

MALE JARGON, FEMALE TALK : VERBAL EXCHANGES OF ACADEME AND THE MUNDANE

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"Women are more imaginative, objective. They are better at planning. They are better speakers" (A Chinese male student).

"Women's speech is more *teratur* and their *bahasa* is *lebih baik*. (A Malay guard at a parking lot).

"It is like a stone: I have to keep my words inside. The tears. Men go to the coffeeshop and talk" (An Indian cleaning lady).

The Ins and Outs of Verbal Transactions

In the arena of women's studies today, the debate between intellectual explanations and female experiences is a vexed one. The area of irritability refers particularly to the predicament of language and the ways in which social reality is conceptualised and constructed by the sexes. In this essay certain critical annotations will be made regarding the jargon of theory (the postmodernist strains) while at the same time taking issue with the types of male speech as contrasted with the way women express thought. A brief overview is presented of gender studies in the developing countries of Southeast Asia on language styles of the sexes in order to assess how their wordpower can be fitted within a frame of dominance-submission relationships. Fieldwork results of a mountain community study in Northern Thailand are taken as an example of how textual knowledge is communicated and how the access to verbal resources does not suggest that one sex overbears the other in terms of verbal power. While these findings are corroborated in other studies of folk societies, it is at the

same time speculated that modern trends involving stately, formalised language patterns have turned men's speech into jargon, that is a specialised vocabulary of a pretentious nature. A plea is made for the Malaysian gender scene to exercise criticism on the part of female researchers towards the "isms" of theory and concept formation and to generate female relevant knowledge about the social reality based on self-scrutiny and female talk of the empirical field. Stress is placed on a process of awareness building about strategies that can be used to circumvent the male imperative word and to vent women's inside narratives.

Feminism and Concepts of the Field

Feminism within the frame of the social sciences has in general pleaded for the inclusion of women's epistemology which is assumed to be based on sensuous, relational activity and which is vital for an understanding of a reality that is primarily assessed as concrete (Harding, 1986:148). Female knowledge could transcend the in-built male power complex of the academic division of labour and transform the idea of power by means of giving energy to others. Doubts are however raised as to whether a female-imbued political theory could energise enough strength to combat centuries of Enlightenment doctrines (i.e. the powers of reason, the dualism of intellect and feeling; see Harding, 1986: 142,149). Moreover in the realm of postmodern philosophy, scepticism seems to prevail with respect to the methods that explain human experience by means of a process of categorisation which would not distort reality and which could erase the dangerous fiction of run-of-the-mill constructions of men. The core of the problem is how women's values which oppose the sovereignty of the male political culture could make significant inroads into men's public domain. Nancy Fraser has in this context argued that the intrusion of feminised forays requires an abandonment of the postmodernist discourse for an enquiry of a different sort, an enquiry which is however not further spelt out. (Fraser, 1985:89)

Anthropologists of the so-called new ethnography have become enamoured with the postmodernist dictum to question continually the

researcher's characterisations of the people surveyed in their aim to include the many voices of women's oppression (Mascia Lees, 1989:10). Feminist approaches have thus focussed on the typical reflexivity of the female in terms of knowing herself and others. This among others involved the study of the subjective realities of indigenous women and the ways the native female apprehends and talks about her experience in dialogue with the researcher who brackets for the time being her cultural and intellectual bias. The realisation emerged that such a deconstructive enterprise always involved a power relationship which is an outflow of the colonial situation encased in male epistemology in which women are continually subjectivised. As a way out of this impasse, it has been argued that there is a difference between the new ethnography and feminist approaches in the sense that the latter try to speak from the position of women, not for the other (Lees, 1989:11). But this plea to include female perceptions as vital to the understanding of exotic cultures has not resulted in de-emphasising or de-centering the observations of male anthropologists. It appears that male dominance in terms of appropriating the method of awareness of self or of mystifying the power of the ethnographer has been the recurrent strategy employed by men in the field (Bell, 1993:8). This annexation of the anthropological methods by the male has in my view been made possible on account of the preponderance given to textual, male-oriented knowledge at the expense of women's voices, not only those of the female fieldworker but also of the local female as object of study.

