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Research Article




Perspectives on Poetic Language Construction of Identity through Language

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Abstract

The present research article aims to investigate the intricate tapestry of language and its profound role in shaping and conveying human identity. One of the most pivotal movements in the intellectual history of the twentieth century revolves around the exploration and understanding of language and its fundamental roles in the human experience. Since the dawn of civilization, language has served as the conduit for narrating, preserving, and influencing the multifaceted dimensions of human experience. It stands as a reflection and assertion of individual and collective identity, offering insights into the diverse ways through which human beings perceive, interact with, and interpret the world around them. This article embarks on a comprehensive examination of the burgeoning human interest in language, transcending its functional use as a mere tool for communication. It scrutinizes the significant transformation in the conceptualization of language, primarily initiated in the twentieth century, wherein language evolved to be seen not just as a

medium of communication but as a crucial construct that interlaces with diverse dimensions of human existence and identity. The study delves into various facets of language, encompassing its poetic dimensions, which provide a rich, multi-layered platform for the exploration and expression of identity. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the article explores the symbiotic relationship between language and identity, acknowledging the myriad ways through which language informs, shapes, and is shaped by human identity. It investigates the poetic construction of language, unveiling the nuanced ways in which language, particularly in its poetic form, serves as a powerful instrument for the articulation and construction of identity. There is a dynamic interplay between language and identity, providing a robust foundation for future research and exploration in the realm of language studies, with a particular focus on its poetic dimensions and its role in the construction of identity. The paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on language, adding depth and breadth to the understanding of its multifarious roles in the human experience, particularly in the context of identity construction through poetic language.

Aims: The paper will focus on how critics, linguists, theorists and philosophers like Ferdinand de Saussure, Valentin Voloshinov, Martin Heidegger, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva have linked language and identity. The purpose was to draw an analogy and figure out that how these critics in different centuries, under different circumstances, with different descriptions have identified themselves and theories in relation with language.

Methodology and Approaches: The paper is primarily based on the elaborations of the insights given by the various critics and historical records. The methods and approaches adopted for writing this paper are explanatory, comparative and analytical.

Outcome: The paper offers a detailed pattern of the emergence of the link between language and identity. It is also concluded that language as concept is always intriguing and suggestive.

Keywords: Linguistic turn, Signified, Signifier, Consciousness, Language, Identity, Idea, Semiotic, Symbolic, Mirror Stage

In Rig Veda, the Goddess Vak is described as the creator of all human beings and the whole universe. She is considered as the provider of food, thought, language and creativity to the human being. There cannot be more importance attached to language than this. In Post-Structuralist times, the reflections on the nature of language and creative powers have changed the dimensions of knowledge forever. One can go back to the times of Russian Formalism and American New criticism to make sense of the central role of language in the analysis of Literature. But this cannot be stretched too far but the emphasis on language by Formalism and New Criticism was for different reason and it could only provide an excuse to the traditional argument that language is means to communicate an idea. On the contrary in post-Structuralist times, the nature of language has been viewed from completely different perspective. This perspective in language creates human consciousness.

Language creates ideologies, knowledge, power structures, genders, bodies and everything else that we can think of. Such a notion of language has completely reversed the earlier instance

that language is medium of reality. Though there is a whole history of ideas on the nature of language. But in this paper, I have only concentrated on the post-structuralist notion of language which is sometimes known as 'Linguistic Turn'.

Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language propagates the basic conceptual motivation to think about the relationship between language, truth and identity. The idea that language is in an arbitrary relationship with meaning makes us suspect the credibility of the signification that we derive from the corpus of signifiers. Saussure also claimed that language is a social phenomenon and thus by extension the arbitrary significations as drawn from language have truth value only within the cultural and social context in which language functions.

Ferdinand Saussure brought language in the centre of discussion in his theories of Linguistics. Saussure's the concept of sign. The sign for Saussure is constituted by two elements the signifier and the signified. Saussure reflected seriously on the nature of the sign, signifier and the signified he considered the signifier as the material form of language, and the signified as the cultural element attached to the signifier. In itself signifier has no value or is empty until and unless it is invested with the meaning of the signified.

However, Saussure's emphasis on the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and signified, sparked a debate on the truth value of the meaning as given by the language. Saussure insists that the relationship between the signifier and signified is not inherent, but arbitrary and based on tradition or convention. Such a theory challenged the meanings as received by human beings in language. Saussure also insisted on the relationship of language and society.

