

CALL US MS.*

By

Zarina Patel

"She's an efficient girl, the Matron - the hospital is fortunate in having her."

What is wrong with this sentence? Nothing, most readers will say. But for many of us who have become acutely aware of the role language plays in demeaning women, this sentence is degrading.

The Matron being referred to must be at least 40 years old and probably more, she certainly cannot be in her teens. And yet she is a "girl". Is the hospital administrator ever referred to as a "boy"? Or the male doctor, the male radiographer, the male attendant or the male nurse? Do we refer to them as boys or as men?

The dictionary meaning of woman is an "adult female". Women who insist on being called women are often labelled as cranky or making mountains out of molehills, and even frustrated. After all what does it matter if one is called a girl or a woman? It's just one word instead of another, people say.

The Importance of Language

But it does matter and it is not so simple. Words make up a language and language is the single most important tool evolved by human beings to shape and direct their development. It is through language that we communicate, share and exchange ideas, co-operate, establish theory and build on it.

As human beings have continued to evolve more complex forms of material existence, so has language grown in vocabulary, grammatical intricacy, poetic subtlety and scientific accuracy. It is clear therefore that language not only shapes and directs our growth, it is at the same time a graphic indicator of its contemporary society - its values, ideology, moral outlook and economic and scientific development.

It is not a matter of accident that words such as solidarity, black power, alienation, zombie, feminist and mass

*This is a reprint from *Viva*, 1979 (July), a monthly magazine published in Nairobi, Kenya.

action have evolved in this century. They fittingly describe prominent phenomena prevalent in the era of capitalism and imperialism. In Third World countries where family ties are still strong and traditional customs are widely practised, the language reflects this. Terms such as extended family, elders councils, age groups and polygamy refer specifically to social conditions in these societies. Scientific discoveries have given us the jet age, space travel, instant coffee and extra-sensory perception.

In short, language is a reflection of the condition of society - like everything else, words have their basis in the factual realities of the community. It follows therefore that as those conditions change, so language too must evolve.

Girl or Woman

So returning to the *girl* or *woman* question, let us see which members of the female sex do get addressed as women. Usually it is the very elderly, or mothers with several children or a female who has made it in a man's world. For example, our women in Parliament, women leaders, women who have proved their worth by male standards. Just as during colonial times, only the few African males acceptable to the colonialists were referred to as men, the rest were boys. Similarly the rest of us are just girls.

Interestingly enough, in the national languages of Kenya, it is an insult to call a circumcised female over 13 years of age a girl.

The unmarried woman has to be particularly careful because if she objects to being called a girl, she might end up being called a spinster and the connotations of that word are too well known to need describing. The equivalent term bachelor has a vastly different meaning - everybody loves a bachelor! Bachelors are gay, eligible, free-wheeling and much sought after. Spinsters on the other hand are rejected, dried up leftovers on the shelf. No wonder unmarried women prefer to be called bachelor girls.

The terms *man* and *woman* basically refer to adulthood, the stage that normally follows adolescence. But in our world, girls only become adults when they marry and have children or, as stated earlier, when they achieve parity in a man's world. Only a married woman with kids is considered mature and responsible because society has decided that that is the only role in which women can grow up. A boy, as soon as he has passed his teens, becomes a man even though he may be serving no useful function in society.

Exactly the same form of discrimination was used in colonial times when black men were referred to as boys while white male adults were men or better still, 'gentlemen'. The racist assumption was that black males could not have the intelligence or maturity which white 'men' were endowed with.

Along the same lines, why does a woman have to be either a Miss or a Mrs. when a man is just plain Mr.? Why is it always so important to know whether a woman is married or not? Because society still considers woman's place is in the home and her most important function in life is that of being wife and/or mother. Hence she must at all times declare her marital status.

Women who feel strongly that they are persons in their own right and have their own identity regardless of whether they are married or not, now use the title Ms. (pronounced Miz). But it is an uphill battle to get it accepted. Leaving aside all other arguments, it is so much easier if one can address a woman without first having to find out her marital status.

So often we talk of women and kids in the same breath as though the two belong to the same category. For that is in fact how women are viewed in a male dominated society - as children who never really grow up, as weaklings who need constant protection, who rarely can act responsibly, assume leadership roles or shoulder onerous tasks. That is why we are called girls and not just because it is another word. Some women may feel flattered to be called girls, but they should realise that the term is not a reference to their youth. It assigns to them an inherent immaturity. The languages of male dominated societies are full of such words and phrases, and others which graphically portray the female sex as a commodity, a sexual object, a plaything, a frivolous beauty with no brains and always of secondary importance.

