The Power within Power: A Semiotic Approach to Matrimonial Discourses in Bengal

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Abstract

The whims of patriarchy, undeniably, has engulfed our daily life. Patriarchy and the notion of gender are mutually inclusive: the spectrum is same though the operation within is different. Difference is also reflected in the stereotypical construct of marriage. The myth of a successful marriage is mostly sought through matrimonial advertisements. Linguistic manipulation is one of the major factors of matrimonial columns. It negotiates the relationship between the advertiser and the advertised. What kind of relationship they share? What are the different parameters and socio linguistic influences? The answer is sought for in this paper.

Method: A semiotic approach to Matrimonial advertisements in the context of Bengali community and a close reading of different matrimonial advertisements (one each from Grooms Wanted and Brides Wanted columns) from *The Telegraph*, one of the most widely circulated daily English newspapers in Eastern India, has been done with the help of CDA.

Finding: After considering all socio-cultural as well as semiotic aspects it has been found that in spite of gender discrimination and marginalization there is still hope for a better future where a 'handsome' man proudly declares himself to be worthy of a 'beautiful' woman. Those days are in the offing.

Discussion: The language of a matrimonial advertisement reflects the inseparable relation between a signifier and a signified. The prospect of a 'fair' woman undermines that of a 'not-so-fair' one. A CDA highlights also the social as well as cultural aspects of matrimonial columns. After decoding them it has been found that there are considerable changes in the socio-cultural as well as semiotic aspects of the matrimonial advertisements.

Keywords: *Matrimonial advertisement, patriarchy, CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis), signifier, signified.*

Patriarchy, a pervading phenomenon in human race, is irreplaceably intertwined with the notion of gender. It endangers the way a man or a woman is usually represented within its corpus. Gender, therefore, is a 'representational practice'[1] which subverts the female as the inferior male

and subsequently creates a space between two different individuals. The time and space involved in gender has a polyphonic image. It controls, subverts and simultaneously challenges patriarchy. Society, curiously, is 'no mosaic of individual existences looked in some stratified structure but a dynamic formation of relationships and practices constituted in large measure by struggles for power.'[2]

Physics of power is also manifested in the discourse of marriage. Marriages in India are mostly sought through matrimonial columns or sites or by employing a mediator. The myth of a successful marriage is a byproduct of such advertisements. It is the plurality and the inclusivity of such language which binds two unmarried persons together. We cannot deny the linguistic manipulation of such matrimonial discourses.

Discourse, therefore, 'is a highly contested term.'[3] 'Discourse is not only suprasentential'[4] but also functional in terms of language use. From this point of view, it refers to languages which communicate a meaning in a context. The linguistic interaction between the advertiser and the imagined reader of a matrimonial advertisement provides the context of the matrimonial discourses. It endorses an event which is practiced widely and celebrated across the world irrespective of any race, nation or class. The micro structures of advertisements and the macro structure of society exert influence upon each other and the conventions of the institution of marriage are ideologically shaped up by social relations and realized through different discourses like matrimonial columns, ads, websites etc. The advertiser controls, negotiates and manipulates the power of the language of such advertisements to reach his desired effect and the target reader. 'A newspaper is always very eclectic, from the stylistic point of view.'[5] and from a linguistic point of view, the language of advertising is too different from other newspaper articles/ journals. The underlying aim of a matrimonial discourse is to present a certain number of facts in as interesting a manner as possible to the advertised. It is interesting to find a power dynamic existing between the advertiser and the potential reader in such ads where the producer (advertiser) and the receiver (the reader) of the discourse hardly know each other. 'The relationship between discourse and social structure is dialectical in such a way that discourse assumes importance in terms of power relationships and power struggle.'[6]

