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Research Article

Ungendering Women's Language through Economic Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Heavily codified by societal norms, women's language is obliged in most situations to follow strict patterns. These features limit a woman's freedom of expression and submerge her personal identity. In the name of preserving social propriety, women are consistently denigrated in their own language use as well as in others' discourse about them. This article seeks to locate these strategies of linguistic subjugation in women's relative economic position through close reference to two texts from different periods, namely, *A Doll's House* (1879) by Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, and *Top Girls* (1982) by British playwright Caryl Churchill. The speech and mannerisms of the various characters in different circumstances in the text are analysed from relevant theoretical perspectives to identify the intricate relationship between women's language and their economic status. The article then attempts to prove that women speak and are spoken of in an inferior language precisely because they are economically deprived of privileges and rights. The oppression is systemically perpetuated by a number of social institutions like marriage, motherhood, religion and education. On the other hand, if a woman breaks free of these set roles, and acquires financial autonomy, then, no matter what her class in the societal hierarchy might be, her language changes significantly. It deviates from the linguistic norms imposed on her by patriarchal culture and becomes ungendered. The article thus concludes with this need for women's financial empowerment to liberate women's language.

Keywords: Language and gender, Linguistic discrimination, Subjugation, Femininity, Empowerment, Women's language, Gendered language, Financial autonomy

INTRODUCTION

Conditioned from the very first days of her life to think, speak and behave in certain ways, a woman's life is regulated according to very strict social norms. This is, of course, not to say that all women speak and act in the same way. Speech styles and mannerisms are dependent upon a number of factors, social standing and individuality being some of the most obvious. However, what may often be overlooked while analysing women and their language is their economic status in life. Economic status here refers not to class in the Marxist sense, but to economic independence. A woman who has to rely upon a man even for her barest necessities, not only does she abide by the 'feminine' norms of what Lakoff (1975) calls 'women's language', but she even promotes gender stereotypes, whether unconsciously or not. Traditional class and gender structures thus seek to maintain stability through the conventional languages of women as well as men. On the other hand, when a woman achieves financial independence in her life, no matter what her class in the societal hierarchy might be, she tends to deviate from the language that is imposed on her by patriarchy. The purpose of this article is to identify this undeniable connection between a woman's financial autonomy and her language.

While much research has been done on various aspects of gendered language, gender-centric expressions, language use and woman's identity as well as the interrelation between women empowerment and economic entrepreneurship, it appears that the issue of language and women's economic status has received relatively less critical attention. This article therefore proposes to explore this fertile area of study. After looking at existing and associated works on the subject, two texts, in particular, will be examined minutely to identify the nature of the connection between women's economic autonomy and their language. These are *A Doll's House* (1879) by Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, and *Top Girls* (1982) by British playwright Caryl Churchill. It needs to be clarified at the very onset that due to constraints of scope and time, instead of actual conversation, literary texts have been taken as illustrative examples of the hypothesis in question. The dialogues of the characters have been considered equivalent to spoken language for the sake of convenience. The style, structure as well as content of the dialogues will be thoroughly analysed with ample critical argument to place the hypothesis in the appropriate context. The article will then draw to a close with a comprehensive account of all that is investigated, discovered and deduced.

Language and Gender: Gendered Language

What is this 'women's language' as characterised by Lakoff (1975)? She defines it by a variety of common features such as hedging, use of tag questions, rising

intonation at the end of declarative sentences, frequent pitch modulation, observing certain taboos, and basically avoiding any kind of straightforward statement or direct confrontation. She refers to women as speaking in 'italics', that is, since they are apprehensive about not really being listened to, they utilise extra elements of intonation and stress in order for their message to be communicated through tone if not through the words alone. She locates the origin of all this in a general lack of confidence as well as in a propensity towards politeness, which women are conditioned into from their very childhood. It is part of the same conditioning that teaches women that they are the 'Other', to be defined solely in terms of their relation to the 'Self' which is always the man (Beauvoir, 1949).

Brown and Levinson (1987) have traced this particularly 'feminine' trait of euphemistic and tactful language to something that they aptly refer to as 'negative politeness' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 135), which is when women show respect in a self-effacing manner and are thus considered to be deferential. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) identify the sources of tag questions as manifold. A woman may use tag questions to express uncertainty, to facilitate the opening up of a new avenue of conversation, to mitigate the impact of a harsh statement or even to challenge. But in most cases, even those tag questions arising from a perspective of open-mindedness may be mistaken by the phallocentric language (and society) as stemming from insecurity or vulnerability.

