



Category: Research Article

The Role of Language in Naturalizing Cultural Constructions of Gender: A Feminist Approach to “Prabuddha” of Mahagama Sekara

Nayomi Madhupani Konara

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published Online & Printed
December 2021

Author:

Nayomi Madhupani Konara
Lecturer (Temporary),
Department of Languages,
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Rajarata University of Sri Lanka,
Mihintale.
Email: nayomimadhupani317@gmail.com

මූලාසපද:

භාෂාවේ කාර්යභාරය, සංස්කෘතික ගොඩනැංවීම්, ස්වභාවිකකරණය, “ප්‍රබුද්ධ”, ස්ත්‍රීවාදය.

සංශීලනය

සමාජයක පවතින සංස්කෘතික ගොඩනැංවීම් භාෂාවේ භාවිතය මගින් ස්වභාවිකකරණයට ලක් කර ඇති ආකාරය තත් සමාජයේ සාහිත්‍ය ශාන්ත අධ්‍යයනයේදී පෙනී යයි. ස්ත්‍රීවාදී සාහිත්‍ය විචාරයේ ප්‍රධානතම අරමුණක් වන්නේ සංස්කෘතික හා සම්මුතික ප්‍රපංච ස්වභාවිකකරණයෙන් ස්ත්‍රීය පරිපීඩනයට ලක් කෙරෙන අවස්ථා සාහිත්‍යය විසින් තහවුරු කෙරෙන්නේද, නැතහොත් ප්‍රශ්න කෙරෙන්නේද යන්න විමර්ශනයයි. මෙම පර්යේෂණයෙන් ප්‍රයත්න දරන්නේ සංස්කෘතික ගොඩනැංවීම් ස්වභාවිකකරණයෙහිලා සාහිත්‍යයේ භාවිත භාෂාව කටයුතු කරන්නේ කවරාකාරයෙන්ද යන්න හඳුනා ගැනීමටයි. මේ සඳහා මහගම සේකර විසින් රචිත “ප්‍රබුද්ධ” කෘතිය ස්ත්‍රීවාදී ප්‍රවේශයකින් අධ්‍යයනයට ලක් කෙරේ. පර්යේෂණ ගැටලුව වන්නේ තෝරා ගත් කෘතියේ භාෂාව තත් සමාජයේ ස්ත්‍රී-පුරුෂ සමාජභාවය පිළිබඳ සංස්කෘතික ගොඩනැංවීම් අර්ථකථනය කරන්නේ කවරාකාරයෙන්ද යන්නයි. ගුණාත්මක ක්‍රමවේදය, දත්ත විශ්ලේෂණය සහ ස්ත්‍රීවාදී සාහිත්‍ය න්‍යාය භාවිතය පර්යේෂණ ක්‍රමවේදය හා විධික්‍රමය යටතේ සිදු කෙරේ. මෙම පර්යේෂණයෙන් අනාවරණය වන්නේ “ප්‍රබුද්ධ” කෘතියේ භාෂා භාවිතය මගින් ස්ත්‍රී-පුරුෂභාවය පිළිබඳ සංස්කෘතික ගොඩනැංවීම් විවේචනයට හා ප්‍රශ්න කිරීමට ලක් කිරීම වෙනුවට පිළිගැනීමට හා ස්වභාවිකකරණයට ලක් කිරීමෙන් එකී ගොඩනැංවීම් ප්‍රතිස්ථාපනය කෙරෙන බවයි.

Introduction

Cultural constructions are conventions, ideas, rules, laws, expectations or stereotypes that are created and maintained by different cultures. These are determined arbitrarily by one's cultural background, rather than some unyielding aspect of human nature or something universally rooted in biology. So that cultural constructions are dynamic and changed over time. Nevertheless if these constructions were not examined and called in to question, they will be naturalized and established in that particular community.

Cultural constructions of gender emphasizes that different cultures have distinctive ideas about males and females and use these ideas to define manhood or masculinity and womanhood or femininity (Peoples and Bailey, 2003: 239). These ideas clearly can be seen expressing by the usage of language in literary works that are published in that particular cultural community. In Feminist Literary Theory, it recognizes the role of language in making what is social, cultural and constructed seem transparent and 'natural', and raises the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially and culturally constructed as different (Barry, 2009: 128-129).

