



THE USE OF LANGUAGE IN BELL HOOKS' BOOK 'FEMINISM IS FOR EVERYBODY: PASSIONATE POLITICS'

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A writer, a feminist theorist, a cultural critic, bell hooks is all of this and much more, she is a woman. Born as Gloria Jean Watkins in 1952 in an African American family in what was a 'racially-charged' America, her writings inevitably acquired the role of analysing race and gender relations. A social activist and professor, Watkins took her nom de plume from her maternal great-grandmother Bell Blair Hooks. Her writing often focuses on the interplay of race and gender in a fiercely capitalistic society and how in the absence of social intervention this interplay perpetuates a tendency towards injustice and class dominance.

A prolific writer, hooks has written extensively on women, feminism, mass media, race, class, and gender in education, art, history, and sexuality in her books. She has to her credit over thirty books, various scholarly and mainstream articles and has delivered a number of public lectures on these issues. But most importantly, she has always offered an open-hearted and welcoming vision of gender, sexuality, and society in most of her inspiring volumes. The language hooks uses is not a very metaphoric or hard to decode. She has a provocative style of writing and an easy way to make people understand the very core meaning of the term 'feminism'.

A large part of our global populace looks at feminism as movement of misguided missiles hell bent on destroying gender relations. Much like the public discrediting of the term 'secularism' in India in recent years, feminism, over the years, has become a dirty word. A major reason for this negative perception of the movement, perhaps stems from the fact that the true message of feminism has failed to reach the general populace. In the absence of simplified messaging, anti-feminists who had interest in discrediting the movement, managed to achieve their purpose.

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This is why I have chosen her book 'Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics' which is a telling commentary on why feminism is important, and not just for women. In this particular book, hooks has not only emphasized on her points of views and opinions but also makes people understand her version of feminism which she has used in various examples from her life. The way this book is written and presented shows how in reality feminism is around everyone and, hence, it is for everybody.

Feminism is a human rights movement. It is about proclaiming equal rights for every human being, men or women. And hooks said, "I want to be holding in my hand a concise, fairly easy to read and understand book; not a long book, not a book thick with hard to understand jargon and academic language, but a straightforward, clear book – easy to read without being simplistic."

One of the distinct arguments of the book is that feminism can be applied to men also. And this aspect is what she has spread in her book throughout because in her opinion, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression." Through this book at least, hooks argues that feminism is not an abstruse term used just by a few sloganeering women, but it concerns the whole of our society and in a broader view, the world.

hooks has always focussed her writings on the need for solidarity between races, classes, and more importantly between genders. She believed that a change in the society can be brought up by not just the struggle of one gender, or one race, but by a uniform effort by everyone in the society irrespective of gender, caste, race, or class. She wanted men to promote feminism as much as she wanted women to stop oppression.

Language is the face of any civilisation. The evolution of a civilization can be tracked by examining the evolution of its language. According to Mark N. Brock and Yoshie Nagasaka, "Within our own social group, we normally find it quite easy to use language appropriate to a variety of communicative settings. This is because language is used in fairly regular ways. One source of this regularity is that members of social group follow general patterns of behaviour expected by the group."

Surely the human psyche differs from one person to another but in a broad categorisation, males and females have distinctive ways of viewing, perceiving, and analysing the same object. Hence, it would not be incorrect to say that what men would write on a particular



subject would be different from what a woman would write on the same subject. The use of language may be same but the viewpoint would differ.

According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, “Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the empirical centre – whether achieved by displacing native languages by installing itself as a standard against other variants which are constituted as ‘impurities’, or by planning the language of empire in a new place – remains the most potent instrument of cultural control.”

Language also often becomes a rhetorical device in an environment that champions cultural nationalism. The renewed focus on Hindi as the source of cultural pride after the accession of a right wing government in India, is a case in point.

However, when it comes to English language, it is undoubtedly seen that the feminist movement has influenced the language in a huge way. The demolition of patriarchy in a language heralds a new mind-set. The emergence of feminist movement was a result of the subjugation of women over centuries. By demanding equal rights for one half of the world’s population, the first feminists shook the world by a great force. It was inevitable for the movement to have an impact on the language.

English is a very liberal language and it can easily mould itself according to the situation and period. The UNO has declared English as an international language along with Russian, Chinese, German, and French. Hence, English is a *lingua franca* and an official language for all the diplomats around the world.