Tannen (1990, p. 18) adopts the different approach in analysing this 'women's language', which she calls a different 'genderlect' altogether, as a product of being socialised in a subculture intrinsically different from that of men. An observation that she keeps on repeating is that while men's language strives for status and independence, women's language is directed towards connection and intimacy. So, it is no wonder that they are called two different genderlects if their purposes are so entirely dissimilar. In connection to this, she also deduces that if women only vie for empathy, their language is also generally disapproving of any hint of disagreement, which they perceive as a threat to intimacy, unlike men who see it as a mark of intimacy. So, 'women's language' tends to be pacifist, insofar as they are conditioned to be peacemakers.

As women give more importance to building bonds, and men on power, Hudson (2001) argues that this puts women at a disadvantage when it comes to the professional milieu, and men are at a disadvantage in the domestic sphere and in the domain of relationships. Since the patriarchal society does not accord women the same opportunities as men, they often have no choice but to try to gain prestige by speaking differently. 'Prestigious

language, then, is the female substitute for a prestigious job as a way of establishing a position in society' (Hudson, 2001, p. 213). Men's language is often considered to be more prestigious and more desirable (Lakoff, 1975), which is why power is associated so closely with it. Women in their language use become contact points for men to access established traditions of gender and power. Language gives men a way to constantly subjugate the women and reaffirm their authority in order to persist in a position of power (Roberts, 2019). This, in fact, helps to trace back the root cause of the differences in men and women's language to the division of labour which separated the men's sphere as public (and hence, superior) and the women's as private (and hence, inferior), and it is something that Jespersen (1922) also mentions at the end of the infamous chapter 'The Woman'. In spite of his entire analysis being filtered through a highly misogynistic and biased lens, it does provide some very valuable data regarding 'women's language' in its most primitive conditions, as spoken by tribal women.

Ethnographic studies (Salifu, 2020) have shown that in a matrilineal society (i.e. a society that traces lineage through the mother's side), women have better access to resources, and have more effective rights of self-determination in the realm of marriage, as compared to patrilineal societies. Such an example has been found in the West African community of Asante, where it is chiefly the woman's prerogative to earn a living and sustain the family. This serves as an avenue of empowerment, and gives the women economic autonomy. Though the above study was conducted in a community very different from what is perceived as typical and what has been depicted in the texts in hand, it can function as a precedent to what economic autonomy can signify for women and their general social position, which gets reflected in their language.

While Hobson (1990) links a woman's bargaining power to her relative economic position in the household, Biddlecom and Kramarow (1998) demonstrate how even equally contributing women find it hard to break off convention when it comes to actual self-assertion. So, either way, society insists on viewing the feminine gender as weaker. What Lakoff (1975) says in this regard forms an apt prelude to the proposition of this article. She claims that if women use 'women's language', they are not taken seriously, but seen as frivolous and less than a full individual, but if they do not use it, they are considered unfeminine. Therefore, she 'is damned if she does, damned if she doesn't' (Lakoff, 1975, p. 68). But what if she has no more need to speak a different genderlect to be taken seriously? That is what is to be explored in the following illustrative arguments.

DISCUSSION

'No, of Course Not, Marlene, I Belonged to Him': Women as Men's Property

The great self-contradiction of Nora (the protagonist of *A Doll's House*) is that although she is the actual saviour of her husband, she insists on Torvald being the power-wielder in the family: 'Torvald is a man with a good deal of pride – it would be terribly embarrassing and humiliating for him if he thought he owed anything to me' (Act I, p. 15). Biddlecom and Kramarow (1998) observe how even when a woman is economically more powerful than her husband, perhaps by dint of her profession, more often than not, she bows down to the diktat of convention and gives the household headship to the husband. So, in spite of literally holding the power of life over him, Nora not only lets Torvald control her expenses and diet, but she even enjoys being infantilised. Torvald addressing her as 'my little squirrel' or 'my pretty little pet' is deeply problematic and only one step better than objectifying her into a site and giver of pleasure. She finds it horrifying when suggested that she may hold emotional power over Torvald: 'What makes you think I've got any influence of that kind over my husband?' (Act I, p. 25), as if it is a sin. This reminds one of Griselda's reaction to Marlene's criticism of her husband who was such a tyrant that he tested her obedience by taking away her children and making her believe that everyone hated her: 'Marlene, you're always so critical of him. / Of course he was normal, he was very kind' (Act I, p. 85). Even fair criticism of the husband was something unimaginable coming from the wife. This is not her true thought, which becomes evident when she later thinks aloud: 'I do think – I do wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to' (Act I, p. 89).