The Sinhala poetry "Prabuddha", first published in 1977, is considered to be the last and the most remarkable work of Mahagama Sekara, who was an iconic figure in the field of Arts of the 20th century Sri Lanka. By examining the text from a Feminist perspective, it is attempted to identify the role of language in defining cultural constructions; especially of gender, and it reveals that the usage of language in "Prabuddha" re-establishes the cultural constructions of gender that are created and maintained by the society, by naturalizing them instead of calling in to question and standing against them.

Method and Methodology

Qualitative Method is used for this research. Accordingly electronic and library sources are used including books and journal articles as primary and secondary sources of collecting data. These data are analysed under Qualitative Analysis Methodology. Feminist Literary Theory, focusing into selected main conceptions it brings out on cultural constructions of a community is used for this research.

Results and Discussion

According to Simone De Beauvoir, one is not born, but rather becomes, woman (Beauvoir, 2011: 330). No biological or natural destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is what has been culturally constructed that defines the role and existence of women. Sexual reproduction is biological in origin. Nevertheless, the gendered idea that male babies wear blue and have blue-coloured toys but female babies wear pink and have pink-coloured toys, is a cultural construction. Feminist literary theory does not express the idea that men and women are equal biologically. What it calls in to question is the fact that biological inequality has been highlighted in literature with the cultural constructions, for instance, with ideas like ‘Girls should not ride bicycles, Girls do not laugh out loud, Girls should maintain their virginity until marriage and Women have to look after children’ and so on. In “Prabuddha”, duties and responsibilities of human being have been clearly divided as men’s duties and women’s duties.

“...නාම බුදි ද
නිරංජලා?
දැන් හතරයි;
මේ! මේ! මේ!
නැගිටින්නකො කිරි හදන්න, බත් උයන්න,
පරක්කු වෙයි වැඩට යන්න.”

“ආං!
මට හොඳට ම නින්ද ගියා
ඊයේ රැ නිදි මැරුවා
නිදා ගත්තේ එකට විතර.
පුතාට උණ තිබුණා හුඟක් සැරට...”

(සේකර, 2011: 47-48).

“Niranjala, Are you still sleeping? It’s four in the morning. Here! Wake up, Make tea, Cook rice; Otherwise I will be late for work.”

“Oh! I overslept. I burnt a midnight oil yesterday. I found myself on bed only at around one. The son had a severe fever.”)

According to this, woman is conclusively expected to belong to the household, assume domestic tasks and act as the caregiver and caretaker of the family while the man is supposed to be the breadwinner. Feminism is often misunderstood as a rebellion against men and a struggle for the equality for women but it examines and questions the ideals constructed by the culture and the society in order to understand all other inequalities faced by different social groups including man, woman, lesbian, gay, transgender, black, white, proletariat, minority and so on. Accordingly Feminist literary theory questions the culturally constructed role of man too, which is supposed to be the provider for the family and earning money by working a full-time job. The usage of language in “Prabuddha” encourages the ideal of the family in which men earn a family wage and provide while wives do domestic labour.

“එපා! රංජනී අරින්ඩ,
කොච්චර කිව්වත් ඔයාට මේ ටික තේරෙන්නෙ නෑ නෙ?
රස්සාවක් නැති මං
බඳින්නෙ කොහොමද ඔයාව?
ඔයා ම පස්සෙ කියයි
මං අනාත උණයි කියල!”

(සේකර, 2011: 81).

(Don't cry, Ranjani! You never understand no matter how often I say. How could I, one without a living, take you hand in marriage? Later you will say “I got lost!”)

“දරුවෝ දණ ගානා නො දරුවෝ ය;
උන්ට බොන්ඩ් ටින් කිරි පිටි හොයා දෙන්න
ලෙඩට දුකට උන් වඩාන දොස්තර ගෙදර යන්න
මා නැත් නම් කෙනෙක් නැති ය;
අනාගතය දැනින් මිට මොලවා ගෙන
මා දිහා ම බලා හිඳිති උන් හැම දෙන.”

(සේකර, 2011: 40).

(The toddlers holding their future in the fist look upon me for everything as no one in there if not me to find milk for them or to carry them to the doctor.)

There are five main facts that decide women's place by the society, and are called into question by Feminist literary theory.

