LANGUAGE, GENDER AND IDEOLOGY

CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMININITY FOR MARRIAGE

Saumya Sharma

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This book explores multiple facets of femininity for marriage in India. Using language as an entry point, it looks at how and why media representations of gender identities are constructed the way they are. It works with a unique synthesis of second-wave feminist discourse and empirical linguistic research to look at how the social institution of marriage becomes the site of interaction between language, ideology, psyche and culture. This volume also brings together the personal histories and views of women who discuss how media, modernity and social norms shape their ideas about marriage and selfhood.

Deconstructing perceptions of femininity in contemporary India, the book will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of sociology, gender studies, linguistics, media and cultural studies and psychoanalysis.

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To the Divine Spark whose grace is
constant and unbiased

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Preface

In India, weddings have become an enormously lucrative business, especially in the last decade or so, and this book traces how the phenomenon of bridal femininity in the wedding industry affects the lives of women. Over the years, I have keenly observed that bridal makeovers typically begin a few months before the wedding, but the gendering process of becoming a bride begins years before when directly or indirectly women are made to feel that they need to change themselves, to adapt and to groom so that they become suitable brides. Often this means adopting various forms of feminine behaviour and conforming to social norms. The media too whets the appetites of the consumers through bridal advice, images and products. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the media makes the wedding a once-in-a-lifetime 'show', where the bride is the 'showstopper' who is encouraged to become a consumer so that she is unanimously appreciated at the wedding and in that process gets consumed by others. I feel that the bridal discourses are very subtle and naturalized, and their influence is so pervasive that not much cognizance is given to the power they hold over the psyche of women and society in general. This is precisely one of the reasons that prompted me to undertake this study. The ubiquity of the phenomenon called the 'bride' needs as much attention as other social issues of women such as education and empowerment, and this book is a humble attempt to highlight that.

In writing this book, my family members supported and encouraged me, and I'd like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of them. I'd also like to thank my teachers, particularly Prof. Arora, for introducing me to the multilayered dimensions of discourse and sharpening my critical faculties. Special thanks to Aakash, Brinda and Arani for their help and suggestions. Lastly, I am eternally indebted to my Spiritual Masters for their grace, love and constant guidance in life, and in shaping this work.

Notes on the text

The terms that designate the bride's physical appearance in print matrimonial advertisements were manually counted and then their percentage calculated.

In the interview section, since the language of the interviewees was a mix of English and Hindi, a literal translation in English of what they spoke in Hindi has been given beneath the original text. This was done by the researcher herself to remain as close as possible to their responses, since Hindi is her native language.

A few discourse fillers that have no English equivalent have not been translated such as *arre, yaar, na*. The researcher has given explanations of what the respondents said in square brackets.

Throughout the book, the researcher has used the following terms interchangeably:

1 Matrimonial advertisements/matrimonials
2 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)/critical discourse studies (CDS)
3 Ideology/ideologies
4 Femininity/femininities

Introduction

A leading English daily, the *Times of India* (*TOI*), recently published an article which discussed the emergence of the 'anti-bride' who does not follow the typical norms of the bridezilla – that of donning a traditional gaudy attire, being cosmetically laden, flaunting intricate *mehendi* on arms and legs, perpetually panicking about her appearance, constantly anxious about the last-minute wedding details and spending exorbitant sums of money on the 'event of a lifetime': marriage!' Instead, the 'anti-bride' is calm, confident, thoughtful and rational, follows her will, chooses to be thrifty yet creative in all her endeavours and uses her money judiciously. From this seemingly neutral description, several issues arise that form the basis of this book. Firstly, the use of the phrases 'anti-bride' and 'bridezilla' are not only markers of labelling women in a particular way but also their specific linguistic structure signifies a lot about the manner of labelling. The expression 'anti-bride' is the opposite of the term 'bride', which contains the presupposition of 'being bridal' or 'behaving like a bride', while the label 'bridezilla' is a morphological blend of 'bride' and 'Godzilla', meaning a bride obsessed about her wedding preparations, connoting unreasonableness, fussiness and perfectionism in every detail of trying to make the marriage ceremony a grand, gigantic affair! Thus, language is used for labelling how a bride is or is not and should or should not be (for instance, she ought to be shy, coy, petite, demure and never frank, brazen or vocal), thereby structuring the bride and society's expectations of her and her wedding day.

