

Beyond Binary and Trauma: The Transformative Role of Language

Ms. Sruthi Mohan¹

Abstract

This paper attempts to erase the conventional dichotomy with regard to gender. Language is assumed to be the mightiest weapon that has the ability to bring about remarkable transformation that is required for the amelioration of the society. If so, language can act as an agency to blur the stereotypical need to conform to the dual accepted genders. The paper throws light on the need to include and accept the existence of other genders which are considered to be marginal and uncommon. When language becomes a neutralizing entity, the question of gender shall prevail over the parochialism of binaries. Moreover, this paper offers a foray into the perspectives of gender and how language operates as a transcending force.

Key words: gender, language, transcend, trauma, binary, supremacy, difference

Human beings have the tendency to perceive things in terms of binaries to comprehend concepts better. This is very obvious when it comes to gender. The question of gender prevails and pervades in the human psyche. Male- female dichotomy is considered to be an enduring instance of such a binary. The stereotypical conception of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers is the major impediment in erasing this binary. The categorisation of things into binaries limits one's choices. Rather than conforming to any of these accepted genders, one cannot ignore the possibilities for becoming both the genders at the same time, neither man nor woman, in between these genders, or being an entirely different gender. The use of gender- neutral pronouns is gaining currency these days. Apart from man and woman, there exist cisgender, agender, transgender, demigender, bigender, androgyne, gender fluid, bigender and so on. Language can be the mighty tool to subvert the conceptions pertaining to gender. It has the prowess to break the age-old gender mould. This attempt to disrupt gender binary will expand the horizon of possibilities.

When binaries are being introduced and practised in different realms, there arise traumatic events. It can be physical as well as psychological. The word 'trauma' has its literal meaning that of wound. It was originally confined to the medical field, but it has widened its semantic usage to diverse contexts. The psychological wound of gender bias takes more time to heal. Transcending gender binary is a grave matter to be discussed. One distinguishes things in dualities to attribute certain identities and uniqueness. This effort to discriminate people in terms of superficial aspects increases the need to conform to any one of the existing groups. "Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either/Ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities." (Dewey, 1916). The perception and division of concepts into dualities celebrates difference, at the same time it triggers the intermediate conceptions. Peter Elbow construes that "binary thinking can serve to encourage difference- indeed, encourage non- dominance, non- transcendence, instability, disorder" (01). While he contradicts the idea that binary thinking encourages non- dominance by summing up the contribution of the eminent feminist writer Helene Cixous thus: "Helene Cixous is one of the many voices arguing that wherever there are polar oppositions, there is dominance- some classic terms are day/night, sun/moon, reason/passion- and of course lurking behind all these pairs is usually gender: male/female. According to this critique, binary thinking almost always builds in dominance or privilege- sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly" (01).

Gender equality is an age-old problematic question and longing. Gender is not only something that one identifies with internally, it is something that demonstrates externally as well. It varies in terms of dress sense, appearance, language, behaviour, body language, physique and psyche. When there exists a clear-cut demarcation between two accepted genders, there arise issues with regard to supremacy. As the indicators of gender is

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru

complicated, when it comes to other genders apart from male and female, how convoluted it would be. This sort of distinction and othering leads to traumatic experiences.

Traumatic experiences are universal in nature. Loss, departure, disaster, death, destruction etc can bring traumatic experiences. The eminent Cultural Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth asserts that “In a catastrophic age, [. . .] trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves”(Caruth, 12). When cultures or communities confront certain traumatic experiences together, their collective consciousness might filter memories and these memories can impact their identities in the future. “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander,06). Such traumatic memories can impact on one’s linguistic choices and presentations.

Language can act as a glue to fix things with regard to gender issues. It can act as a transcending factor to neutralise the intricate gender binary issues. When it comes to literary theory, deconstruction advocates erasing binary oppositions. “Deconstruction seeks to undo all oppositions that, in the name of unity, purity, order, and hierarchy, try to eliminate difference” (Paul, 278). The feeling of trauma that is experienced by a community, be it women or transgender is not something that happens spontaneously or naturally. “The trick is to gain reflexivity, to move from the sense of something commonly experienced to the sense of strangeness that allows us to think sociologically. For trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society” (Alexander, 07). This societal construction of gender binary can be subverted through language.

