


An Overview of Gendered Violence in Language

Rokaya Chaarani  

MA in Gender Studies, Sultan Moulay Slimane university, Beni Mellal, Morocco, Department of English Studies, Morocco

 **Corresponding Author:** Rokaya Chaarani, **E-mail:** rokayachaarani@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

There is little doubt that language and its politics are one of the most powerful apparatuses that construct, determine and communicate dynamic meanings about gender. The cultural and societal definitions of femininity and masculinity along with their connotations are reinforced and channeled through as well as constituted by language. In this regard, the notion of violence is a pertinent field wherein language, with its sexed and gendered lot, continues to perform and display aggressive and crude sexist meanings that debase a specific gender against the backdrop of another.

Language is a cultural practice that can latently wield violence, especially when this violence is generated or provoked by a driving force such as sexual difference. In fact, violence has become gender-based, which manifests itself in everyday communication and interaction between individuals in almost all societies. Following this line of thinking, one has to better comprehend the relation that links gendered violence to language and how it appears in communicative situations; moreover, one has to discern how power relations are discursively built and implemented in patriarchal societies, and how they affect primarily what is called "gender communicative practice" (Eckert & Ginet, 2003, p. 195). The latter can be sensed in social discourses such as the street discourse which is extremely reliant on gendered and figurative language, namely aggressive and violent language that dehumanizes women. This idea is moulded in the form of a pertinent question by Dale Spender, for she ponders upon the ground that brings women's devaluation in language and their devaluation in society together (Spender, 1990). The topical issue of sexual violent language is a crucial issue that is worth examining, especially in regards to gendered violence in language, for it is a language that vehemently imbues every day's communication content, and it acts as the mirror which reflects societal and cultural perceptions of sexual difference. For this reason, attention must shift towards the contribution of sexuality, the one that is defined by patriarchal and misogynistic discourses, in the production of witheringly sexist and offensive language that demeans and debases social subjects in general, and women in particular.

Almost all languages are violently sexist, including the English language, which is the crux of this paper's analysis. Before delving the relationship between gendered violence and language, it is notable to first designate what is meant by the term "gendered violence". The most accurate definition is the one Julia T. Wood provides in her work *Gendered Lives*, for she claims: "The term gendered violence refers to physical, verbal, emotional, sexual and visual brutality that is inflected disproportionately or exclusively on members of one sex" (Wood, 2009, 2007, p.285). In effect, what is at stake is the verbal dimension of gendered violence, which can be, appreciably, the umbrella under which the other dimensions are both incorporated and obscured. This line of argument suggests that language legitimizes, naturalizes and normalizes the social practices of gendered violence; it mitigates and condones as well its jarring and crude impact. As far as gender is concerned, it is clear that femininity plays the role of the colonized and masculinity the colonizer, for as Spender points, "femininity is the marked form" (Spender, 1990, p. 20). Therefore, what is feminine has long been represented as the struggle in patriarchal societies; femininity is the battleground on which violence is practiced. This idea leads one to consider the quintessential role of semantics in the linkage of what is feminine with the fashion its meaning is encoded through words and expressions, for since language is a male's territory, the meanings

along with the messages it conveys are determined and produced by men. Consequently, their very implications lie on women who have no infrastructure to reinvent a language of their own. There is little doubt that the feminine is deemed the generator of the obscene; thus, it carries every derogatory meaning. Furthermore, society's perception of women as passive and weak and men as active and strong covertly legitimizes violence, a formula that rests on the very binary opposition of strength and weakness. In that vein, communication embodies, in the same respect, this violence in communicative situations where degrading messages are taken for granted. Spender contends concerning this line of thinking: "*Woman* does not share equal status with *man* (linguistically or otherwise) because, in accordance with the semantic rule, *woman* has become pejorated while *man* has remained pure and untainted, protected by its semantic association with the male" (Spender, 1990, p.17). To better comprehend the relation that interconnects gendered violence to language, one has to reverse the discourse directed towards one specific gender. That is to say, if the very violent language whose target is women become directed towards men, its effect will not be the same by virtue of the language's dearth of neutrality. Instead, men who are targeted with this sort of language will be seen as women, not as men. One can illustrate this argument by the expression: "*The man was sexually harassed*". What the expression implies, in fact, is that the man was molested like a woman by virtue of the semantic perception of *sexual assault* which is believed to occur to only women. This illustration elucidates the fact that discursive opportunities are limited when it comes to male victims of gender-based violence, as a consequence, males who experience violence are extremely feminized (Shepherd, 2010). It is clear that gendered violence masks its ideologies through discourse by virtue of the uncontested reality it produces and, accordingly, one of the arenas where violent gendered language is performed, is the street sphere which is reserved for the male.