Lady Nijo, another character from *Top Girls*, was a 13th-century courtesan, born and brought up to live in the service of the Japanese emperor. She was frequently ill-treated, beaten and had her children taken away. One would expect her to be somewhat resentful of the oppression she had to undergo. But when Marlene confronts her with the question of whether she was raped, her reply is rather stunning: '…It made me uneasy. No, of course not, Marlene, I belonged to him, it was what I was brought up for from a baby. I soon found I was sad if he stayed away. It was depressing day after day not knowing when he would come. I never enjoyed taking other women to him' (Act I, p. 67). She was taken to the Emperor's chamber when she was only fourteen, so her consent does not even come into the question. But it is very interesting to notice that she categorically denies being raped, although she clearly was. She is talking about this to another woman in modern times, but even then, she is conditioned enough not to accuse the man she 'belonged to'. Though she is severely aware of her status as property, she confesses her need to receive validation from him. However, this needs

to be taken with a pinch of salt, because as Tannen (1990) states, a woman will prefer not to be blunt or directly confrontational, and will seek assurance and intimacy rather than respect and autonomy. Another statement of Nijo is also quite puzzling given the same context of her constant ill-treatment. Even when she spent the latter years of her life as a Buddhist nun, she confesses multiple times to Marlene that she really did enjoy her fine silks and eight-layer gowns as a courtesan: 'What I enjoyed most was being the Emperor's favourite / and wearing thin silk' (Act I, p. 68). Lady Nijo's courtly language, therefore, is not just a relic of the medieval era she inhabited, but also her individual orientation towards the life she was forced to lead as a young woman. To put it in another way, they as women are the property of the men they are associated with, so they form part of the subaltern class. It is not that they do not have economic privileges as a whole–Nora can afford to spend a lot on fabrics and decorations, Nijo too is able to live in luxury. But all their economic comfort comes from the fact that they have to depend on men, Nora on Torvald, and Nijo on the Emperor.

This gets reflected in their language as they speak to their men, and as they speak of their men. Nijo's socio-economic position is jeopardised when her father dies and she is left at the mercy of the Emperor: 'So when I fell out of favour I had nothing' (Act I, p. 71). Nora objectifies herself when speaking to her husband: 'If a little squirrel were to ask ever so nicely…?' (Act II, p. 41) and when speaking of him to her friend Kristine/ Mrs Linde, she makes it very clear who holds the dominant position: '…and having things just as Torvald likes to have them!' (Act I, p. 16). Nora's speech (as can be observed in her dialogues) is replete with exclamation marks, which indicates a great degree of voice modulation as well as rising intonation. Nijo is somewhat confused by Marlene calling her cheerful: 'I'm not a cheerful person, Marlene. I just laugh a lot' (Act I, p. 72). Her speech, like her practised laugh, is more strategic than genuinely expressive of her own thoughts and feelings. It is what may be called a 'staged discourse' (Romdhani, 2015). Both Nora and Nijo are defined by their marital (or broadly, sexual) status, so they speak the 'women's language', because they need to appease their men who are their sole means of livelihood. In all practical terms, these women perceive themselves as 'selves-in-relation' to their male counterparts (Chodorow, 1978).