Female Talk of the Third World

The gist of the ongoing debates on male word power seems to revolve around the theme that theorising, and its related interpretative models are primarily constructed by the male and for the male. I take the argument as a helping device to delineate a view within which the subject of male jargon and female talk may be shaped. A look at certain analyses of knowledge patterns of the sexes in Third World investigations makes clear how politics are interwoven between male and female realms of knowing and saying. What also transpires is that

male dominance is invariably not monolithic but susceptible to context. Marilyn Strathern's evaluation of three Melanesian societies has provided gainful insights into the political content of claims to knowledge and the so-called "equivocality" of those claims (Strathern, 1985: 60). In her scrutiny of the power complexes in rituals of the male and the counter-forces which initially were related to women's control of creation, it is forcefully demonstrated how power across gender lines is differently structured. The ambiguity which is implied in these differential types of control is based on degrees of objectivity, formalisation, validation and secrecy. Her analysis captures the powerful forces at work as she delves deeper into the meaning of words and skills which need not necessarily be translated as a way of exercising total influence over others, but rather that these verbal exchanges involve an enactment of claims which are invariably negotiable. Such a perception of power as non-aggressive or non-possessive involves certain repercussions for sexual politics in terms of what is said by whom particularly in economically less advanced communities. It brings to mind how men and women may each in their encounters with the other sex have different ploys to lay claims on prestige, while using different communication styles. New approaches in the study of speech or non-speech are suggested by Susan Gal (1991). In her multifaceted examination of the use of language and silence in gender communication (Gal, 1991: 175-179) she demonstrates the many controversial uses of "mutedness" by women in different settings. Her focus is the everyday talk which permeates the verbal interactions between the sexes and which are important for an understanding of the structuring of power (Gal, 1991: 176). What has been at fault in earlier theories on speech and power is that women's words are interpreted as subjugated knowledge (following Foucault) or at times as opposing dominant definitions. Male types of speech have often been associated with being forceful and authoritarian as contrasted to female verbalising which is judged as trivial and correct or polite. Inarticulateness, in some cultures is seen as not having influence but in others as a marker of prestige. Much evidence counters the public image that women's lack of words in public means a lack of skills to persuade. Given the appropriate conditions under which they are asked to comment on their culture (for instance in the presence of a female ethnographer) they manage to produce their own

texts, and create an impact on the "micropolitics" of gender talk. By way of conclusion Gal states that women's linguistic experiences have made "visible a crack in the dominant male discourse of gender and power", (Gal, 1991:196). Women's every day style of talk and the way they apprehend reality could thus be considered a rival practice to undo or subvert men's wordpower.

Besides the aspect of speech articulation versus non-speech the theme of language style and gender has been further elaborated upon in anthropological research data with specific reference to Indonesia. In a recent volume on *Gender in Southeast Asia* (Atkinson and Errington, 1990) a fair number of examples are found of speaking genres of the sexes and related ideas of potency which unlike the concept power do not imply a coercive component (Keeler, 1990:132). In a Javanese village it is for instance noted that the women in daily cross-sex encounters have the freedom to engage in a variety of degrees of formality with quick shifts to informality, thereby displaying a greater ability to status enhancement via their language in comparison with their men who are more predisposed to weightier, less variable tones of speech. Referring to the differential control of men and women over verbal resources (Kuiper, 1990: 155) in Sumba, the male performers in rituals are always engaged in ordered sequences on speaking genres and use of reported speech (Kuiper, 1990: 165) whereas female singers in their lamenting display more spontaneous, uncontrived speech constructions (Kuiper, 1990: 171).

What transpires from these few anthropological investigations in Southeast Asian communities is the greater attachment of the male to the prescribed word in contrast to a flexibility of language use of the female. It is at the same time relevant to observe that these gender differences in verbal expressiveness are not a proof of the speechlessness or tongue-tiedness of women. There is instead a careful phrasing by the researcher and the people studied of how female and male potency/strength function and how their verbal acts fuse within various communication contexts, at time providing imbalances in prestige meted out to whatever sex, at other times resulting in a simultaneity of creating status jointly.