The other related issue that surfaces is bridal ideology and its relation to femininity. In recent years, the Indian wedding has become an extensively discussed affair as noted by marketing studies:

> The Indian culture is traditional yet contemporary, it moves on with time. There are certain things about India that are famous worldwide, like: the Indian Marriage. Time has changed but the lavishness has always been an integral and indispensable part of Indian marriages . . . Wedding is a big occasion in different subcultures in India, and big opportunity too for luxury brands in categories like apparel and jewellery.
>
> (Dave and Dhamija 2013: 166)

In all the lavishness and celebration, the image of the bride represents the pinnacle of consumerism and commodification. The bride is both a representative and a target of the media frenzy surrounding the wedding that has built up in the last decade or so. Women's magazines, matrimonial advertisements, television shows, etc., are centred on the bride, telling her to look, talk, walk and behave in specific ways that reinforce normative heterosexuality. The print and the electronic media focus on different attributes and images of the bride. Indian families in print matrimonial advertisements demand and exhibit particular kinds of brides without much variation, revealing the discourses of commodification, narcissism, femininity and heteronormativity continuing the matrimonial demand-supply chain in society. In newspapers, magazines and wedding blogs, would-be brides and young women readers are advised to dress, appear and conduct themselves in particular ways that conform to the standards of femininity. In bridal television shows, women often deck themselves out in a manner that enhances their bridal femininity, projecting themselves as a contradictory phenomenon: modern yet traditional. This normalization of brides, to use Foucault's term (1977/1995), is very pervasive and powerful, for it creates images of the bride (through verbal and nonverbal language) that are hard to ignore. Multiple discourses interact to produce the bride as an epitome of beauty and femininity. In every discourse, we find commonsensical assumptions that society has naturalized and accepted to such an extent that they provide a broad framework for the creation and functioning of actual brides and would-be brides. In other words, bridal ideology is not a monolithic structure made up of a single ideology but of multiple ideologies that are present in the media discourses and those created by participants. In Althusser's

terms (1971), ideology is perpetuated by consent of ideological state apparatuses such as family, religion, school and media that systematically enforce norms of appropriacy for a particular phenomenon. In the case of brides, not only do the print and electronic media perpetuate perfect and narcissistic bridal images but also family, relatives, friends and in-laws expect young women to behave and look in certain set manners, reinforcing norms of femininity. As Althusser states, "Everyday life provides us with innumerable examples of this [ideological state apparatuses], but they must be studied in detail if we are to go any further than this mere observation" (1971: 145). In this book, I examine bridal discourses and images from three kinds of print media – namely, matrimonial advertisements, newspapers and women's magazines – using tools from CDA (vocabulary, speech acts, transitivity, modality, sentence structure, intertextuality) to highlight how the ideologies of femininity are pervasively embedded in everyday forms of media and their power in creating the phenomenon of the 'bride'. I use the term brides-to-be for women who are of marriageable age and whose families are searching for grooms, some even having placed matrimonial advertisements in newspapers, and the term 'brides' for the ones who are already married. My respondents are both married and unmarried women, the latter of marriageable age who engage in various forms of femininity to become suitable brides.

The scrutiny of bridal ideology is an exploration of the ways in which brides are implicitly and explicitly expected to be feminine. Thus, the topic of femininity is of utmost relevance here. However, in linguistics, though there are empirical studies on femininity, not much theorizing is available. This book attempts to bridge the gap between 'theory' and 'data' by discussing the views of second-wave feminist thinkers (Beauvoir 1952/1989; Greer 1970/2008; Friedan 1963/2001) and material feminists (Smith 1990/1993), along with the empirical research of linguists (Coates 1996; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). Not only does this book present a comparative and detailed analysis of the views of feminist thinkers on femininity but also discusses them in the light of performativity of gender (Butler 1990) and ideological mapping (Althusser 1971) to highlight their relevance in the matrimonial scene. In this way, the book specifically addresses the issue of femininity, its multiple facets and its role in the socialization of brides and brides-to-be. Although there are many works on masculinity, sustained discussion of femininity in linguistics that focusses on theory and empirical research is not common. Furthermore, this book provides detailed discussions

of gender representations in the media on the specific topics of femininity and bridal femininity (in Western and Indian contexts), stringing together the theoretical discussions with research.