'Poor Thing': Women as Powerless

This powerlessness can be observed not only in the women characters' speech to men, but to other women as well. It is also not simply a result of a rigid division of labour as Jespersen (1922) suggested, but because while men are defined by what they do, women are defined solely in terms of their gender. Several instances from both texts clearly manifest this feature. When Kristine visits Nora, it is not just to

seek a friendly reunion, but an attempt to take advantage of the friendship to get hired by Nora's newly-promoted husband at the Bank: 'Believe it or not, when you told me the good news about your step up, I was pleased not so much for your sake as for mine' (Act I, p. 12). Her manner of speech is of a woman coming to ask for help rather than of a friend meeting after a long time. This is because she is at the lower end of the power spectrum in these circumstances, and has to depend on Nora's efforts to get employed. So, she abides by the norms of 'women's language', including politeness, no direct confrontation and favouring roundabout over blunt statements. She is not always of the same opinion as Nora, but she is very cautious so as not to offend her in any way. She is careful to express any negative opinion in a cushioned and deferent manner: 'It is awfully kind of you, Nora, offering to do all this for me, particularly in your case, where you haven't known much trouble or hardship in your own life' (Act I, p. 12). Nora's speech, on the other hand, demonstrates that she is well aware of her superior position. She realises that she possesses the economic power to help her friend out of misery. So, her offer of help has a message of compassion, but it might also be interpreted as having a 'metamessage' (Tannen, 1990, p. 12) of condescension, which becomes evident in her way of interacting. She addresses her friend as a 'poor thing' for being 'so utterly alone' and 'terribly sad', and occupies the position of a benefactor when she assures her: 'Just leave things to me… Oh, I do so much want to help you' (Act I, p. 12). Therefore, even women-to-women interaction cannot be simplified into 'rapport-talk' (Tannen, 1990, p. 34), but is very much influenced by the intricate power dynamics between the speakers.

A version of Kristine's subordinate speech can be traced in Nora too, on a different occasion. Mr Krogstad had secretly lent money to Nora, enabling her to save Torvald. But since Torvald's promotion had made it possible for a greater financial stability in the Helmer household, Nora grows confident that she would soon be able to forget any association with a disreputable man like Krogstad. Her speech is also therefore quite assertive: 'You speak disrespectfully of my husband like that and I'll show you the door' (Act I, p. 25) At the same time, Krogstad is initially in a position subordinate to Nora because he has come to request her to influence her husband not to take away his Bank job: 'Mrs Helmer, will you have the goodness to use your influence on my behalf?' (Act I, p. 24). In the beginning of this conversation, the conventional hierarchy is subverted with the man pleading with the woman, but only on account of something that is in the power of the woman's husband and not herself. However, as soon as Krogstad claims that there is something puzzling about Nora's past actions, though she seemingly holds power over him (by virtue of being his employer's wife), her speech changes tone as the veracity of her statements is questioned. She starts hedging and takes a lot of pauses in between words, which shows her own dilemma

and lack of confidence. Her dialogue in this portion is littered with hesitations and ellipses. Again, immediately after realising that Nora has actually committed a crime, Krogstad's own subservient manner is replaced by a more arrogant and even threatening pitch: '… if I'm pitched out a second time, you are going to keep me company' (Act I, p. 29). His male ego gains prominence in order to safeguard the traditional gender status quo, and it overtakes any sort of compassion he might feel for a woman who had no choice but to do whatever was possible to save her husband's life, which was the only way she could save herself too, given that she had no other economic backing. In response, the only way available to Nora was to take recourse to codified 'women's language'–she speaks passionately and emotionally, exclaiming her helplessness and distress. The reasons she gives are not rational any more but sentimental. But that is the only way she can uphold her husband's supremacy and ensure her own financial self-preservation in the face of a threat to her husband's pride. That is because if Torvald got to know of her forgery, the greater consequence would be the wounding of his ego rather than her being ashamed or guilty. This instance displays the subtle power dynamics that govern a woman's speech in her confined patriarchal setup.

Nora defending her husband's pride is echoed when Mrs Kidd in *Top Girls* pays an impromptu visit to Marlene's office (Act II Scene III). Its purpose is to somehow convince Marlene to forgo her promotion so that Mr Kidd/ Howard might not have to work as a woman's subordinate. Mrs Kidd's tone is simultaneously ingratiating and threatening. She exhibits classic symptoms of hedging as she takes time to come to her point–she talks of Howard not sleeping well and makes some general commentary before indirectly accusing Marlene for her husband's ill health. Her need here is evident because 'It's me that bears the brunt. I'm not the one that's been promoted. I put him first every inch of the way. And now what do I get? You women this, you women that. It's not my fault' (Act II Scene III, p. 119). She has come to persuade another woman to give up her promotion because her own financial stability is at stake–Howard is the only bread-earner in the family. This is something that Hudson (2001) has observed, that since a woman and a man's underlying goals in language are different, when they communicate in a sphere that is conventionally specific to the other gender, there is bound to be misunderstanding. Mrs Kidd here has come on Howard's behalf, so she is trying to communicate his need for power in the professional scenario to Marlene who is a woman, and so should be more focussed on connection rather than power. But a problem arises because Marlene, despite being a woman, gives far more importance to her own career advancement than forging connections with another woman. So, while Mrs Kidd takes recourse to verbally abusing Marlene for something that is not her fault at all, Marlene's response on the other hand is totally different. She takes care not to inferiorise the other woman in any way and accords her due