Chick Versus Superman

These claims may sound exaggerated but let us look at a few examples. How does a man address the woman he loves? Sweetie, birdie, chick, baby *kipusa*, *kidoshu* (Kiswahili). They don't exactly make the woman feel strong or intelligent but then maybe they are so much in love it doesn't matter. But no matter how much they are in love, the boyfriend is never a chick or birdie - oh no, he is superman, Tarzan, he-man, Samson and always boss! In Kiswahili, he is *bwana yangu* and *bossi*.

An attractive woman is described as cute, pretty, delicate, petite. The attractive man is tall, strong, handsome, aggressive, brilliant. The ideal woman is hard-working,

co-operative, obedient, faithful, a devoted wife, a loving mother, understanding, patient, caring. The ideal man is powerful, dominant, ambitious, successful, virile, popular and smashing.

In other words, descriptions of the ideal man show him as strong and oppressive; he suppresses all ideas and actions that challenge his authority. The ideal woman on the other hand is oppressed and exploited as she is submissive and non-political. She does not stand up for her rights and believes she is born to suffer.

Sayings and proverbs are a popular form of expressing the values and morality of a culture. Sayings on the subject of women make us wonder if women are really human and how they ever manage to raise a family and contribute to the economy. A few examples are: "Fickle as a woman", "Don't be a sissy, be a man", "Woman, the temptress", "It's a lady's privilege to change her mind". In Kiswahili we commonly hear: "*Usiwe mjinga kama mwanamke*", "*Mwanamke ana akili kama za kuku*", "*Usiamini mwanamke*" and "*Maneno haya ni kama ya mwanamke*". This last refers to gossiping and cheating.

This derogatory terminology has no basis in reality; but it reflects the low worth and status of women in society. Both men and women are conditioned into believing that there are inherent sexually determined roles and behaviours, for example that men are born aggressive and women passive. Some even think that male fetuses kick harder than female ones and are more difficult to deliver. They make strenuous efforts to conform to these norms and those who don't are viewed as eccentric or abnormal. These patterns are perpetuated from generation to generation as children are reared in the same mould.

Woman as Commodity

This negative kind of terminology does not just stop at purely descriptive words. It is deeply rooted in the unequal social relationships between the sexes and ensures that women are put into a passive role that emphasises their value as property and a source of labour.

There must be few words more ridiculous than housewife - we use it so often that we hardly ever stop to analyse it. What does it mean? A woman married to a house? Exactly. A woman is esteemed, not for her intellectual or leadership capabilities or her political acumen but first and foremost for her performance in the home and the way she brings up her family. She is identified with the home and the husband, her own identity of course having long since been erased by a patriarchal society

which makes men the centre of human existence.

Languages such as Kiswahili and Gujerati, which have strong feudal connections, reveal even more oppressive terminology. In Kiswahili, a woman never marries, she is always married: *ameolewa*. It is the man who marries: *ameoa*. He is the active decision maker; she is the passive piece of property waiting to be paid for in dowry and taken by her husband. We have noticed that some modern Kenyan women are saying, in English "I was married by him" instead of "I married him". Here we see the English language being adapted to fit women's non-decision making role.

Among nationalities such as the Wakamba and the Wakikuyu, the woman is known as, for example, "*Njoki wa Kamau*". *Njoki* is "of" her husband, she belongs to him but the husband is never *Kamau wa Njoki*. He would be *Kamau wa Maina*, the son of his father. In fact the correct and proper way of addressing *Njoki* would be as *Mama wa Kimathi*, the mother of her eldest son. Her own name is not even used for of course she has no identity of her own - her very existence is dependent on that of her husband and son, not even her daughter. Western culture follows a similar pattern when women at marriage give up their own family names and take on the husband's family name.

In some Indian communities, including the Gujeratis in Kenya, the bride not only gives up her family name, but even her own first name is replaced by a name chosen by her in-laws. So a woman who for twenty or thirty years has lived as, say, Sushila Rajan, suddenly on being married, becomes Promila Devshi. Was it not a colonialist strategy to deny the colonised his/her identity in order to more fully enslave them? Is that not why more and more Africans today are shedding the Western so-called Christian names they were baptised with?

For the Kenyan Gujeratis, who are essentially a commercial petit-bourgeoisie, it is not enough to have property, it must be bought and sold. So when a marriage is in the offing you will hear Gujeratis ask "*Koni chokri lidhi?*" ("Whose daughter did they buy or take?" The word *lidhi* is used for taking or buying commodities from a shop.) Others will ask "*Chokri kone didhi?*" ("Who did they give the girl to?") This is really degrading to the Gujerati woman who is reduced to a mere object.

In commonly spoken Gujerati, the words for woman are *stri* and *bairi*. These words are also used to mean wife. The word for girl is *chokri* which can also mean daughter. There is therefore no specific word to describe a woman who is independent of both parents and husband and is a person in her own right. A widow is addressed as *Ganga Swaroop* but there is no equivalent title for a widower. For in Gujerati society, when a woman loses

her husband, her entire status changes and in fact drops dramatically. But a man whose wife dies does not experience any such upheaval. The most respectful and caring title one can give to a married Gujerati woman is *Akhand sobhagyavati* - this means "May your husband live forever!"