The power struggle within evokes an intricate relationship between

gender and language. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the arrival of *parole*: gender and language use (with the focus being on gender differences), and *langue*: gender (bias) in a language (usually English) as an abstract system (with the focus being on individual words). Discourse, relevant to both, was still waiting in the wings. Lakoff's early work in both camps, in the form of *Language and Woman's Place* [7] is rightly acknowledged as both 'ground-breaking and seminal.' [8] Wodak defines gender in the introduction to her own edited collection, *Gender and Discourse*, [9] as the understanding of how what it means to be a woman or to be a man changes from one generation to the next, but also shows how this varies too with language users, i.e., between different racialized, ethnic, and religious groups, as well as for members of different social classes. Gender and its intelligible relation with discourse prompted me to do a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of matrimonial advertisements meant for the Bengali Community and a semiotic interpretation of two different matrimonial advertisements (one each from Grooms Wanted and Brides Wanted columns from the 21st Century) from *The Telegraph*, one of the most widely circulated daily English newspapers in Eastern India, in the context of the different races, creeds and cultures of India.

Discourse, then, involves social conditions, which can be specified as 'social conditions of production, and social conditions of interpretation.' [10] For Fairclough, 'critical' is used 'to show up connections which may be hidden from people—such as the connections between language, power and ideology.' [11] Therefore, as Cameron puts it, 'it is concerned not only with social injustice, inequality, power and power struggles, but also with exposing the subtle role of discourse in the construction and maintenance of injustice, inequality and domination.' [12] Since our argument has a social relevance, we cannot escape the temptation of following Fairclough's three-tiered concept of discourse, i.e., text, discursive practice and social practice. The 1st stage is concerned with the formal properties of the text, the second one is based on the relationship between text and interaction and the last one is developed on the basis of the relationship between interaction and its social context. Now, if we consider the Bengali matrimonial discourses as the text, the discursive practice of it would be:

1. Extensive matrimonial websites in different web addresses

2. Facebook and other online communities which try to sell the

concept of arranged love marriage by popularizing the concept of finding out a soulmate through navigating it.

3. Arrangement of Bengali Swayamvars to promote individual likes and dislikes.

4. 'Checkmates', 'lovebytes' etc. are highlighted in the matrimonial columns to attract the marriage-unwilling people and also the urban youth who don't believe in the concept of arranged marriages or arranged love marriages.

Discursive practice actually deals with the production, distribution and consumption of the discourse. Since CDA is more concerned with the social context and influence of a discourse, social practice of Bengali matrimonial discourses would be within the Bengali context something like this:

1. Gender inequality and discrimination is reduced.

2. Dowry won't be entertained.

3. Implementation of laws to stop social injustice/ violence against women.

4. Resistance to inter-caste/ inter-religious marriages.

5. Caste no bar/ religion no bar is highlighted in newspapers to raise the consciousness of these issues among the common people. Not only that, to reduce inequality, injustice or discrimination, advertisers of newspapers promise to reduce a certain amount of money if people get married following such dictums. The diagram of the text, discursive practice and social practice in the context of marriage has been attached with this paper.

S. Peirce's seminal work in the field of semiotics was anchored in pragmatism and logic. Following the footsteps of Saussure, he defined a sign as 'something which stands to somebody for something.'[13] One of his major contributions to semiotics was the categorization of signs into three main types: (1) an *icon*, which resembles its referent (such as a road sign for falling rocks); (2) an *index*, which is associated with its referent (as smoke is a sign of fire); and (3) a *symbol*, which is related to its referent only by convention (as with words or traffic signals). Peirce also demonstrated that a sign can never have a definite meaning, for the

meaning must be continuously qualified.

Marriage and matrimonial advertisements are part of the social rubrics. Following Peirce's words, in this paper, I tried to focus on the language of two matrimonial classifieds:

*Grooms wanted:*14th January, 2022 (*The Telegraph*) Bride 5'4"/ 26 years MA (Modern History), C.U., B.Ed. (C.U.), teacher of an English medium school (CBSE), father and two brothers Civil Engineer having well established business in civil engineering. *Bride is fair and possesses sweet nature.* Mother Baidya, father Napit. Suitable groom of Napit/ any caste welcome. Box (T) M8723 The Telegraph, Cal. -72.[14]