respect. But when abused, she also swears back at her, though not as a superior to a subordinate, but rather as an equal expressing disgust. Marlene's metamessage noticeably remains one of equal status all throughout.

Griselda, the fictional obedient wife of The Clerk's Tale in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400), is another character in Churchill's play. Her speech offers a different kind of study in how economic dependence shapes a woman's language. Although she is hungry, she is very reluctant to display it and make a demand for food even when she is in the company of none but other women. She concedes to having pudding only when she is assured that she is causing no special trouble and that everyone else is having it too: 'I'm sorry I'm so late. No, no, don't bother…. Oh if everyone is, I don't mind' (Act I, p. 83) This may be interpreted as what Tannen (1990) calls seeking affiliation in a group, or her speech being more inclusive by virtue of her gender, or she wanting her way only if it is not at the cost of a confrontation (here, extra trouble). But it is perhaps more so because her dependent status has taught her to be ashamed to make any sort of direct demand, even if it is to fulfil her basic needs. Hobson (1990) establishes a connection between a woman's bargaining power over decisions and her relative economic position in the household. The 'economic dependency', as she calls it, plays a role in the woman's ability to influence economic activities in the public sphere. But as can be seen through the numerous instances of Griselda, Mrs Kidd and Nora, it affects not only her economic contribution but also disempowers her language, and oppresses it.

'But of Course, a Wife Must Obey Her Husband': Women as Subjugated by Marriage

The reason behind the economic dependence of women is social in origin. Various social institutions legalise this constant oppression of an entire gender based on irrationality. The first of these that come to mind is marriage. The notion of marriage based on love or romance is rather new. For centuries, marriage has always been a stolidly economic institution–a negotiation between two families to decide how to best manage their property. One way of controlling inheritance was to spare women any responsibility regarding property rights and professions. The headship of the household has historically been allocated to the main economic provider of the family (Biddlecom and Kramarow, 1998), which automatically led to women having to depend on their husbands literally for their survival, but in a manner involving an artificial sort of affection in most cases. All the regulations of 'women's language' stem from this very fact. The good wife Griselda in *Top Girls* never questions her husband's authority. Her speech shows that she always took it for granted, even when she was given a choice for marriage: 'The Marquis said it wasn't an order, I could say no, but if I

said yes I must always obey him in everything. … But of course a wife must obey her husband' (Act I, p. 84)

In the first two acts of *A Doll's House*, Nora too exhibits all these 'feminine' features of language, which have been discussed in the previous arguments as well in detail. For example, she is reluctant to talk about the 'real' affairs of the world: '… But let's not talk about business… it's all so dull' (Act I, p. 18). She is also the stereotypical stupid shallow woman: 'You all think I'm useless when it comes to anything really serious' (Act I, p. 12). These apparently ordinary expressions speak volumes about the fact that Nora's language is controlled by her marital status. Her marriage traps her into behavioural patterns of subjugation.

But all of this undergoes a sea change after Torvald's furious outburst at discovering Krogstad's revelatory letter and learning about Nora's crime. His attitude becomes downright autocratic as he flings ugly accusations at her, and all his anger is directed at the fact that she had jeopardised his career and reputation: 'What good would it do me if you left this world behind, as you put it?' (Act III, p. 77) This is his utterly selfish response to Nora's offer of committing suicide to save his reputation. Then, another letter from Krogstad alleviates his despair by giving him back the incriminating evidence and resolving the entire problem in practical terms. Torvald's hysteria of anger is replaced by a hysteria of relief: 'I have forgiven you, Nora, I swear it!' (Act III, p. 78). This fickleness in his attitude that changes in an instant from one pole to the other is what triggers Nora's epiphany. Before this, her speech has been extremely agitated, tense and full of shrieking. But her sentences become curter after Torvald's consecutive shows of anger and forgiveness. She looks calmly at her watch and tells him to sit down because they need to discuss certain things. Her composed demeanour is in exact contrast to Torvald's manner of speaking. This tremendous overturning of power dynamics becomes very evident in the last conversation between the couple. Torvald now plays the conventional role of the woman, scared that the husband will flee his familial duties. He tries to hold Nora back by asserting his patriarchal authority handed over to him by the society; he proclaims that forgiving Nora's act of transgression has been immensely satisfying for him: 'It's as though it made her his property in a double sense' (Act III, p. 78). All this time, Nora becomes aloof, detached, like the man who moves away from the domestic sphere.