Media discourses are very much a form of mediated communication, controlled and governed both at the micro and macro levels, thus another dimension is that of the actual reality of people, their responses and experiences of becoming a bride, the manner in which they have been gendered or feminized and to what extent and, lastly, their views as active consumers of media texts, both newspapers and magazines. As Dorothy Smith advocates, "Organization of the actualities of people's experienced worlds . . . as their experiencing participates in and is shaped by that organization" (1993: 2). Moreover, media reception studies is an increasingly popular area in media research but has been largely overlooked by CDA analysts (Fairclough 1989); therefore, this book forms a link between critical theory and textual analysis of media texts, drawing from feminist, Marxist, Foucauldian and critical linguistic strands. I have endeavoured to understand the various discourses that construct the identities of women and how their personal histories and subjectivities are shaped by the dominant discourses of our times. Are young women just pawns, acting according to ideological norms of society, or do they have the power to articulate their concerns and resist the dominant bridal discourses? Is the truth about their lives a dynamic, sociopsychological reality, as evinced in their discourses? A related issue in exploring the voices of brides-to-be and brides is their psychological reality, especially their attitudes, emotions and desires, and whether their psyches were changed in becoming brides, and if so, then in what manner and by whom, making the bride a psychosocial object of inquiry. This book deals with just this: *becoming* a bride.

Long before a woman gets married, she is gendered to become one, as famously said by Beauvoir (1989), and I have tried to examine the gendering patterns, the long-held notions of femininity and the psychological states of young women in becoming brides. The present work seeks to answer the following questions:

1 How do married and unmarried women understand bridal femininity?
2 What are women's experiences in being gendered to become perfect brides? In what ways have they engaged in, challenged or resisted femininity, and how has that shaped their identities?

3   What are the social practices, knowledge and beliefs around femininity, marriage and matrimonial advertising, and who is responsible for their perpetuation in society?
4   What are their responses to matrimonial advertisements as women and as brides, as well as to wedding advertisements/ articles as consumers?
5   What is the role of desire and its interaction with the ideologies of femininity in creating the subjectivities of women?

While some issues raised by feminist thinkers have found support in this study, others have been modified. For instance, feminist thinkers often refer to patriarchy as a monolithic norm, but empirical evidence shows that patriarchy includes parents, family, relatives and friends, making the family a nodal point for transmission of ideologies of femininity. Both male and female members of the family can be patriarchal, while evidence also shows that sometimes men can be anti-patriarchal too! Another notion that has been challenged is that of women as passive readers. Women are not cultural dopes (Hall 1981), but they actively engage with media texts through their personal histories to question, dislike, support, resist and transform social discourses. Yet another issue is the dichotomy between what the media says a bride should be and what a bride or bride-to-be thinks of it. Their attitudes, beliefs and emotions are examined to understand them as targets, as consumers and as individuals.

   Studies in CDA (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 1998; Wodak 1991, 1996, 1997) focus on the social constructivist aspect, ignoring the psyche of the individual. Though van Dijk's work is sociocognitive in nature, he too ignores questions of desire. On the other hand, we have discursive psychologists (Billig 1991; Edwards 1997) and psychoanalysts (Frosh et al. 2003) who have increasingly employed some form of discourse in their interpretative studies. My work is not strictly psychoanalytical, but it is an attempt to understand the psychological workings of the feminine 'mind' as it operates in the social sphere. Like Young and Frosh (2009), I believe that the individual is determined by both social and psychological forces at multiple, intricately related levels. Thus, it is important to examine the emotions, beliefs, attitudes and desires of women in interaction with ideological social currents that construct the bride as a psychosocial phenomenon. I employ van Dijk's mental models (1998) along with the concept of desire. Mental models allow us to view