The italicized sentence indicates the social reality that however educated a woman might be, she is ultimately defined by her beauty and submissive nature. 'It divides her into the pleasing and the plain.'[15] She turns herself into an object which becomes sanctioned through the male gaze and the concept of femininity emerges out of such situation where the advertiser (mostly guardian, nowadays brides also advertise) proudly declares that the bride is fair enough to attract a presentable groom. By mentioning herself as a person of sweet nature she affirms her submissive image and foregrounds herself as female. She is not the daring, independent individual. Rather she is the submissive and passive girl who might be able to please her would-be family members through her pleasing personality and sweet nature. And her fair skin would be equally important in achieving her goal if we consider fair to be the signifier and the signified to be beautiful. The grey area that exists between the signifier and the signified disappears and the two finally converges into one. Her passivity and non-masculinity brighten up her future.

The external beauty of women was an object for male creativity and imagination. Men were driven thus to objectify women by felt notions of pleasure, gratification and desire. The male gaze may be said to represent the visceral, emotional and psychological expression of male authority, though ironically, 'women learnt to recognize and accept these various beauty norms as their own.'[16] As a result of this, 'women and girls, by actively desiring a certain sort of body or particular image, participate in the making of beauty norms.'[17] In any socio-cultural context a girl with an

ordinary look is considered valueless and she makes utmost efforts to change her look and present herself as attractive and admirable to the male gaze. Those who cannot live up to the norm 'are afflicted with a sense of inadequacy, guilt and jealousy, and most of all a corrosive anxiety that they would meet with male disapproval and indifference.'[18]

In the above advertisement, the bride's mother is a Baidya and her father is a Napit by caste. They seek either for a Napit boy or somebody from another caste—not necessarily Baidya, i.e., her mother's caste. The struggle for power is evident in this equation of gender where the mother's caste becomes negligible to her father's and the father's caste is the preferred one excluding the option of *any caste welcome*. Or it may mean that Baidya would be their second option while choosing among boys of any caste.

As Fairclough suggests, 'Power relations are always relations of struggle.[19] Most importantly, 'power of one class depends upon the maximization of its exploitation and domination of another.'[20] Here the father's identity dominates the identity of the bride by simply referring to his caste. Subtly 'the contributions exemplify the importance of context and situated meanings, and reflect and develop a view of gender as crucially fluid and dynamic.'[21] In the above-mentioned ad, the bride herself is a school teacher, yet she mentions the profession of her father and brothers to dominate her position in the hierarchy of power and subvert the equation of gender. She is financially independent and therefore, she does not have to rely on her husband's salary to live her life smoothly. Financially, she is not the passive or the subjugated one; rather, she controls the discourse. This confirms Foucault's view on sexuality that 'power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix – no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body.'[22] The advertiser uses an ambiguous language, i.e., *suitable groom*, to specify the criteria for selection of grooms. Surprisingly, the specification is more on the caste, trivializing other social parameters such as educational qualification, family status, salary package, physical appearance, etc. It is probable that the advertiser does not mention any specific requirement for the groom simply because it is expected that a

school teacher would automatically get responses from men who would either be financially equivalent or superior to her.

> *Brides Wanted*: (14th January, 2022) (*The Telegraph*) *Homely, really beautiful, minimum graduate, 23-28,* for Brahmin Chatterjee 33, 5'6", BE, *handsome groom* working in MNC. Own flat & car. Same gotra also acceptable. Contact: 9830262170.[23]

In this particular matrimonial discourse, if we look at the sequence of the required qualities of the prospective bride, homely comes first, really beautiful is the second criterion and her educational qualification is the last one. The modifiers homely and really beautiful denote the advertiser's search for a peaceful (patient / tolerant) homemaker who is simultaneously so beautiful that she could easily satisfy her husband's as well as the male dominated society's male gaze through her physical beauty. 'The shy beauty of the prospective bride'[24] reinforces the question of gender identity as she is being looked upon (by the advertiser) from the stereotypical concept of femininity as 'even the wealthiest and most powerful of women are perceived chiefly as mothers, wives, daughters or sisters.'[25] Her educational qualification is of secondary importance as the emphasis is mostly on her physical beauty and ability to become a good housewife. That is why, the advertiser does not seek a working woman. The language of the advertisement also implies that the groom is well-established as he owns both a flat and a car. We can also infer that the financial matters of the family would be controlled by the groom himself. This financial discrimination might cause a social struggle which aggravates a struggle for power.