Language is also gendered. With respect to salutations, the demarcation between ‘Mr’ and ‘Ms’, ‘sir’ and ‘madam’, one should always be aware of the possibilities of people who suffer to get categorized. This affects the feeling of oneness. Inclusion will remain as an unattainable abstract idea when such compulsion to conform to socially-constructed identities. Erikson makes a distinction between individual trauma and collective trauma thus:

By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively . . . By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.” But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared: . . . “We” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson, 153–4)

Transcending the binaries of gender conundrum requires the assistance of language. The trauma emerged due to tragic experiences pertaining to gender will bring a state of trance. Traumatic events get registered individually or collectively. “Trauma takes time to register and to be able to name it for what it is. It goes through different stages and makes itself felt in different registers at different times. Marking a decade can be given a special significance, but there is no evidence to say that it brings any kind of closure” (10, Seidler).

The role of language in traumatic experiences is multilayered and intricate. Language can be part of trauma or it can also be the cause of trauma. Language can also be used as a tool to relieve the pain of traumatic experiences through writing. Literary works like autobiography, memoir, and novel present such experiences. Roger Luckhurst asserts that “Literary or biographical texts often provide insights into connections between traumatic and linguistic experience” (214).

Language can also be a mighty weapon to harm people fatally. Judith Butler in her book *Excitable Speech* construes that “We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. We claim that language acts, and acts against us, and the claim we make is a further instance of language, one which seeks to arrest the force of the prior instance. Thus, we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in a bind that no act of censorship can undo” (01). People who got victimized by traumatic experiences are linguistically vulnerable. Berating the other can be done easily through language. The way society addresses the downtrodden itself is highly infectious. It makes the psychological injury will worsen. Butler probes into this issue thus:

In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. Thus the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one

it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response. If to be addressed is to be interpellated, then the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call. When the address is injurious, it works its force upon the one it injures. What is this force, and how might we come to understand its faultlines? (02)

Language is assumed to be the basis of thoughts. Through language, one's thoughts also get influenced. Trauma and the impending linguistic vulnerability can impact the very thought process of an individual. "...trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present. Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think"(21, Kolk).

Moreover, when communities face subjugation, their right to expression will also be curtailed. This act of silencing is even more dehumanizing. When language can be used as a tool to divide people and develop conflict among them, it can be employed as a unifying tool to wipe away the barbaric notion of demeaning the other. If language can negatively impact the psyche of the suppressed, it can impact in a positive way as well. When one adopts right perception towards issues like gender inequality, right language will be disseminated, right thoughts pertaining to gender will pervade.

To conclude, language can act as a transcending agency to erase the age-old gender binary. Language can lend voice to the voiceless. It has the prowess to control the misconceptions. When language becomes a neutralizing entity, the question of gender shall prevail over the parochialism of binaries.

References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.
- Brigitta Busch, Tim McNamara, Language and Trauma: An Introduction, *Applied Linguistics*, Volume 41, Issue 3, June 2020, Pages 323- 333, <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amaa002>.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Introduction to Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Culler, Jonathan. "Paul de Man's Contribution to Literary Criticism and Theory". *The Future of Literary Theory*. Ed. Ralph Cohen. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916.
- Elbow, Peter. "The Uses of Binary Thinking." *Journal of Advanced Composition*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1993, pp. 51–78. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20865892>. Accessed 20 Jun. 2022.
- Erikson, K. *Everything in its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976.
- Kolk, van der B. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking, 2014.
- Luckhurst, R. *The Trauma Question*. NY: Routledge, 2008.
- Seidler, Victor Jeleniewski. *Remembering 9/11: Terror, Trauma and Social Theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.