the personal histories and opinions of people concerning events and texts, while desire is seen in two ways in my work: women's desire for recognition and appreciation that goads them to engage in different forms of femininity, and women as 'desiring' consumers (Coward 1984) of magazines, bridal jewellery, clothes, etc. Why does the bride have a desire to become something else and to attain perfection? What are her desires as a consumer, and how are they related to capitalist ideology? In today's market-driven economy, where the wedding broadly revolves around the bride, examining her socially and psychologically highlights how the individual, the family and the society are intertwined in multiple ways. Even though these relations are deeply entrenched and are difficult to change, change is possible. Women's transformative discourse can be truly transformative if they are supported by the custodians of patriarchy; until then, women can submit, question, challenge or resist societal norms as my women respondents have done, for resistance is the first laudable step towards liberation.

Gender, feminism and femininity

Since the publication of Robin Lakoff's seminal essay 'Language and Woman's Place' (1973/1975), the field of language and gender has increasingly expanded to produce a large number of works in diverse fields relating to woman's and men's lives, so much so that there is now a 'feminist linguistics' corresponding to and also borrowing from feminist thinkers. The plethora of research on language and gender cannot be summarized in this short space, but suffice it to say that it is not restricted to women, but encompasses issues of masculinities (Connell 1987, 1995; Frosh et al. 2002) and sexualities as well. In the following pages, I'll give a brief overview of the development of the field of language and gender, the major works and their critiques, followed by a detailed discussion of the notion of femininity, drawing on the works of sociologists, feminist thinkers and feminist linguists. I'll then discuss the importance of feminism in contrast to the troubling notion of postfeminism, laying down my aims and approach for this book.

Language and gender: a brief overview

Researchers in language and gender usually distinguish between sex and gender, where the former is considered biological and the latter a social construct. Broadly, the studies in this field can be divided into those that treat gender as a variable (see Jesperson, Labov Trudgill in this chapter) and those in which there is an active feminist intervention in the analysis of gender. Jesperson, in his work *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922/1998), described the differences in the speech of men and women in terms of phonology, grammar, vocabulary, etc. Not only did he find tribal

differences in their speech, such as the use of a different vocabulary in the Swahili system when talking of sexual life, but also in general, the quickness of women's thoughts was matched by the use of the pronominal system (he or she), and they used a lexis that was more refined and contained more euphemistic substitutes ("the other place" for "hell") and adverbs of intensity ("awfully pretty", "quite charming", "so lovely") because of their "fondness for" hyperbole, and they left "their exclamatory sentences half finished" (Jesperson 1998: 234–7), which lent a distinct feminine touch to their speech. In contrast, men used more rugged language, replete with swear and taboo words. The field found impetus in early sociolinguistic research that was mostly quantitative, relying on the interview method as found in Labov (1966) and Trudgill's (1972a) works. Such studies were largely correlational in nature, where the principal aim was to find differences in pronunciation largely on the basis of social class, ethnicity and biological sex – men versus women – showing the use of standard and nonstandard forms, and differences in speech styles by both or either of the genders in Norwich, Belfast and New York (Labov 1966; Trudgill 1972a, 1972b; Cheshire 1982; Milroy 1992). However, when it came to the female gender, conflicting results were found. For instance, Trudgill reported that women were more status conscious and showed a tendency to use the standard forms because of their insecure status in society as compared to the nonstandard, working-class speech that possessed "desirable connotations for male speakers" (1972a: 183), probably as a sign of masculinity. However, Lesley Milroy's work titled *Language and Social Networks* (1980) challenged the notion of women being more conscious of standard forms of speech than men, identifying the role of social networks in the speech of each of the genders as a social group. However, in these studies, gender was considered a monolithic, unproblematic, given entity, and not much attention was given to the social positions, roles and other factors that required men and women to behave and talk in particular ways – for instance, professional requirements (Eckert 1989; Litosseliti 2006; Sunderland 2006a).