Why is it then that the word of the woman has not been regarded as on par with man's rhetoric? Partly this may be due to an adherence to patriarchal frames by outside commentators on gender. It is often assumed that male authority is a *fait accompli* because of men's dialogue with patrilineal ancestors, their power of divination and their capacity for political oratory. Other arenas where women contributed to spiritual potency were easily overlooked as was also the component of intermittent claims to verbal resources of the sexes. This preconceived notion of weighing the more visible, audible roles in favour of the male is further related to another predicament in which social scientists are caught. The reason why feminist writers were unable to forgo an *a-priori* patriarchal mode of the Southeast Asian reality in their analyses and to rely on conceptualisations which assume a more ambiguous gender inequality is situated in an inability to see social categories in ungendered or unoppositional terms. Part of the deconstruction of a male-oriented perception involves a tearing down of the categorisation process altogether. The observation made by Heryanto (1994) on the perception of hierarchical dichotomies in Western epistemology which were deeply rooted in its intellectual history whereas they do not seem to operate that extensively in the lives of Indonesian pre-metropolises, is relevant here. Deconstruction was according to him a living tradition of several social groups in Indonesia (Heryanto, 1994: 11, 12). My experience with the Lisu in Thailand (a mountain group of about 25,000 people) showed that processes of carving up the world in set configurations were similarly hard to undertake when their definitions of economics, religion, of politics were not apprehended in definite categories. Work, worship and decision-making seemed to be an all-in-one involved activity of a holistic, synchronic nature in which the expertise of each sex played a part with blurred definitions of the value contributed by each player. Having watched their verbal performances at festivals, at bride-wealth negotiations or solutions to frequently occurring village conflicts, I came to realise that both female and male chip in their wordpower, none overriding the other in order to convince or coerce.

The Lisu people were continually deconstructing their own world, no definition ever held, meanings were invented or refashioned according to the whims of the moment. Gender capabilities differed in terms of

language form and verbalisation, but how were they to be assessed by an onlooker with ready-made concepts of power and privilege? A pertinent question is raised by Mascia Lees (1989: 29,30) in this instance, that is: "Can we think of difference, but not in terms of hierarchy?" The reported difference between men's formalised textual and objectified knowledge (Ardener, 1981) and women's non-standardised expressions of thought which are more subdued and "less loud" could be viewed with a non-oppositional frame of interpretation. The many negative responses that one invariably receives from women in the field in the vein of "I cannot say, I do not know, I am too shy to talk" do not mean that these women have nothing substantial to say, nor that their talk is dominated by a master narrative. Possibly there is a difference in level of verbalisation, but from the subject's point of view this should not imply a juxtaposition of power of speech in which the male control the policy-making processes of politics, while women are silenced-out. We should try to explain the way knowledge is conceptualised among early peasants like the Lisu, from their own rendering of what textual knowledge means. Text or imprinted knowledge for the Lisu involves shamanic chants, the recounting of myths and although this type of male epistemology has been considered as male-dominated in conventional anthropological interpretations, I contend that for the Lisu who have a non-writing culture that textual wisdom is in both female and male bodies. Here women know the lines of chants and may even correct the men, but they do not say it openly in ritual contexts. Women could be seen as remarkable prompters on the scene of ceremonial performances. Each sex knows the script of culture by way of doing or keeping it within themselves, because it is imprinted in them. Male texts may be rigid and expressed in songleader's fashion while women elaborate on and even challenge the rhetoric of the male by means of poetic word-play. This can particularly be observed in the recitation of wedding songs. Men and women know the text from the inside as it is implanted in their bodies. This text may be acted out in verbal duels, but also in dance, in playing the flute. For both it is embodied knowledge.

In conceptualising thought processes and their vocalisations as embodied texts we try to circumvent prejudgments about verbal performances as formalised and therefore susceptible to male-

dominated strategies of control. Development processes which involved state penetration with their formal structuring of relationships have however clouded the issue of gender equality in terms of access to verbal resources. In an earlier study I have alluded to the greater officialisation of language used in male speech of the marginal male in four different communities (Klein Hutheesing, 1994) on account of increased contacts with dominant bureaucratic domains. Susan Gal also observed that more scientific interpretations are used by males of developed societies which follow a rational model and "which then seem to be inculcated in middle class women as well" who as a rule might more frequently rely on knowledge from direct experience¹. Little research attention is paid to the dynamics of these modernising, rationalising influences on gender use of language in traditional societies and its resultant jargonising of speech patterns.

The Issue of "Isms"

Within the academic arena the tendency is there for female researchers to fall prey to male-invented theories, their "isms" and specialised lingo. One instance is the borrowing of the word "discourse" from postmodernism, a term which conveys the idea of an intellectual enterprise that should lend a credible air to a very banal practice of conversation or debate. "Discourse" defined as a more formal and orderly expression of thought is heavily imbued with the male empowered activity to formulate academic jargon. Attempts at theorising about women (and men) by female social scientists have inevitably leaned upon male rhetoric and masculinised schemes of interpretation. Feminists who oppose the dominance of the masterminded intellectual arena have while doing so adopted the macho model of "isms" and formed another "ism" in feminism. Any "ism" as an ideology and programme for action adopts a message using a language which has the power of persuasion. Women in university departments who are embroiled in feminist studies have too often in their research designs and organisation of seminars copied principles of male ordering and formalisation. Feminist researchers at the centres of male academic production wherever have taken in the language of male-inspired theories in their writings (using