Language is meaningful, has the capacity to convey meanings, only when it is used in the social space, inhabited by the human beings. Thus, Saussure made two three different remarks about language. (1) That the signifier has no direct relationship with signified, (2) that language is meaningful and signifying only in the social space. (3), that there is relationship between the language and the human consciousness. These were significant insights for the future thinkers and philosophers who were seriously reflecting on language and its connection with reality.

Another important thinker who needs to be discussed is V.N. Voloshinov. Voloshinov stressed upon the relationship between reality and language. He extended the insights of Saussure in regard of the relationship between the consciousness (individual or collective) and language. In fact, Voloshinov was first to see the direct relationship between language and thought. He considered that language and ideas exist as one entity in the society. Like Althusser, he considered a direct relationship between the ideas and language. He said,

Any ideological product is not only itself a part of a reality (natural or social) just as in any physical body, any instrument of production, or any product for consumption, it also, in contradistinction to these other phenomena, reflects and refracts another reality outside itself. Everything ideological possess meaning, it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself. In other words, it is a sign. Without signs there is no ideology. (Voloshinov 39)

After this, there were many thinkers who started viewing the relationship between reality and language seriously. One prominent thinker on this issue was Claude Levi Strauss. Strauss was an anthropologist, investigating the growth of culture in human societies. He realized that the growth of culture is closely related with the growth of signs - signs that ultimately helped in the

growth of language. The language was getting slowly converted into thick ideas that determined the nature of society.

For Strauss, the social structure and the linguistic structure had some similarity in the sense that the structures of cultures. Ultimately got concretized in ideological assumptions. These basic premises of Saussure are the fountainhead of the philosophy of deconstruction that was propagated by philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and many other thinkers to radicalise the whole spectrum of deliberations on identity and truth narratives (history). Jacques Lacan used many of the insights from Strauss's anthropological studies.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger laid great emphasis on the very existence of the Being. According to Heidegger, the fundamental question of philosophy is, "If being is predicated in manifold meanings, then what is its leading fundamental meaning? What does Being mean?" ("On My Way to Phenomenology" 74). He believed that there could be nothing more fundamental and important than the fact that we are, that is, we exist and our attention should be focused on the Being/Self. Heidegger believed that although we have a wholesome and coherent awareness of our surroundings, our sense of being-in-the-world at times gets disjointed.

Heidegger upheld the notion that language should be freed from the shackles of grammar as the use of logic and grammar formalize language. The expression given to thoughts and feelings should be free and unrestrained in poetry and other modes of creative writing. Heidegger believed that the poetic self is different from the normal self and transcends the barriers of space, time and language.

Jacques Derrida, one of the most controversial philosophers of the twentieth century enunciated the philosophy of Deconstruction. To understand Derrida's concept of self, one has to take into account his philosophy of language. Derrida's primary argument is that nothing exists outside the text. In relation to the idea of self, it means that self is "textual" in nature. For Derrida the reference in language is basically the effect of language practices. There exist two kinds of realities. First, the reality of material existence, and second, the reality that we know through language practices. The reality that exists outside the language practices, according to Derrida, is inaccessible to human beings. In the human world, we have access only to the language reality. The reference that the language generates is illusionary and unreliable.

The signified is not inherently related to the signifier for him. In other words, the meanings, the reference, that we attach to language is in an illusionary relationship with the signifier. The signifier cannot claim any truth value or any reference capacity. In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1970), Derrida contends that the Western metaphysics is problematic precisely because it is logocentric. This means that Derrida refuses the authenticity and validity of knowledge systems because these knowledge systems claim the presence of unquestionable truths in the narratives which are primarily language narratives.

The human self is constructed in language. Language that cannot claim access to truth or reality, cannot construct a self that has any truth value. Thus, for Derrida, the human subject is a construct of language, devoid of any transcendental meanings, any reference, and any sense. All these are only fictionally attached to the vacuous self.

Paul de Man is one of the most significant practitioners of deconstruction in literary studies. His philosophy of language propounds that language cannot be trusted to create essence, identity and truth. In his deconstructive readings of philosophers, historians and creative writers,

he brought out that all these texts only create an illusion of stable meaning and truth. In reality these texts are only a corpus of signifiers, streaming endlessly without the possibilities of concrete signification. More significantly, he argued that human beings are condemned to seek stable meaning and truth in language because there is no other possibility of any stability or essence outside the language. This idea of human existence - existence in language was the basic thesis of de Manian conceptualizations on identity and language. In his works Paul de Man claims that knowing in authenticity is not the same as to be authentic.