1. Biological facts
2. Experience
3. Discussion
4. Unconsciousness
5. Economic and Social state

Although no Biological fact should define the figure that women takes on in society, constructed conceptions in different cultures create and maintain some outrageous readings on women based on their biological factors. There is a Latin American saying; woman is nothing but a womb. These readings on women have been naturalized and established in some communities as cultural constructions. Cultural constructions of gender often represent women as 'other', as 'lack', as part of 'nature' or as 'weak'. ((Barry, 2009: 128). To justify this representation and the cultural construction that women essentially should be the caretaker of children, it is brought forward Experiences women have to go through biologically; men do not have to, like giving birth, menstruation and breast feeding and so on. The biological experience of pregnancy and childbirth should not be equated with the cultural construction that women's parenting is necessarily superior to men's. Men will not share equally in parenting until they are taught, ideally from childhood on, that fatherhood has same meaning and significance as motherhood. As long as society see the mother and child relationship as unique and special because the female carries the child in her womb and gives birth, or makes this biological experience synonymous with women having a closer, more significant bond to children than male parent, responsibility for child care and child rearing will continue to be primarily women's work. Even the childless woman is considered more suited to raise children than the male parent because she is seen as an inherently caring nurturer (Hooks, 1984:137).

Also, there can be seen Discussions, agreements and conventions about the behaviour of women which are arbitrarily determined by the society. These are often supported by Customs, Literature and Religion etc. of that particular community. For instance, wearing jewellery, clothing styles and so on are decided by the Sinhalese culture based on the gender and age.

“මේ අහන්ඩි;
ලොකු දුව ලොකු ළමයෙක් වෙයි අද හෙට
එයාට මාල පොටක්
කරාබු කුට්ටමක් නැතොත් වළලු දෙකක්
අරගත්තොත් හොඳයි නේද?”

(සේකර, 2011: 60).

(Listen to me! The daughter will reach puberty anytime soon. Isn't it good if we buy her a pair of earrings or a pair of bangles?)

Moreover, proverbs in Sinhala like “ගැනු නුවණ හැඳි මිටේ දිගටයි” (Women only have the knowledge about household chores) and many disparagements on women that can be seen in classical Sinhala prose and poetry like “අවසර කල් රහස් තැන - ගැහැනු කවුරුද වරදේ නොබැඳෙන” (Every woman misbehave as soon as she has a chance to) have been naturalized and established in the society. Religion too supports to maintain some cultural constructions, for instance, in Buddhism, there is a concept of seven types of wives a man may have (The concept of “Saptha Bharya”). Three of them are considered as bad and undesirable wives and four of them are considered as good and praiseworthy wives. Women are encouraged by the Buddhism to become one of the last four types of wives, a wife like a mother; who is compassionate and treats her husband like her son, a wife like a sister; who is respectful towards her husband and obedient to his wishes, a wife like a friend; who is virtuous and rejoicing at the sight of her husband, or a wife like a hand-maiden; who remains calm and does not show any anger although her husband uses some harsh words. Characteristics of this so-called praiseworthy wife are admirably written in “Prabuddha”.

“දුර ගමනක් ගිය විට මග බලා සිටින බිරිඳ ඔබ ය
කරබාගෙන ඇනුම් බැනුම් අසා සිටින බිරිඳ ඔබ ය
නරකාදිය කුළ පුර පුර උදා කරන බිරිඳ ඔබ ය
මරණින් මතු සංසාරේ එකට සිටින බිරිඳ ඔබ ය”

(සේකර, 2011: 91).

(You are the wife who awaits my arrival when I am long gone. You put up with my complaints in silence. Most of all, you create a heaven out of hell.)

“නිරංජලා රැ තිස්සේ නිදි මරාන
කොව්වරවත් දැලි පෙරාන
ඇටයි හමයි;
පිටි කොටනව, කිරි හදනව, කැඳ උයනව
රෙදි මදිනව.
අම්මා කෙනෙක් වගෙයි,
අක්කා කෙනෙක් වගෙයි.”

(සේකර, 2011: 40-41).

(Niranjala burns midnight oils; always filled with dirt. Skin and bones are all that is left of her. She pounds flour, makes tea, prepares porridge, irons clothes; she’s like a Mother. She’s like an elder sister.)

In addition to supporting the idea brings out about the ideal women in Buddhism, “Prabuddha” naturalizes the culturally constructed ideology on how a mother or an elder sister of a family should behave, and then encourages wife too, to behave the same way. If these cultural constructions were not called into question, they remain as unexamined knowledge and eventually establish in that particular community. The hegemony of cultural constructions makes people adjust to them unconsciously. Unconsciousness makes them believe that certain duties that have been determined as women’s duties or men’s duties are not cultural and constructed but transparent and natural. So also appreciation and admiration for acting the culturally constructed role well, make them continue playing that particular role with self-obedience.