Foucauldian, Geertzian, Wallersteinian paradigms). The implied danger of paying lipservice to male (western)-ized jargon in Southeast Asian contexts by female fieldworkers interested in women's studies is that women thereby tend to mystify their own oppression. Postmodernism is intentionally brought into the discussion as the latest theoretical fad based on a language of unmasking the authority of academic rhetoric. In cultural anthropology this new ethnography has resulted in an intellectual approach which criticises, demystifies or deconstructs the power of texts and which has been tinged with a kind of theoretical nihilism. Its jargon which encompasses terms like reflexivity, polyphony, dialogue has in the words of Steven Sangren led a surprising unreflective attitude towards the grounds of authority and the operations of what is fashionable in intellectual circles (1988: 405,414). It appears that while feminist scholars have tried to create their own text, they have yet fallen prey to the obscuring aspects of male postmodernist jargon of the academic industry. They have not been able to see through the oppressive male-ized rhetoric and have as a rule bypassed the intricacies of a female-based terminology.

Postmodernist currents have had a certain fascination for the non-Western feminists in order to comprehend women in their own light while the deconstruction of authority structures was attempted. In their ambitious questioning of mega-theories of the male they were intent on creating new forms of knowledge by focussing on the structure of feeling, as postmodernism has been typified (Gitlin, 1989: 348,350). We may however wonder whether any female social scientist in Malaysia has followed in the footsteps of Margery Wolf's study in which she highlighted the continual self-reflection upon her fieldwork experiences in a Taiwanese village, a process which produced a "thrice told tale" (Wolf, 1992). In her rendering of an event she questioned her methodology, her self-involvement with the locals. Part of her confessional tale, which included the collective experience of women, showed how they accomodate or resist the power dimension of every day interactions, or how the dealing with dominating influences is learned or spurned (Wolf, 1992: 133). The resultant theorising and writing she could foster was that of an open-ended, ambiguous reality in which women release their oppressive state through various mechanisms, in one case that of coopting a god (Wolf, 1992: 116).

Given this example it seems doubtful whether the change of an epistemology from a feminine point of view is feasible. How should we then make an impact on the male master narratives especially on those postmodernist anthropologists who have dismissed two decades of feminist work? (Wolf, 1992: 118). Grand theories have become outmoded over time due to displacement techniques (Ryan, 1983: 139-154), but these were replacements of male thought by men. All that female researchers can hope for is to speak different languages of interpretation from a number of viewpoints and to translate female talk from ever evolving perspectives. Can women's way of apprehending the world become philosophy? Presumably only if we dismantle the very idea of philosophy, of science, of theory.

Let me mention one highly deceptive endeavour and one that holds some promise. The first refers to the creation of new theoretical perspectives which challenge phallocentrism, which prompted Gayatri Spivak to question: "Why should women accept the primacy of the stable male speaking subject?" Her counter image of hysterocentric power (Spivak, 1983:184) may be doomed since it would yet imply an "ism" that is moreover centered. Her jargon despite efforts to focus on the hymen is impenetrable, viz. read: "the hymen is the figure for undecidability and the "general law of the textual effect" (Spivak, 1983: 174). Another counter-theoretical assumption is that of the phallic mother (Lacan, 1982) where the child "apprehends from the outside that the mother contains the phallus" (Lacan, 1982: 44). This new myth however was a male Lacanian invention. Different conceptual frameworks designed by women like Kristeva seem to suffer from the following weaknesses: an inclination to engage in aesthetic jargon and adding points to theories without scrapping them (Fraser, 1991: 109). It is also possible to engage in a play of words, language games in an attempt to ridicule master narratives, a strategy which I would label: "Deriding Derrida", but this strategy like any spoof or sarcasm could prove to be a weapon of the weak.

Rather than copying the feminist, predominantly European, theorising with its predicament of creating ontologies that are a mirror of male centrism, the attention should be drawn towards what Liz Stanley calls "an unalienated knowledge" of the female scholar (1990: 11,12,14).