Freud was a psychoanalyst who did not give any clear and distinct theory of language. However, in his practice as a psychoanalyst, he used language to cure his patient—he called this as ‘Talking Cure’. Julia Kristeva gives more significance to Freud’s use of language as she considers Freud a believer in the idea of language as a repository of unconscious, unknown desires and drives. This idea of language is very different from Lacan’s idea of language who believes that the unconscious is like language.

For Freud the biological drives, especially sexual-desires are deposited in body as unfulfilled desires. Some of these desires and drives might get a voice in the use of language of individual beings. For Freud language is not the creator of desires, the desires are biological. Language in different forms like jokes, slips of tongue/pen or other forms of unconscious uses might reveal those desires as symbolic, metaphoric or metonymic expressions. This means that many of the desires and drives may still remain outside the language. This is because, only certain desires may find expression in language.

Similarly, the creative works of arts also might become expressions of unfulfilled desires. Thus, for Freud, the creative works of art are sublimations of unfulfilled desires. The language for Freud is one of the mediums out of many, to give outlet to the repressed desires and drives. Language is not the creator of those drives and desires.

Jaques Lacan was a psychoanalyst and a self-proclaimed Freudian. Lacan was much influenced by Saussure, Levi Straus, and Roman Jakobson. These were structuralist thinkers who considered the human consciousness and culture in terms of structures, especially in terms of linguistic structures. Jaques Lacan’s initial conceptions of language were in the mode of structuralism. He considered language to be the constitutive factors of human culture. Lacan believed that in human affairs the world is created by the language. His famous dictum is : the unconscious is structured like language. By this he means that the unconscious can be accessed, made available, analysed through and in language. The implications are that it is language that stores the unconscious beliefs, desires and drives. This idea is very different from the Freudian idea of unconscious. For Freud the unconscious is repressed store house of unfulfilled desires and for Lacan the unconscious is the store house of language, the symbolic

Lacan’s idea of language made into belief that the human culture in its all manifestation is available in the symbolic - the symbolic, that is, dominantly linguistic in nature. As a psychoanalyst he considered it the task of the analyst to relocate the analysand in the symbolic. This will make him aware of the fictional nature of the drives and desires that have overpowered him, and that have made him psychotic or neurotic. Lacan analysed the structure of human consciousness and unconsciousness in the relation to language. He viewed the human culture to be symbolic in its totality.

The human subject cannot become anything but what the symbolic allows him to become. The human subject before he takes birth, is welcomed by the stars of language, awaiting his arrival before his birth. Even though Lacan was a structuralist in his early phase, he transcended the myths of structuralism even in his early writings like *Language of Self*. Lacan cannot be confined to the labels of structuralism or post-structuralism. Because Lacan, from the beginning, tried to locate the sources of human knowledge. The false validity and authenticity of knowledge systems that was claimed by the existing systems of knowledge was challenged by Lacan from the very beginning. Even though he was uncomfortable with the need, structuralist conception of language, it was only in the later phase of intellectual growth that he started giving the different models of language.

In the words of Lacan, “the mirror stage ... manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality.” (“The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” 4). It is in the mirror stage, according to Lacan, that a child develops subjectivity as it becomes aware of its bodily form. It becomes aware of the limitations as well as the functions of its body. The child begins to realize that outside of it, there is a world, a system of which, like other people, it is a part. This is a complex process and is referred to as the imaginary as it is governed by images or reflections. Lacan, while seeking to explore and explain the basis of subjectivity, talks about the mirror stage and the desire to cling to the Symbolic in order to make sense of the insecure, fragmented image that we have of ourselves and our body by establishing a link with the shared structures of the Symbolic order and the patriarchal law.

He gave the concept of Epos which means the epic like nature of language. This means that language is continuously changing phenomena. In this course of time the elements of language which are not used, get sedimented and remain in the memory of a culture, a nation or in the whole Symbolic System. Lacan did bring a different dimension to the understanding of language and his concept certainly helps us in understanding the nature of ‘poetic language’.

Lacan’s concept of pure signifier is also very interesting because pure signifier is a signifier which is not yet appropriated by the signified - the signified is always in the realm of Symbolic. The pure signifier is full of possibilities - possibilities of creating new knowledge and new signification. By giving the concept of pure signifier, Lacan stressed the fictionality of the sign that Saussure and others created. The pure signifier is also closely related to the idea of Semiotic in Julia Kristeva. The pure signifier is immensely energetic in the space of literary creation. It has the capacity to embrace the unknown signifiers

‘Sinthome’ is that unanalysable, that left over in the corpus of language which cannot be assimilated by the linguistic structures of analytical language. Lacan found the ‘Sinthome’ in the works of Joyce. The language of James Joyce remains an enigma to many of his readers and nightmare to many linguists. The logical irrationality and illogical, structures a nightmare to the rational linguists. But Lacan declares that the future of knowledge is not within logical assumptions but in the song of signifiers which he calls as the master signifiers.