In Feminist literary theory, it is identified two ways that cultural constructions of gender act in literary works by the usage of language; criticism and appreciation. Criticism allows examining and calling into question the cultural constructions and then to standing against them, while appreciation accepts, re-establishes and maintains the ideology. In “Prabuddha”, socially and culturally constructed role of women has been re-established by appreciating and admiring them for playing the role of ideal mother who is the nurturer, caretaker and the sufferer or ideal wife who is virtuous, submissive and assumed all the household chores to herself.

“අඩන විට මා කුඩා අවධියෙහි බඩගිනි ව
තම්බා බතල දළු
ලුණු දියර ඉස
පොල් ගා මුසු කොට කවා
බඩගිනි නිවූ අම්මා ඔබ ය

උයා උදයෙන් නැගිට කඩයප්පන්
තබා තේ කඩයෙහි
ලබා ඉන් ලැබෙන සුළු වට්ටම
ජංගි ඇන්දූ අම්මා ඔබ ය”

(සේකර, 2011: 31-32).

(You are the Mother who fed me with boiled sweet potato leaves, sprinkled with salt, mixed with coconut, when I cried in hunger as a child. Having woken up early, having cooked “kadayappan”, you are the mother who dressed me with the little money you earned.)

“පාන්දරින් තේ උගුරක් මට ගෙනෙනා බිරිඳ ඔබ ය
දූන් පුතුන් ආදරයෙන් රැක බලනා බිරිඳ ඔබ ය
හීන් සිරුවේ මා ගැන සෝදිසියෙන් සිටින ඔබ ය
මාත් එක්ක සංසාරේ එකට හිටිය බිරිඳ ඔබ ය”

(සේකර, 2011: 91).

(You are the wife who brings me a cup of tea in the morning; looks after the children with love, with your vigilant eye upon me, together with me throughout the “samsara”)

Considering the fact, Economic and Social state, the cultural construction that men are superior to women has been used to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political and social power, to put in another way, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political and social power in some communities. That is the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically produced (Tyson, 2006: 86).

Another aim of Feminist literary theory is to examine representations of women in literature by men. ((Barry, 2009: 128). In most of the literary genres which have been written by men, the women have been understood within the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ structure. The terms ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ have come out together with the Theory of Deconstruction and the understanding and everything exists with its opposite and in fact it exists thanks to its opposite is suggested. (Yegen and Abukan, 2014: 52-53). It was first defined ‘Self’ (Man) and then examined whether the ‘Other’ (Non-man;

Woman) have acquired the criteria used to define ‘Self’ or not. According to Beauvoir the man is defined as a human being and woman as a female - whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male. (Beauvoir, 2011: 677). Mahagama Sekara, the author of “Prabuddha” and Prabuddha, the inside narrator of the book are both male, both of whom appears to have read 'the woman' from a male perspective. It seems that they acknowledge the viewpoint which carries that a woman should not be allowed to do all that is done by a man. Consequently they tend to justify certain behaviours of men without question whereas they are also inclined to view the same behaviour as a misconduct when it is done by a woman. Prabuddha, seeing his lover Yasoda with another man becomes furious, who seems to have forgotten that he himself was with another woman in that very moment.

“දිගු සාලාව කෙළවර
අඳුරු ආරක්කුව යට
උනුන් බදා වැලඳ හිඳින
අඳුරු මිනිස් යුවලක් මිස
යසෝදා නැත අසලක

වේදනාවෙන් පිරුණි ඔහු සිත
ඊර්ෂ්‍යාවෙන් පිරුණි ඔහු සිත
ගසා දා තමා වෙත සිටින ගැහැනිය ගෙන අත
නැගී සිටියේ ය ඔහු
විෂ සෝර සර්පයකු අත ගැසුව කලෙක මෙන්
කෑ ගැසිය මහ හඬින්
අවතාරයක් දුටුව කලෙක මෙන්!
'ය සෝ දා!.....!'
...අත නගා වේගයෙන් හැකි තරම්
ගැසුවේ ය ඔහු ඇයට පහරක් තදින්
වැටුණි ඇ අස්නක් මත.”

(සේකර, 2011: 23).

