overlady (overlord).

6. Conclusion:

The research has shown how language is a tool for communication and propagation of ideas. It also explores significance of words and their meanings and their sexist associations in our everyday use of language. The study has revealed that gender ideologies and constructs are not immanent in language but are rather imposed. By studying the subversion of patriarchal language in the novel, the researcher has tried to understand and unravel the gender embedded in language and how it could have been otherwise in a matriarchal world, suggesting that language is only a tool which can be bent and moulded to suit the purpose of the powerful party. Further studies of the novel can be undertaken on the bases of the rest of two levels: sentence level and discourse level. The novel offers rich possibilities for feminist stylistic analyses.

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