'Hasn't it struck you this is the first time you and I, man and wife, have had a serious talk together?' (Act III, p. 79) While Torvald is shocked by the reality of his wife actually being a person instead of a possession to be protected, Nora discovers her individuality for the first time. She is no more a daughter, no more a wife, but only a human being, an independent woman. This realisation of her selfhood is tantamount

to a rebirth, and this is where she comprehends the full significance of economic independence. What has been characterised as 'women's language' is something that actually submerges the woman's personal identity. It imposes certain norms on her and restrains her from expressing herself freely. Social institutions like marriage only deepen these practices and behaviours even more. By keeping the woman dependent on the husband for her most basic needs, marriage in a social sense lowers her status as a human and most importantly, denies her access to power. Foucault (1961) spoke of what constitutes 'discourse' or meaningful speech. Anything that is meaningful has to be defined in terms of institutional ratification, sanity of the speaker, and most significantly, the power held by the speaker. Knowledge, or in other words, speech is true power. Freedom of speech and expression is one of the fundamental human rights because it is a primary prerequisite of power. It is this freedom of women that is curtailed by social institutions like marriage. This prevents her from getting recognised by society on an equal footing with men, and perpetuates patriarchy in a systemic manner. Therefore, when Nora asserts her duty to her own self, she finally breaks free of Torvald. She musters up the courage to go against all social proprieties when she leaves her family to discover herself and stand on her own two feet.

This radical act of assertion defines her character anew. Very interestingly, it may be noticed that it is from the time that she makes up her mind to leave Torvald that her speech style changes too. If carefully examined, it is possible to deduce that her language becomes devoid of all the marks of 'women's language', and acquires the characteristics of the type of language that has conventionally been called 'men's language' (to pose a contrast to the feminine counterpart). It would be useful to analyse Nora's final dialogues in terms of the binaries identified by Tannen (1990). She locates in women's speech certain distinguishing features, which are briefly summed up in the following woman/man pairs: connection and intimacy versus status or independence; reactive versus initiating; affiliation versus respect; and so on. These pairs can also be subsumed within the broad categories of 'rapport-talk' versus 'report-talk' (Tannen, 1990, p. 34). Nora's earlier speech as hitherto analysed has explicitly expressed these 'feminine' features all throughout. She was speaking of her emotions rather than giving information, mostly reacting to a man's speech rather than initiating it–she was speaking to create and maintain an intimacy with whoever she was speaking, most importantly, her husband. But after her epiphany, the qualities of her speech change in consonance with her attitude. She is the one who sits the man down to give him information, and she asserts her independent status rather than trying to forge a connection with the husband who had wronged her so. She no more wants to be just Torvald's 'doll wife' (Act III, p. 80), but she annuls the marriage and demands respect from her husband

as well as from the audience. The expected binaries thus get overturned. But the question is whether this means that Nora adopts the male way of speaking to assert herself. It certainly appears so if one wishes to view the above-mentioned binaries in terms of man versus woman. But the oppositions come into being because of the very basic difference in power. The subculture that women are socialised in is different because it teaches them to be powerless creatures at the mercy of those who hold the power in society. Those who hold power in society are inevitably those who are at the helm of the society's economic infrastructure, which is traditionally men in most cultures. Hence, when Nora adopts the other language, she is not on her way to becoming a man. She is rather on her way to becoming a fully independent complete individual. This aspiration towards comprehensive autonomy is what drives the change in her language too. This changed language becomes the language of power and responsibility, which are essential constituents of an independent human being.