She argues that within the academic mode of production, knowledge is largely accumulated within a patriarchal capitalism and as such could be regarded as any other alienated capitalist commodity. An unalienated knowledge ought on the other hand to be grounded in actual experiences in concrete settings. Theorising is done within the material activities and not as an unanalysable metaphysical "transcendent" one, different in kind from those of "mere people". Feminist researchers in sociology should be committed to underline a different kind of knowledge than that proposed by Cartesian scientism, which is a consequence of a different way of being in the world and a different ontology. The latter need not however imply that it becomes a denuded theory based on raw experience. It is rather context-specific embedded in investigative procedures and processes through developing sensitising concepts. Grounding female experiences while in search of theory is based on the assumption that meanings are still historically and sub-culturally detectable. It may be generated through a self-reflexivity of researcher and researched, an awareness of socialisation within particular contexts. It is characterised by a knowledge gathering through action without "isms", forgetting about jargon. The disenchantment with male narratives is aimed at avoiding the fads, the garbled texts, the masking strategies of men. Women may then learn to discover their verbal power without being trapped by male paradigms.

Awareness: Talking Action

What does feminism have to say about women as they relate to themselves? If academic rhetoric is ineffectual in its affectation how does self-realisation become nurtured? Besides an unveiling of the veiling processes of the Malaysian male and an understanding of the obscuring power of men's language, it is necessary to analyse how women speak about gender, how female/male conversation is conducted, what it is that Malaysian women can and may express, how often they twist their speech to please men and how often they say "Yes" when they mean "No".

To provide an answer to these questions we could start to observe general features of gender communication and try to explain why at times women play at being silent or subdued. Certain interpretations allude to a fear of being stereotyped a bad woman or to strategies which are aimed at maintaining peace within the domestic sphere. An elucidation of women's agendas based on feminist anthropological approaches carried out in a Kedah village has focussed on the cultural construction of a Malay feminine identity (Couillard, 1987:416). One of the complex manoeuvres used by rural women is the value which women place on the engendering of love and tenderness towards household members particularly daughters. Though constraints which the female has to exercise in her behaviour could be regarded as a way of men to control women, another interpretation which has been forwarded in this case is that soft demeanour may ultimately be a form of manipulation to exercise a certain power and a resultant relative autonomy. Subservience to husbands expressed by some Singaporean Indian women has been explained in a similar vein (Purushotam, 1989:32), namely that seeming servility may in the long run assure a woman of having her way, in one case for instance the desire to keep a job and enjoy a degree of independence.

Feminist activist workers in the social science field would benefit from a perspective which emphasises a rigorous self-analysis of their own demeanour in cross-sex conversations. This self-reflexivity geared towards a discovery of our own womanhood is rarely exemplified in research findings. The undertaking to research ourselves while trying to recall our first consciousness about being different from men seems like a perilous journey into a no-man's-land of unnamed meanings. The danger is that women may yet produce a number of distortions due to bits of intellectualising of our thought patterns. A remote sensing of my own experienced womanhood for instance varied according to the different definitions of the time period and it proved to be a constant alternating of interpretation schemes within the forest of symbols. For example: "Did I become aware of the privileged brother because of Freud or of the brute, bourgeois father because of Marx?"

Fieldwork experience among the tribals of Northern Thailand made me conclude that gender systems are emergent and variable. Other small-scale societies of Southeast Asia have come to similar observations of gender flexibility in terms of power assessment which produces an assortment of illusive meanings. See for instance the studies conducted over several decades in Borneo which demonstrate equal value assigned to Rungus sex roles (Appell, n.d: 30), similar prestige listed out to male and female among the Iban (Davison and Sutlive, n.d: 164) which have led to the conclusion of "shifting perspectives of different articulations of gender relationships" (Mashman, n.d.: 263).

My rethinking on the specificity of Lisu female/male relations as being fluid made me ask whether this was the outcome of a Lisu ontology, a reality as real of the people observed or did I only see it in that particular light because of the academic socialisation at that stage of the late nineteen seventies? I was taken by the idea of negotiated realities, of the making and unmaking of men and women as representations. Their non-fixed character did not seem to fit my own brew of sociological philosophising. Or, as I wonder now, was this pleasing portrayal of a fluctuating sexual equality my personal rationalising device concocted out of a fear to blame men for their abuses? Or was I just sentimental? Romanticism of course has its own camouflage techniques for personal ego trips. The kind of idyllisation of the tropics described by Western travellers, is vividly expressed by a Frenchman who wrote about the sensuous East where the "whole island came to me like a woman" (Clifford, 1988: 161) and where its women "spoke lovely, childish words". In their idealisation, elements of domestication of the young, innocent female by white men seem to surface. The image of the white colonial who dominates the exotic female as if she were a child is familiar in his fantasies. As a post reflection on the exotic male I recall being enamoured with the vision of the strong, sinewy Lisu male, the hunter type with his rifle slung over the shoulder, who danced forcefully, in other words a man who would come to me "like a jungle". It is a primeval, Tarzan-like image and the urge to be overpowered by him was prominent.