Globalization has drastically changed the definition of consumerism and marketing. A fairness cream for men is a product of such marketing strategy. It also liberates the male from the stereotypical concept of masculinity which necessarily identifies his role either as careless (about his physical beauty), bold and the breadwinner or as the father/brother/husband i.e., stereotypically in the role of a protector in a wider socio-cultural domain. A man hardly hesitates to project himself as a handsome guy and doing so, just like women, he also becomes a commodity for women, implying a reversal in the discourse of gender. The signifier *handsome* 'could be seen as a challenge to the monolithic structure of traditional masculinity'[26] as it ends up in undermining the

privileges enjoyed so far by men. In this matrimonial advertisement the signifier handsome has been equaled with the signified beautiful. A man has to be handsome enough to attract a beautiful woman. It questions, subverts and challenges the stereotypical projection of gender. Both the handsome groom and the would-be beautiful bride are ready to undertake a newly defined gendered journey at the advent of a new morning.

The positioning of gender as represented in the Critical Discourse Analysis and in the semiotic analysis of the two matrimonial classifieds is only a microscopic view in the spectrum of the macrocosm of matrimonial advertisements in India. Further research in the larger context may foreground the individuals beyond their stereotypical roles promising of a new era devoid of any gender bias.

Social Practice

Under the purview of Bengali matrimonial columns, we find :
1. Gender inequality and discrimination are being reduced.
2. Dowry is not being entertained.
3. Implementation of laws to stop social injustice/ violence against women.
4. Promotion of inter-caste / inter-religious marriages.

Discursive Practice

1. Through Facebook and other online platforms, the concept of arranged love marriage is promoted by popularizing the concept of finding out a 'soulmate' in it.

2. Arrangement of Bengali Swayamvars to promote individual likes and dislikes.
'Checkmates' 'lovebytes' etc. are highlighted in the matrimonial columns to attract the marriage-unwilling people and also the urban youth who no more believe in the concept of arranged marriages or arranged love marriages.

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Endnotes :

1 Sara Mills, *Feminist Stylistics* (London: Routledge,1995), p.1.

2 Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman,1989), p.vi.

3 Discourse is explained and explored from different points of view: new researches and works would enhance this search.

4 Suprasentential- In communication, suprasentential is the grammatical unit in a discourse.

5 David Crystal and Derek Davy, *Investigating English Style* (London: Longman Group, 1973), p.173.

6 Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p.37.

7 Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp.20-22.

8 Lia Litosselitti and Jane Sunderland, eds. *Gender Identity and Discourse Analysis* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002), p.19.

9 Ruth Wodak, *Gender and Discourse* (London: Sage publications,1997), p.1.

10 Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p.10.

11 Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p.10.

12 Deborah Cameron, *Working with Spoken Discourse* (London: Sage, 2001).

13 Quoted by Umberto Eco, 'Social Life as a Sign System' in *Structuralism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Paladin Press, 1973).

14 *The Telegraph*, 14th January, 2022, ed. Sankarshan Thakur (Calcutta edition, ABP Pvt. Ltd.).

15 V. Geetha, *Gender* (Kolkata: Stree,2002), p.110.

16 Geetha, *Gender*, p.108.

17 Geetha, *Gender*, p.109.

18 Geetha, *Gender*, p.110.

19 Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p.vi.

20 Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p.vi.

21 Litosselitti and Sunderland eds. *Gender Identity and Discourse Analysis*, p.1.

22 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality an Introduction* (Westminster: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), p.93.

[23]   *The Telegraph*, 14th January, 2022.

[24]   Geetha, *Gender*, p.107.

[25]   From a broad point of view, individual struggle might lead to a social struggle.

[26]   Litosselitti and Sunderland, eds. *Gender Identity and Discourse Analysis*, p.1.