The act of violence and the matrix of the street are gendered; they are socially sexed, as it were. In this respect, both violence and the street sphere are deemed male by virtue of their correspondence with physical strength and freedom. Yet, according to traditional consciousness, females are considered incompatible with the public space's connotations. That is why the female's presence in male's territory shakes and unsettles the very foundations of the masculine world. This is what Anita Taylor and M.J. Hardman elucidate by stating that: "...because of patriarchal structures, violence and dominance are male identified even when women do the acts" (Taylor & Hardman, n.d, p.8). Respectively, violent language is believed to constitute masculinity, for it is surprising and unconventional to hear a female cursing or affronting someone publicly. This act can culminate in rendering her immoral, aggressive or even promiscuous whereas cursing in public is thought to be the male's tools of expressing and tuning emotions such as rage and irritation. As far as the street matrix is concerned, the words and expressions that are exchanged between individuals on a daily basis without being aware of what they imply are extremely symbolic and violent. As a matter of fact, girls and women become absorbent of the meanings these words and expressions encode, which explains the continuing perpetuation of offensive and violent language: Whether it is conscious or subconscious, most girls and women do not resist the fact that they are objectified unless it is considered sexual harassment, for they usually laugh at and make fun of the words that reinforce the idea that they are objects and that men are subjects. Furthermore, men's granted agency makes them approach the action of objectification as a privilege because their belief system is steeped in the idea that they are the agents, the doers of every '*violent*' act that leads to a specific achievement which, again, validate how masculinity is symbolically viewed. For instance, a group of friends talked about a rape incident mentioned in a television program. It is likely if, on the one hand, it was a woman who was raped to accept one of the friends saying the expression: *he did it to her*; on the other hand, if it was a man who was a victim of rape, it would be '*unnatural*' to hear someone of them saying: *She did it to him*. This example demonstrates how the act of doing, in this case, raping is laden with the cultural and societal definition of sexual violence, which was articulated symbolically. Following this line of thinking, it is necessary to pinpoint the patriarchal ramifications of constructing sexuality within language, a language where metaphorical sexual violence lurks.

Many feminists engaged in linguistics, such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, have attempted to unearth and debunk male language steeped in sexual symbolism. Almost all languages are loaded with sexual metaphors and symbols that demean the female as a mother, a wife, or/and as an embodiment of femininity and as a body. Several feminist thinkers have espoused the idea that femaleness has long been the generator of mystery and curiosity since the times of mythologies, for it stands for the other which is not male. Therefore, it has become the ground on which metaphorical language blossoms (Eckert & Ginet, 2003, p.224). As far as sexuality is concerned, it is another social and historical construct that misogyny has moulded to tame and captivate the female body which is rendered the source of male gratification. Ultimately, women's sexuality is suppressed and denied along the lines of their silent and concealed voice, for sexual language belongs only to the male realm, a language by which the female is victimized and objectified. Following this line of argument, language incorporates sexual meanings through violent metaphors and imagery; it is, in Teresa de Lauretis' terms, "*the violence of rhetoric*". De Lauretis has borrowed this notion from Michel Foucault to expound how violence in general and sexual violence in particular produces its objects and subjects, its wielders and victims and its semantic and discursive dimensions (De Lauretis, 1987, p.32). This idea can be clearly seen in terms of gender relations; for sexual violence maps, the largest structure of language as well as the fashion in its meanings are communicated. Consider, for example, how parts of the female body are articulated through metaphoric words such as *cream pies*, *melons*, *coconuts*... which refer to the female's breasts. However, the male body parts are usually linked to elements that

represent force and speed, such as *skyrockets, trains, soccer balls...* All of which symbolize the phallus. In that vein, Taylor and Hardman contend that male sexuality has always metamorphosed into violent metaphors, especially in regards to the realm of war. Accordingly, they state that narratives extremely glorify warlike quests because they incarnate manhood, whereas peace connotes womanhood (Taylor & Hardman, n.d, p.6).

To summarize, the subject matter revolving around gendered violence in the language is a broad subject that can delve into a myriad of facets and dimensions. Notwithstanding, it is worth considering the comprehension of the pivotal and vital linguistic dynamics that construct and dictate gender relations to have a clear vision about how language and communication reflect reality. Language is human-made and man-produced. Thus, every attempt to destabilize the rooted foundations of masculine violence in language will falter and meet great difficulties. Yet, social change can be possible if resistance is taken seriously and authentically, especially female resistance. Thus, there is an urgent need to reappropriate the female voice in order for it to penetrate slowly but surely different exploited realms including the linguistic one.

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