The post-structuralists believed that identity was constructed through social interaction. They purported the view that language plays a pivotal role in the framing and shaping of identity. While Freud and Lacan, maintain that human beings are Symbolic beings and can be scientifically

examined and explained, Julia Kristeva points out that human beings are a combination of the known as well as the unknown and cannot be explained or defined so simplistically.

She, not only, takes help of Freudian concepts to challenge Lacan's theory but also extends them further by building on them. She puts forth the view that the repression of our psychosexual desires is never complete. The borders between our levels of consciousness are permeable and the Subject is not a constant, simplistic unit but is unstable and complex. Our subjectivity is constantly being questioned.

Kristeva mocks the notion of a fixed identity and in an interview with Susan Sellers titled "A Question of Subjectivity" published in *Modern Literary Theory- A Reader* states, "A fixed identity": it is perhaps a fiction, an illusion – who amongst us has a fixed identity? It is a phantasm; we do nevertheless arrive at a certain type of stability. There are several steps which lead to this stability" (128-34).

Julia Kristeva was much influenced by Freud in his perception of the desires and drives as outside the language. Because Kristeva was trying to locate the energy of maternity and the energy of language outside the Lacanian. symbolic. Because Kristeva considered the symbolic to be dominated by the male discourse, which excludes the female from its domain she considered the semiotic as the possibility to create signifiers of maternal space.

Like Freud, she propounds that meaning is constantly changing and differs as well as defers. There is no clarity, no destination but an on-going journey... a constant desire to make sense of Self. Subjectivity, according to Kristeva, never stabilizes. Our subjectivity is influenced by our surroundings. In the semiotic stage, a baby tries to imitate its surroundings even though it is unable to make sense of its surroundings. It doesn't understand the language spoken by adults but it tries to imitate it and patterns appear. It is only in the symbolic stage, which comes after the mirror stage or the experience of castration in the Oedipus Complex that the child begins to make sense of the world around it. There is no absolute distinction between the Subject and its surroundings. The Subject is permanently in an unresolved and incomplete state. Kristeva does not adhere to Freud's contention that the subject's consciousness is stable and meaningful. She explains that our consciousness is like a container that has permeable walls and as a result, constant filtration takes place between the levels of our consciousness and our surroundings. Unconscious material is not stored or locked. Thus, the Subject never feels itself to be knowable and organized rather always under a threat, in an unresolved state which is both exciting as well as dangerous, "as tempting as it is condemned" (Kristeva "Approaching Abjection" 1). A defensive position is taken up against this infiltration but not one that produces a subjectivity completely distinct and uninfluenced by its surroundings.

Kristeva also talks about how we identify ourselves with the body. Our body becomes synonymous with our identity. This fact is used by the social institutions to manipulate the body; to measure it and define its perimeters and ideal type. The body is reverential for us as our sense of selfhood is in its most simplistic way connected with the separation and integrity of the body. This separation is flawed as the body is fragile and temporary. Kristeva explains this beautifully by saying, "I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (*Powers of Horror: An essay on Abjection* 3). However, the Subject is always trying to establish itself and push away things that challenge its limits: "unflinching, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and

repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (Kristeva “Approaching Abjection” 1).

“The gagging is a re-dramatization of these separations and the intense questions they awaken, about the Self and its involvement with others, and about the interpenetration of separate states in general” (Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway 84). Kristeva maintains that no notion of selfhood can be developed without a simultaneous abjection. If we consider this in gender terms, commitment to the masculine comes only after a sense of fragmentation and separation from the feminine. The symbolic order is connected with the masculine, even with the patriarchal but the abject impulse is connected with the feminine especially the maternal as prior to the mirror stage, there is a pre-Oedipal indefiniteness that is preserved by the forces and flows that reject the distinct perimeters of the clean and proper body. The subject, before the mirror or Oedipal stage, is built around a sense of loss as Lacan seeks to return to the imaginary whereas Kristeva seeks to break the boundaries and reach the imaginary attacked the notion of subjectivity as well as the assumptions on which European knowledge systems, politics and morality are based. They completely abandoned the notion of a coordinated selfhood.

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