There have been cultural nuances in the same language used to different people. The same happens with English. The feminist ideologies vehemently questioned the gender-specific usage of the language in terms like ‘spokesman’, ‘chairman’ etc. The push for gender neutral terminology in language came from the feminist movement. Feminists advocated the use of person, nurse, and server in places of man/woman, male nurse, and waitress. The language was altered once again according to a neo ideology.

For instance, for an unmarried or a married man we use ‘Mr.’ (mister) but for an unmarried woman we use ‘Miss’ while ‘Mrs.’ (short for mistress used to mean ‘wife’) for a married woman. The feminist writers popularised a parallel usage of ‘Ms.’ for both married and unmarried woman. Hence, feminists propagated a more non-sexist language by using



humanity instead of mankind, chairperson instead of chairman, handmade or artificial instead of manmade, and artisan instead of craftsman.

Creative writing was considered primarily a male-centred activity but when the wave of feminism arose, feminist writing also came to the surface and it flagged the victory of females over the patriarchal society of the west. It became the political statement for raising the consciousness of women. This challenged the stereotyping of women by male writers and a more genuine and original picture of a woman came to fore by the women writers.

The essential purpose of language is communication. As Noam Chomsky, who is considered to be the father of modern linguistics, said that language usage rules may differ from person to person. We may use simple and easy words when dealing with children but when talking to our friends, we may use those words and jargons that are common amongst our friends. And when we publicly speak the same thing we may use different vocabulary and perhaps some difficult and complex sentences.

bell hooks used a very simple and easily understandable language in her book. It is very important to use simple language when dealing with a subject that most people think is irrelevant to a major section of the society.

hooks believed in the transformative power of language and wrote books in order to ignite the fire of feminism and exhort people to stand against sexist oppression. She became a master in turning personal pain into public energy and that is why she often cited her personal experiences as examples in her books.

However, hooks has been criticised many times for her style of writing. Liberals and conservatives alike have criticised her informal style of writing. hooks' first book was 'Ain't I a Woman: Black Women in Feminism' and hooks was slammed by critics for her 'ahistorical' and 'unscholarly' style of writing. Many even complained about the absence of footnotes in the book. Also, hooks does not provide any bibliography for her work making it difficult to find the editors and publication information which was pointed out by K. N. Abraham. hooks explains in 'Theory as Liberatory Practice' that her lack of conventional academic format was "motivated by the desire to be inclusive, to reach as many readers as possible in as many different locations as possible."



KeishiaNicole Abraham criticises hooks, saying that, hooks wants to reach a broader readership perhaps by assuming that the average person has "no real interest or knowledge about who really wrote what ideas and where we can look for more thoughts on similar subjects" or "she mean[s] that we are lazy readers who have not the sophistication to grapple with the complications of an endnote".

However, hooks never felt anything wrong in her unorthodox writing and it soon became a trademark of her writing style. Using short sentences with easy words was something writers and authors did not prefer. But hooks wanted to reach a wider and diverse readership for her books. She did not write to praise feminism rather she wrote to spread awareness to those who did not know the difference between the oppressor and the oppressive.

In a rigidly patriarchal society, hooks broke barriers like many other feminists. She participated in radical freedom struggles and influenced others to awaken their spirit of rebellion.

Sharing experiences that would have been extremely personal, and bypassing the literary elite through her quotidian writing, hooks attempted to democratise the feminist movement. She used a language style that could be comprehended by anyone irrespective of class, gender or educational background. This was her way of initiating feminism out of the elite, into the masses.

Being a scholar of Women's Studies, I often come across the statement that sex is a biological characterisation and gender a social role. Through her writing, hooks emphasized this fact further in her book. In fact, "Feminism is for Everybody" is endorsement of this maxim. The writing in her book never over emphasised the fact that racial differences are prominent or vital in feminism. Being a coloured woman, hooks never used the language that by any way tries to showcase the racial influence on her. She spoke as a human being in quest for equal rights for everybody; not as a woman or a black woman in a society marked by racial and gender discrimination.