The status of women is that of commodities to be exchanged and this finds clear expression in the language. In some communities, the value of the commodity is so low that the unfortunate parents of the woman have to provide all sorts of additional value to procure a husband for her.

Can a Woman be "Man of the Year"?

Then we have those words and phrases which clearly refer to the male, but are supposed to include the female. Some examples are mankind, manpower, foreman, Chairman, businessman, draughtsman, spokesman and man-made. People will insist that the phrases *Man of the Year*, *One man one vote*, or *one man one job* include women and that history is not just HIS story. How are women supposed to relate to the phrase "God created man in His own image?"

Male dominance is implicit in the ambiguity of these words and phrases. Their origins are firmly rooted in the ideology which gives men power over women.

When a Committee meets to elect a chairman, one tends to assume unless it is clarified, the the committee is looking for a man to lead it. If posts for foreman, salesman or manager are advertised, women with the necessary qualifications are left in doubt as to whether the advent is addressed to them or to men only.

"Women shouldn't be so sensitive," we are told. "They should know these words are not meant to discriminate". But would men apply for the post of saleswoman or manageress? And the man who insists that a woman can be a chairman, would he agree to be called a "chairwoman"?

In case all this sounds rather petty, please note that now that large numbers of men are joining the Nursing Profession in Kenya, the term Nursing Sister is being changed to Nursing Officer. No man after all would like to be called a nursing sister!

Not only that. With an even less than 50 percent intake of men in the profession, we are already hearing the nurse being referred to as male in general terms. That is "the nurse should be sympathetic, he should care for the patient, he should..."

Similarly, 60-70 percent of our farmers in the country are women. Yet everywhere, including in the Ministry of Agriculture, people use the male pronoun for the farmer and continue to thank the farmer for *his* contribution to the economy.

This kind of ambiguous language only serves to make women even more insecure in a society where they are struggling for rights which are often mistaken for privileges. All the oppressed, whether in a family, an institution or in a class dominated society, know only too well what it means to be "invisible". When the racist regime in South Africa states that it represents the people of South Africa - the real, indigenous, blacks and the majority know very well that to the racists, people are only white people; the rest are sub-human.

Our Colonial Heritage

In Kenya today, we ourselves have discarded colonial terms and coined new words and phrases which are more in keeping with the prevailing historical conditions. *Harambee* is the best known, but they range from *Karafu*, *wabenzi*, *democrasia*, *ukoloni*, *mambo leo*, *wanyonyaji*, *wananchi*, *wenyenchi*, *magendo* and of course *nyayo*. Although we know that the word native only means original inhabitant, because of its racial and oppressive connotations, we refuse to be called natives.

We assert quite rightly, that those people who continue to use these words are still imbued with a colonial and oppressive mentality. Thus any group of people engaged in the process of liberating themselves have to develop a new terminology reflecting their new awareness and clarity of their line of action. And so it is with women too. No longer can women tolerate words which claim to address them but in fact oppress them.

Woman Includes Man and She Includes He

Many people feel that it is too difficult and awkward to change the language. New words such as chairperson, person power, s/he, people (instead of men) and Ms. are surely not difficult if one has the correct attitude. If one can learn to say '*Mheshmiwa*' instead of 'boy', one can certainly begin to use language which not only includes women but treats them as the other equal half of the human race. In fact it is the female terms which are all inclusive and could therefore be seen as being more "correct" if they were used for referring to both sexes. For example 'woman' includes 'man', 's-he' includes 'he' and 'fe-male' includes 'male'.

Socialists have no difficulty in addressing men and women as comrades. Even difficult words such as 'proletariat'

and 'bourgeoisie' and phrases such as 'national liberation' and 'cultural imperialism' have become common in our vocabulary. Language, like the society it helps to develop, is and will continue to be, in constant change. New words are coined every-day and old out-dated words are replaced by more appropriate ones.

Those who resist this change cannot claim to be neutral - they are actively supporting the status quo. By using non-feminist terminology when they are aware of its oppressive nature, they reveal themselves as sexists. Sexists are those people (men and women) who advocate inferior roles for women simply because they are women, and thus strive to maintain the dominance of the male sex. Like racists who advocate superior roles for whites and inferior ones for blacks; and tribalists who advocate tribal supremacy.

Language as it has developed reflects the contradictions in the social relations of production i.e. the development of class struggle. Class contradictions in the present capitalist era are manifested in sexism, racism and tribalism.

Language as we have seen, is also an active tool for educating the people and raising their awareness. Those who are involved in the struggle for liberation have therefore to take responsibility for inventing appropriate terminology to fit the new conditions and to accelerate the changes already in process.

*

*

*

*