'Oh, This Is a Sin against Myself, But I Cannot Leave Them': Motherhood as a Social Imposition

The issue of motherhood has not yet been explored in this context as it requires a separate and fuller discussion covering all its aspects. The circumstances leading up to Nora's epiphany in Act III again serve as a very telling example of how motherhood as a social institution is imposed on women to keep them powerless in terms of behaviour and speech. The first punishment that the furious Torvald pronounces on Nora after reading the incriminating letter is that he will no longer allow her to take care of their children. This ties back to his belief as expressed earlier in the play: 'Practically all juvenile delinquents come from homes where the mother is dishonest' (Act I, p. 33). This one dialogue may even be taken to be the first stimulus which makes Nora think about leaving her family, whether she really believes it or not. She exclaims her horror that her crime of forgery may somehow be genetically transferred to her innocent children and corrupt them. That is why, when she tells her husband of her decision to leave for good, she uses his own logic against him: 'And what sort of qualifications have I to teach the children?' (Act III, p. 81). Another very interesting thing to consider is the alternative ending that Ibsen was compelled to write for the performance of *A Doll's House* on the German stage. He was pressurised by the principal actress and the director-producer to write a more 'conciliatory' ending. So, he wrote some additional dialogue to bring a close to the play, where Nora literally trembles at the thought of leaving her children 'motherless', and ultimately stays back with Torvald: 'Oh, this is a sin against myself, but I cannot leave them' (Act III, alternative ending, p. 88). She is overwhelmed by the forces of compassion, affiliation and intimacy, and turns away once more from the path of individuality.

This delineates what motherhood actually is for women. In the social milieu, motherhood is so much more than just a biological experience. Almost all cultures in the world portray motherhood as a quintessential ingredient of womanhood. While of course the marvellous nature of such a phenomenon cannot be denied, it becomes another significant social restraint on women's autonomy. Marxist feminists like Juliet Mitchell (1966) have discussed at length about how motherhood tends to trap women and reduce them from individuals into beings whose existence becomes wholly dependent on their children. The reason Torvald can give the excuse of her children to try and hold her back is because motherhood is such an important social duty for a woman. Therefore, for Nora to leave her dependent status, it is essential to leave behind her socially imposed maternal responsibilities too. Further illustrations from Churchill's play will serve to accentuate the need for this.

Marlene, the driven businesswoman, and the protagonist in Churchill's play, also had to leave behind her identity as a mother when she needed to focus on her career. Of course, this is not to say that successful and economically independent women cannot be successful mothers too, but often, a child is more of a social and biological burden for a woman rather than a source of joy. Marlene left behind her daughter Angie because she would have been a very real impediment in her path to professional and financial prosperity. The situation of her sister Joyce is the exact opposite. Though she is supposedly Angie's mother, her verbal tone when she speaks to Angie is not what can be called maternal or caring. In fact, she shows her bitterness easily. She comments on sixteen-year-old Angie's growth as: 'She's a big lump' (Act III, p. 128); and tells her to go and change clothes in her room because 'we don't want a strip show thank you' (Act III, p. 128). After virtually being separated from her husband, the entire financial burden of the family rests upon Joyce, and as is shown in the studies conducted by Bröckel and Andreß (2015), she as the woman is automatically given the task of the caregiver. So, she has the twin responsibilities of both mother and bread-earner. Though her strange fondness for Angie becomes clear much later on, she makes it evident that her experience of motherhood has not been pleasant at all, and her life has consequently been unenviable because she could not avail herself of the same opportunities as Marlene, who left at the first chance. Consequently, she also did not have the scope of becoming financially comfortable either. She drily tells her own sister: 'Look, you've left, you've gone away, we can do without you' (Act III, p. 139) This exchange between the two mostly-estranged sisters serves to show how a woman often needs to choose between motherhood and professional advancement and how it shows up in her speech.