Through this book, hooks explains that people's mind sets needed to be changed. The general notion of feminism in the minds of most people remains one of a movement started by a bunch of angry women who wanted to be like men. That feminists hate men is an absurd though popular belief. When juxtaposed against such misguided beliefs, hooks'



subtle and simple writing shows how important it is to understand the real meaning of feminism.

hooks always put emphasis on the elimination of racism, class elitism, and imperialism. She dreamt of freedom and justice and wanted people to realise that we are “created equal”. Through this book, she wanted people to be aware of the true meaning of feminism and how it can touch and change a person’s life. Her books’ introduction ends with the sentence “Come closer and you will see: feminism is for everybody.”

hooks was only in her teens when she became aware of the rampant male domination in her society. She started rebelling against the patriarchal thinking at that young age and found feminism as a foundation of equality and justice to stand on.

Even the chapterisation of the book is very direct and to-the-point. The way the contents are written anyone can easily understand what the respective chapters deal with. For instance, the first chapter is named ‘Feminist Politics: Where we stand’. One can decipher from the name that it deals with the start of feminism as a movement and how it delves into the politics of the time. She has made a point to not only deliver through writing what she wants to say but also to incorporate those views that has created feminism as a kind of a culture. To understand feminism, however, is to imply that all sexist thinking and action is a problem.

Sigmund Freud used to describe feminism and masculinity as biological characteristics. But many prominent feminists criticised Freudianism, some of those feminists are Kate Millet, Betty Friedan, and Germaine Greer et al. Jacques Lacan used his linguistic approach in explaining the “women are the victims of ‘identity crisis’ under the ‘law of the Father’.”

Feminism originated in the west during the late 18th century. The first feminist work in the western society was that of Mary Wollstoncraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Then the first American feminist against the phallogocentric society was Margaret Fuller who wrote *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in 1845. Thereafter many others initiated the feminist consciousness in writing such as, Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, John Stuart Mill, and Olive Schreiner.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (The Second Sex), in 1949, rebelliously asked the patriarchal world about the status and role of a woman in such a society. Most of the early feminists wrote passionately in advocacy for a world uncoloured by gender discrimination



and stereotypes. The early feminists were working in the anti-racist and anti-classist settings to raise the common issue of sexism. Mass media helped them along in their quest to raise pertinent issues of rights -- about freedom to have abortion, freedom of sexuality, freedom to live as a lesbian, to challenge rape and domestic violence and above all to demand equity at the workplace as 'equal pay for equal work'.

As the movement progressed, it was seen that anti-male was not the feminist consciousness anymore. Larger issues came to light and broader views were discussed. All this while, communication was the key for the feminists to take their points across, to argue against injustice and to make people see reason in their arguments. Different communicators used different writing styles to drive home their points. Many appealed to the elite, and some could make a mark on the general populace.

Our ability to communicate does not guarantee that two speakers will use the exact choice of words to express the same idea. Hence, what or how hooks wrote might not have been acceptable to some intellectuals but it was easy for others to understand and relate to.

hooks' writing may be referred to as the idiosyncratic difference because as Chomsky had said that every individual is different and the way of his/her expression of language also differs. There may be variations in the usage of language amongst the family members living under the same roof.

hooks clearly believes that feminists are not born, they are made. She often emphasised the fact that being born a woman does not make someone a feminist. One has to believe in the feminist politics through choice and action. Feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression and not only women but also there are many men who believe in the movement.

The formation of Women's Studies as an academic discipline gave another platform where students can be aware of feminist theories and concepts. hooks wanted to teach these concepts and theories through her books. She did not want to sound as a preacher or an intellectual elitist and, hence, she used the language that could be understandable by anyone and everyone in the society. One does not have to be in the field of women's studies to read her books and comprehend the meaning. People from different fields can read her books and can secure a new perspective on the simple and complex problems faced by the sexist oppression in the society.



hooks had once said, “My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know.” (hooks 2003 p.xiv)

hooks, as I had said earlier, is a provocative writer and still continues to write. She gives lectures and time and again proves her point that language is used for communication of thought and ideas and there is no need to use complex words in order to be an intellectual. One must spread an idea to as many people as possible in the easiest way. I am sure there may be many, like me, who would have not only been encouraged to read more on the subject of feminism but have also got influenced by the writing style of bell hooks. I would like to end my paper once again emphasising the fact that writing style may vary but the crucial thing in a book has to be awareness of the idea represented in the book. This book is not only handy but also thought provoking if one reads and decodes the belief suggested in it.

Taking feminist thoughts and ideas to the lowest common denominator democratises the movement and makes it more representative.

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