At a later stage of my fieldwork when the Lisu economy had dramatically changed, I conceptualised what I saw as a growing

polarisation of the sexes, as a result of modern market economies. I resorted to a Marxist frame of explanation and its implied exploitation of female production by the male. Was this type of interpretation chosen because the theory of dependency and the world system had become popular in Asia or because it now became an easy mechanism of displaced aggression on my part, that is: a theory of convenience which accuses the system rather than what dominant male power inflicts on the female in a concrete context? Part of any field trip to a foreign land contains a wish to identify via a projection of one's own dependency. And as a reversal the other or rather the Lisu people became dependents on me for my wordpower and wealth. That I am able to express my research endeavours in this manner is due to my privileged exposure to academic textbooks.

It is important to ask whether Malaysian women, especially those in academia, have realised their own state of being betwixt and between theoretical stances and whether they have developed subsequent critiques through a process of engaging monologues within themselves and in talk with local women in and through the field. Have they been in a position to analyse the tendency of women to "keep everything inside" from a different perspective than the overall encompassing mechanisms of patriarchy? And how can this supposed suppressed talk become a weapon in the awareness-raising attempt? Following Habermas (1984: 186,187) who emphasised that any critical theory possesses an activist component, the first step should entail a questioning of the legitimisation principles which allow exploitation of different types in everyday life, not merely in an economic sense.

It is understood that along with earlier advocates of female-engendered knowledge, theory should be grounded in participatory investigative procedures (Stanley, 1990:64). But at the same time the conclusion has been drawn that due to a neglect of substantively generated research the aspect of theory construction has not been explicated. We define theory as a set of ideas based on descriptions of empirical reality which has explanatory value and which offers a conceptual framework of the studied phenomena. Theory's explanatory strength always contains elements of speculation about objective, yet unrealised possibilities (Kreckel, 1985: 155). I continue to argue that the

mainstream theoretical strands are suspect because of gender bias which is illustrated in male word power and jargon. Even though the latest trends in theory building (as for instance in Foucault's archeology of knowledge) have attempted to define specific forms of articulation between discourses and the non-discursive domains, the focus has yet been on the language of power strategies and the dominant episteme of a period. The result has been according to Bryan Turner (1985: 194, 195) an interest in "the accumulation of men" and their supposed regimes. Little attention has been paid to the resistance or popular opposition to these practices of control by men and women as well. Foucault's failure to distinguish between continuities of formal discourse, his reliance on texts and his reluctance to analyse the effectivity of discourse makes his theorising carry the appearance of a "gay science of obscurity" (Turner, 1985: 211). Female postmodernists, like Luce Irigaray, who mention the differences between a female and male discourse (the former having a relationship to the real environment, the latter being termed as artificial and distanced from life) and who propagate further an interest in research of sex and gender on the subject of discourse and language, still like to emphasise the concept of discourse as analytical tool (Irigaray, 1993: 29,35). My reaction would be to desist from descriptions of gendered styles of discourse and avoid the male connotation of discourse as a term. Interpretations of postmodernist writings elicited by Irigaray have frequently hinged on the discourse of the female and the discourse of the male. Another attitude towards phrasing generalisations from the empirical is to start with conversation and communication between men and women.

Theory then should be generated within the field of experience or the experience of the field. If a critique of theoretical notions could produce emancipatory awareness why is it that little response to such an approach has been voiced in Malaysian studies? Three inconsistencies may be observed on the scenes of knowledge production in Malaysian investigations:

1. A gap between theories espoused in the intellectual environment and the number of studies carried out on the ground level: studies of village women, career women, factory girls, female elders of

marginalised communities. Few of these enquiries were grounded in queries regarding women's awareness or how to phrase research which would focus on the obstacles facing women to "speak out" or "up" or "against". There is furthermore a lack of studies concerning everyday life with its psychological dimension related to female-male communication.