(Yasoda was nowhere near but only a dark human couple embracing each other in a tight-grip in the corner of the hall, beneath the dark arch.

His mind immersed in grief, drowned in jealousy. Pushing away the hand of the woman who was with him, he stood up; gave a yell of fear,

like a man bitten by a snake; like a man who just caught a glimpse of a ghost; ‘Yasoda!...!’

His hands raised to strike her with as hard a blow as he could. She fell on a seat.)

The ‘subject’ within the existential analytic of misogyny is always already masculine, conflated with the universal, differentiating itself from a feminine ‘Other’ outside the universalizing norms of personhood, hopelessly ‘particular’, embodied, condemned to immanence (Butler, 1999: 16). At length, the Feminist Literary Theory considers the concept of ‘Binary Oppositions’ which came out with the Theory of Deconstruction. Any concept comprises two viewpoints namely ‘Ideal’ and ‘Actual’. The same applies for women as well. It’s likely that the woman in the pragmatic world is far more different from the ideal woman formed by the culture as far as their clothing, the way of conversing and behaviour is concerned. Accordingly, the two Binary Oppositions under consideration is ‘Ideal woman’ and ‘Actual woman’. What immediately follows the existence of binary oppositions is the formation of a hierarchy between these two. Subsequently there comes in to existence the view which conveys that the ideal woman is superior to that of actual woman. As a result the people who accept this view become inclined to view actual women from a rather negative standpoint.

“සිටියෝ මෝරපු ගැහැනු
බැන්ද උස් කොංඩා හා
ගන දෙතොල් උල් නිය ඇති
අඩවන් තච්ඡසි ඇස්
ඉඟ දෙපසින් එල්ලෙන මස්
විජිනි පත් ගෙන පවන් සලමින්
බලමින් නෙත් කොනෙන් ගච්චයෙන්,
මැකෙන රූසිරියට මුක්කු ගසමින්”

(සේකර, 2011: 12).

(There were mature women whose hair tied high, with thick lips, pointed nails, slightly opened swelled eyes, skin hanging from either side of their waists. Their hands were holding on to fans, adamantly casting glances from the corner of their eyes; popping up beams to the fading beauty.)

The Feminist Literary Theory calls into question this negative approach towards the actual woman. Any woman, regardless of her age, outward appearance, and social status should be entitled to behave in their preferred way and also follow any fashion preferable to them. Therefore, neither their fashion nor their behaviour should not be changed in accordance with the way in which the society perceives them.

The impact made through a book on people is such that it becomes a means by which the author rise to eminence and by extension the book itself comes to be considered as a great production in the society. Mahagama Sekara was one of the most versatile of artists in Sri Lanka who inspired several generations of writers even after his time and “Prabuddha” is considered to be the most remarkable work of him. With this literary hegemony he had, it seems that language of “Prabuddha” made a huge impact on readers in defining cultural constructions of gender.

Conclusion

Cultural constructions of gender are ideas, expectations, conventions, rules or laws that are created and maintained by different cultures to define masculinity and femininity. They are expressed through the language in literature of that particular cultural community. Feminist Literary Theory recognizes the role of language in making what is social, cultural and constructed seem transparent and ‘natural’, and questions whether men and women are ‘essentially’ different because of biology, or are socially and culturally constructed as different. Cultural constructions of gender act in literary works by the usage of language in two different ways; by criticizing or by appreciating. If they were not criticized and called in to question, they will be naturalized in that particular community. When reading “Prabuddha” of Mahagama Sekara; one of the most remarkable works of 20th Sri Lanka, from a Feminist perspective, it reveals that the usage of language in “Prabuddha” re-establishes the cultural constructions of gender that have been created and maintained by the society, by accepting, appreciating and naturalizing them instead of criticizing, calling into question and standing against them.

References

- සේකර, මහගම. (2011). ප්‍රබුද්ධ. පන්තිපිටිය: සීමාසහිත ස්ටැම්පර්ස් ලේක් (පුද්ගලික) සමාගම.
- Barry, Peter. (2009). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bulter, Judith P. (1999). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. (2011). *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hooks, Bell. (1984). *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Peoples, James G. and Garrick Bailey. (2003). *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Belmont: Wadsworth Thomson Learning.
- Tyson, Lois. (2006). *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge.
- Yegen, Ceren and Memet Abukan. (2014). "Derrida and Language: Deconstruction", *International Journal of Linguistics 2014*. Nevada: Macrothink Institute Press.