From the 1970s, there was an upsurge in research on gender known by various names: the deficit and dominance approaches. The former claimed to describe and establish how woman's language was different from and deficient to men's language, while the latter focussed on the inequalities suffered by women and their domination by men through language, with the latter being known

as sexism from the 1960s. Women's continued and systematic oppression was a sign of how they were complicit in perpetuating their plight. As Jennifer Coates states, quoting Zimmerman and West, "Doing power is often a way of doing gender" (2004: 6). One of the seminal works that was typical of the deficit approach was Lakoff's article. Here, her aim was twofold: to establish a 'women's language' by citing detailed examples of gender differences in speech and to highlight how English language was derogatory towards women in the choice and connotations of words, making her work one of the first treatises on sexism in English. Lakoff's arguments mostly revolved round vocabulary and what is now known as discourse markers in discourse analysis – that is, hedges, particles and euphemisms (Schiffrin 1994). She put forward the following points:

1   Women showed "far more precise discriminations while naming colours" (1973: 49) – a domain that was decidedly nonmasculine and thus reinforced their subordinate status.
2   Their frequent use of tag questions was a syntactic marker of less confidence and assertion. The peculiar combination of the rising intonation for a declarative answer performed a similar function.
3   Their use of adjectives was particularly feminine ("adorable, lovely, charming, sweet, divine"), while men could use neutral words ("great, terrific cool, neat") (1973: 51).
4   Euphemisms (passed away instead of died, put down rather than killed), hedges (words that tone down the intensity of an assertion), intensifiers and apologies were more common among women, which clearly denoted their desire to not displease anyone.
5   The particles used by them ('oh dear', 'oh goodness') were symptomatic of the discriminatory gendering process of girls and boys; "docility and resignation" (ibid.) were expected of girls, while boys could be more forceful and boisterous.
6   Many words in the English language portrayed women in a negative light when their meanings were contrasted with corresponding words for men – a process later known as semantic derogation, such as spinster/bachelor, master/mistress, widow/widower, the use of titles, etc.

Though Lakoff wished to reveal that "linguistic imbalances" were "worthy of study because they bring into sharper focus real

world imbalances and inequities" (1973: 73), yet she was criticized for her observational and anecdotal methodology of data collection, considered by many as conjectural analysis that would not promote further research in this area. She was also censured for treating the language use of women as markers of their subjugated status and for her rather vocal stance on the dominance approach (see Hall and Bucholtz 1995 for a full review; also see Cameron, McAlinden and Leary 1988). Also, her claim about tag questions lead to a number of studies that found varying or no differences (see Fishman 1980; Baumann 1976; Hartman 1976), and thus the search for real differences between the genders remained inconclusive (Crawford 1995). On the basis of their study of female witnesses in the courtroom, O'Barr and Atkins (1980) asserted that the features of women's language were inaccurate for the social status of the participants, and their previous experiences in the courtroom played a major role in their speech. Lakoff's work was also criticized for assuming intrinsic deficiency in women's language and the fact that they need to appropriate men's speech if they wish to be viewed seriously (Coates 2004).

The second dominance approach was exemplified in Dale Spender's works such as *Man-Made Language* (1980), *Men's Studies Modified* (1981), *Invisible Women* (1982) and *Feminist Theorists* (1983); however, *Man-Made Language* remained by far her most popular and anthologized work, wherein she asserted the non-neutrality of language that firstly served the interests of men and secondly was instrumental in producing and maintaining their domination, and simultaneously the verbal abuse of women because of the way language named, labelled and created reality. Like Lakoff, Spender too has been criticized for stating that syntax and semantics are man-made yet not providing enough evidence of that, and of the unclear use of the words 'meaning', 'semantics', 'structure' and 'symbol' in her work (Black and Coward 1981). In fact, her loose terminology weakens her arguments (Talbot 2010).