2. A disconnection is observed between ad-hoc knowledge applied to women's consciousness-raising groups and governmental policy-oriented schemes on the one hand and academic research on the other. What causes this disjointedness between the two spheres is the fact that little attention is paid to the assumption underlying women's organisations and national policy programmes regarding concepts like mobilisation, interest articulation of females involved and the development of critical consciousness. An overview of community action groups in India and Indonesia aimed at a search for a general theory focussed on the one problem area which involved the contradictions between stated ideologies and institutional contexts, between state structures and political processes (Eldridge, 1984: 405). An evaluation of one implementation of a family development programme in Malaysia pointed out the haziness of the premises underpinning the development programmes of rural women (Hutheesing, 1980:8).
3. There is a lopsidedness in research aimed at spelling out gender differences on roles, rights and remuneration and studies on the ideologies of gender in religious belief systems or the symbolic categorisation of female-male strength. In a country paper which surveyed the different kinds of research that had been carried out in Malaysia (Karim, Hutheesing, 1989: 18,19) it was concluded that women as a separate field of study had been placed within structural frames. This women and/in approach followed similar lines of research design which have been observed in the Western literature of social science and which was there categorised as "adding women" approach, as if women were an afterthought or rather a serious oversight.²

It is assumed that feminism in its stress on consciousness-raising as a specific method will find its own theory which is capable of challenging male hegemony. For Catherine MacKinnon the confrontation with male power occurs in the primary sphere of day to day praxis where women's sexuality is exploited. The attempt at making women aware of their second class status should rest on a collective critique which reconstitutes women's experience (MacKinnon, 1982: 15,25). The critique still focusses on ideas of patriarchy and its immanent presence in the relations of production and reproduction in the domestic arena.

There is no doubt that the battle of the sexes finds its most astute expression in domestic violence committed by men on women which in Malaysia can be demonstrated across class and ethnicity. It is here in the households that male dominance is blatantly observed. The code of shame which operates in the three main subcultures (*mo mien* for Chinese, *ukkarmairke* for the Tamils, *malu* for the Malays) seems to serve only as an attitudinal imperative for women. The man's loss of face does not figure, on the contrary: the Malay male acquires the thick-skinned crocodile face (*muka buaya/biawak*) with implications of power and pride from showing his teeth. The shaming of men in public (a powerful tool for Javanese and Malay women) in village communities has apparently lost its effect in urban contexts.

As crisis centres in Malaysia come to terms with the oppressive rule of the male in the domestic domain, it may become necessary to determine how violence is justified by the men in different subcultural backgrounds and to question why women frequently remain speechless. A study of Korean battered women has elaborated on a specific psychological process which traces the following feminine feelings: beginning with a craving for genuine conjugal love that transforms into feeling rejected, a hatred and subsequent repression of revenge and ultimately in the last stage a desire to kill the husband (Denzin, 1989: 56,57). Where is this female longing for love situated: in culture, in socialisation? Does the concept of love carry different meanings for each of the sexes? One dimension which directs itself to the scenes of male aggression is the fact that women do not utter protest, because the male strategy is to be incommunicado. It is

believed that women's silence speaks worlds, men's silence however is the more powerful. It is necessary to know how the exchange of female versus male words is manipulated in gender communication, why women at times avoid issues out of fear of unsettling men, whereas it is the male who may opt out of talk in order to put the female down.

A depressing sociological report has confirmed that men speak another "language" which makes cross-sexual understanding an impossibility. One study shows for example that wives in the West were ready to provide sensitive, sensible talk to solve marital conflict but their husbands remained remote communicators, distancing themselves from the problem or at times using a technical approach (the so-called screw driver approach) to avoid further complications. The concept of male genderlect (gender and dialect) entails a husband's moodiness and curtness: when asked to search his soul, a wife invariably receives the comment that there is "nothing". A poverty of feeling of expression and minimal self criticism characterise men's talk and an ill-preparedness to react (Report by D. Tannen *Der Spiegel*, 1991:223). The non-involvement of men in talk must then be seen as a highly effective tactic not only of controlling a situation but defining it in particular terms. The finding, disturbing as it is for the Western scene, raises some perplexing questions for Malaysian conjugal communication. A curious contradiction may be found in some of the comments made in a limited sample of men and women in Penang. The male respondents admit that women though talkative and gossipy do speak better and have greater ability to express themselves. Yet it is expected that women speak gently that if they indulge in loud talk they will lose respect. There are instances where men feel that women are not that wise or are gullible, so that women have to rephrase their sentences because otherwise they would not be understood. Both sexes appear to be cautious when they engage in male-female conversation. Women are scared to talk straight, they are not willing to *kasi susah* to the husband, for fear that he will "tackle" them. Men will resort to more clean talk or become *halus* when they address their womenfolk, because the latter is easily hurt. Men seem to find it difficult to discuss personal matters and tend to label any female talk as criticism. Another report on Kuala Lumpur career women shows that their high

level of education does not inhibit bad verbal treatment from their husbands who never show appreciation for women's work (intellectual and otherwise), who never say "thanks" or "please" and worst, the wives cannot communicate their displeasure because it is labelled as "fault-finding" (New Straits Times, 1992: 7).

Shaky Constructions and Contradictions

The examples discussed in the previous section indicate that the exercise of power and control by one sex is caught in incidences of double-talk. Confusion exists in the way women's speech is assessed, on the one hand it is thought to contain rational elements, on the other hand it is regarded as trivial or taking a "long time to get to the point". There are also different meanings attached to the silence of women and that of men. Do we as a result have to assume that the word is weightless? Or that communication across gender has run dry since each is talking at cross purposes. Is it possible to determine whether the reality of gender talk is apprehended in patriarchal terms or an ambivalent sexual inequality? In addition to the inadequacies in gender conversation which are exhibited in incidences when female and male do not seem to come to terms, we also note that misunderstandings about word-use are at play. Ingrid Rudie (1993) in her studies on Kelantanese women showed in this respect that their definitions of their work were different from the way men view a female's production capacities. The Kelantanese male may primarily see his wife's work as child-care and providing assistance to the husband, while for women housework meant to sit still in contrast to real work based on outside activities which were remunerative. Rudie explains these differences in conceptualisations to the idea of male primacy which has become explicit in modern Islamic rhetoric (Rudie, 1993: 109-111). The gender definitions embedded in two traditions that is in informal *adat* (custom) and formalised Islam which have been carefully studied with regard to its implications for women's status by Karim (1992) have also confounded the fluctuating exercises in authority with their overt dictates and covert manipulations. The randomness of meaning assignment in day to day talk is also reflected in the structuring of gender relations in the macro context. Some

Malaysian studies have touched upon the inconsistency in codes of behaviour for each sex. Ong, for instance, argued that the handling of gender formulations appeared to be conflicting and in flux as she states in her paper that,

by looking at the sexual imaging of Malay factory women in village communities, Japanese electronics factories, Malaysian politics, the government-controlled media and fundamentalist Islam it is shown that multiple, conflicting, and unstable representations of gender were generated in different fields of power relations. (Ong, 1987: 16).

Is this fragmented picture of several overlays of subjective interpretation and its resultant ambiguity indicative of what researchers might call as the Malaysian reality? Is inconsistency of meaning a necessary by-product of having suffered many types of dominance?

For the answers to these questions, we shall have to know more profoundly how women operate within the jumble of meanings or how they in Kandiyoti's words "bargain with patriarchy" (1991: 104-119)³. These manipulations with male rule would cover a number of tactics from temporary accomodation to patriarchy to opting out of unfavourable labour relations. Another strategy of a more literate signature could involve the democratisation of academic language or a culture of theory which overcomes the distinction between day to day talk and elitist "isms" (Agger, 1991:138) or the bridging of male jargon and female talk. We need to probe how the male constructs oppressive measures (if they are experienced as such) and how women manoeuvre within. Future inquiries would require a preoccupation with culture, that enigmatic realm which was said to be a man's world and word.

Notes

¹ Similar findings like the ones quoted by Gal can also be traced in

the constructions of disease in relation to gender among the Lisu. As I further reflect upon my latest involvement with AIDS education research, it transpired that attempts to explain disease is phrased in dissimilar fashion between female and male. Because the young men have greater exposure to the dominant lowland media they are exhibiting a knowledge about the virus which is rhetorical in a language larded with slogans. The capacity to provide a rationale however is shallow, whereas the women reason the incidence of the epidemic from direct experiences with other disease-causing agents such as germs and bacteria which "they can see". They express ways of possible infection in culturally relevant metaphoric language which is derived from the Lisu vocabulary.

- 2 The women and/in approach is particularly noted in the first phases of Malaysian women's studies. At that point we find a large number of investigations which bore titles like "Women and Work", "Women and Islam", "Women, Kinship and Community", "Women in Voluntary Organisations". The concept of role figured prominently in enquiries of this kind.
- 3 In an explanatory endnote related to the concept of "bargaining with patriarchy" Kandiyoti refers to scenarios which mould gender relations for both female and male in which the underlying rules can be contested and redefinend (p. 115). In general the bargaining process is carried out between more or less equal participants, a perspective to which I would like to subscribe. The term 'bargaining with identity' would seem therefore more appropriate. The author admits that her usage of the term is confined to ideal-typical systems of male dominance.

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