Another linguist in this tradition who supported her claims with rigorous empirical work was Pamela Fishman, famously describing women's speech as 'conversational shitwork' (1983). In her celebrated article title 'Interaction: The Work Women Do', she endeavoured to analyse mixed-sex conversations of three heterosexual couples "demonstrating how verbal interactions helps to construct and maintain the hierarchical relations between men and women" (1983: 89). Her results largely supported Lakoff's claims. She found

that women asked more than double the questions as compared to men; they were five times more frequent users of discourse markers such as 'you know'; women's minimal responses displayed support in comparison to the lack of interest shown by men through their minimal responses. Also, men made twice as many statements as women, invariably receiving responses from their spouses; the topics initiated by women were mostly met with failure because of minimal responses by men, thereby showing that women did the hard work in conversations to maintain it. An interesting point made by Lakoff was that the success of men's talk and the failure of women's were not because of an inherent quality in the genders but because of the support or lack of it from the opposite gender, thus reinforcing the power imbalance in relationships and language. The dominance approach has been criticized for its marked emphasis on male domination by not providing enough contextual and specific evidence for it. Also, scholars may face ethical and interpretative problems in recording and analysing the private issues of men and women because of the nature of the research topic (Talbot 2010).

The third wave of language and gender research began round the 1980s and was characterized by the difference approach, where the focus was not so much on producing an anti-patriarchy and anti-male diatribe, but on emphasizing the difference between the two genders on the assumption that their subcultures were different. In fact, this approach was more of a backlash against the hitherto subordinate status of women. Although Coates is of the view that "the advantage of the difference model is that it allows women's talk to be examined outside a framework of oppression and powerlessness" (2004: 6), the dimension of power was a regular feature of Tannen's works. Tannen was influenced by Maltz and Borker's (1982) paper on male-female miscommunication, which proposed that different subcultural upbringings were responsible for language differences between the genders; in other words, men and women talked differently because they learnt to talk so while growing up. Tannen (1990) used this argument to present a large array of data from different settings (family, business, friendship, teen talk, etc.) to show that women and men's speech was organized in the following patterns that resulted in miscommunication:

1   Men's conversation was oriented towards maintaining their status, even if it required one-upmanship, while women talked to support and cooperate with others.

2   Independence of opinion was a feature of men's talk unlike women's, whose speech indicated intimacy and sharing.
3   Men were problem solvers and generally gave advice, but women's talk showed their need for understanding and sympathy. This was most visible in cases where women shared a problem, expecting sympathy but receiving clear-cut solutions.
4   Women would prefer to compromise than assert themselves and have a conflict of opinion, whereas men would prefer the latter.
5   Men usually talk to provide information in comparison to women for whom conversation was a means of sharing their innermost feelings and experiences.
6   Indirect requests using the 'let us' structure were not a part of men's conversational repertoire, but were mostly found in women's speech.

Tannen advocated that many misunderstandings and power asymmetries could be avoided if each gender made an attempt to understand the other's speech style, because gender was embedded in our everyday acts and talk, and "masculinity and femininity in our ways of behaving" when "all the while" people believed that they were "simply acting naturally" (1990: 144). Thus, unknowingly, Tannen highlighted the constructivist approach to gendered behaviour and talk, the focus of recent linguistic research, indicating how it was absorbed and internalized.

Tannen (1994) followed this with another investigation that explored the ambiguity and polysemy of linguistic strategies to highlight dominance, solidarity and cultural differences in gender in mixed-sex conversations. Through a detailed examination of conversational patterns (interruptions, cohesion, silence, indirectness, verbal aggression), Tannen "argued against the misconception that a 'cultural' approach to gender and a 'dominance' approach are mutually exclusive and opposed to each other" (1994: 218) for culture serves as a unique platform for mediating relationships and creating identities along both dimensions. Writings by Jennifer Coates also fall under this tradition. Like Tannen, Coates (1996) relies heavily on empirical evidence (ethnographic interviews) to show the linguistic strategies (hedges, questions, interruptions, overlap) employed by women in their discourses of collaboration, support and friendship, and the role of narratives in constructing their personal identities. The influence of post-structuralism could be seen