Lady Nijo, on the other hand, offers a different view on motherhood. By virtue of her being a courtesan, many of her pregnancies were unwanted and forced, and that is

why, it is not much of a surprise when she states: 'It was a boy again, my third son. But oddly enough I felt nothing for him' (Act I, p. 82) Women's speech seems to show how a wonderful experience like motherhood can become an imposition, a burden, and often, a restraint, as in the case of Pope Joan. She is a historico-fictional character from *Top Girls*, Pope from 854 to 856 AD, believed to be disguised as a man. Extremely prodigious and intelligent, she had to take on the appearance of a man in order to continue in her office. But her pregnancy gave her away – she gave birth on the street during a church procession, and consequently, was stoned to death. When narrating the incident, Nijo asks if the baby died too, and Joan replies in a curiously matter-of-fact manner: 'Oh yes, I think so, yes' (Act I, p. 81). The reason why she put so less emphasis on her only baby's death may be interpreted as a way of holding a grudge against it. It was because of her pregnancy, the visible sign of her womanhood, that she was killed, so the manner in which she speaks of her killed child is disinterested as she holds it responsible for her death. Again, a woman's speech gives proof of her response to and position in the society, burdened by the institution of motherhood.

'Whatever the Pope Says, That's True': Religion, Learning and Women

Many Marxist thinkers and scholars have referred to religion as something that is imbibed by the masses without rational thought, and then pursued to the point of violent discrimination. While the positive sides of organised religion cannot be denied, it has always been one of the most potent instruments of social oppression. This is all the more pertinent in this regard as education was originally a part and parcel of religion and religious learning, in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam or any other religion. So, as the dominant religions of the world are known to actively subjugate women – the best and simplest example is probably the figure of Eve who is condemned for the Fall of the entire humankind – educational opportunities for women have also been equally negligible for a long time, and women have continually been deprived of educational rights. Religion has been the perfect means of ritually characterising women as only faithful wives and devout mothers, justifying their subjugation as divinely ordained (Sivakumar and Manimekalai, 2021). The character and speech of Pope Joan become an important vehicle of the evidence of this systemic religious suppression of women.

Joan had to leave home dressed as a boy at the age of 12, because she wanted to study and women were not allowed in libraries. She was sincerely devoted to the knowledge of the Scripture: 'There was nothing in my life except my studies' (Act I, p. 76). In order to stay a dedicated academic, she took the only practical way out– she went to Rome as Italian men did not have beards and it would have been easier for her to remain disguised. Her womanhood and papacy never actually came into

conflict till that public scandal of the pregnancy. Her dialogues demonstrate the journey from her hesitancy in being a woman Pope to her confidence in her own position: 'I had thought the Pope would know everything. I thought God would speak to me directly. But of course, he knew I was a woman…. And I realised I did know the truth. Because whatever the Pope says, that's true' (Act I, p. 78) This last dialogue is what holds forever true. She held the supreme religious and social power in her hands, and she enjoyed it. Her speech did not betray to the people that she was a woman. While it may be argued that it was because she had to maintain her disguise that she took active care in speaking like a man, it should be evident rather that people did not realise her gender because the speech of an empowered (though falsely in Pope Joan's case) woman is the speech of a learned and empowered individual, of a religious head, and it is assertive speech rather than 'men's language'.

'A Rough Life in the Open Air': Femininity and Assertiveness

Pope Joan's assertion leads to the deduction that assertiveness has nothing to do with gender at all. Whoever has economic independence and power will use a language that is assertive. Anything else that can be observed is largely societal imposition. Isabella Bird from *Top Girls* was a 19th-century British traveller-explorer, who was incidentally the first woman to be elected as Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. She admits to having tried to become 'a clergyman's daughter' (Act I, p. 68) by practising needlework, music, studying hymnology and metaphysical poetry. But she found out that she was more suited to manual work and a rough open-air lifestyle. This is a woman who has no qualms about confessing that she tried to be what society defined a 'daughter' or a woman to be, but realising that she was not meant to conform, she led a life that she actually enjoyed. What is important to notice here is that she does not seek affiliation or solidarity, but she aims for an independent assertive status, again, in a reversal of Tannen's equation of man/woman being equal to status/connection (1990). This gets even more evident in this remark that she makes a little later: 'Well I always travelled as a lady and I repudiated strongly any suggestion in the press that I was other than feminine' (Act I, p. 73). This probably sums up the entire argument of the article, that just like being 'feminine' is in no way contradictory to being a solitary and independent traveller, being autonomous does in no way necessarily mean that one has to be a man. Even then, this is attached to a painful reminder of why the question of being a man when one is alone (and independent) becomes so important, because, as she confirms: 'There was no great danger to a woman of my age and appearance'. Bowing down to societal dicta is essential for a woman's security and that is probably why she almost always does so, whether it be in terms of her attitude or her language.

'But I'm Not Very Nice': Women and the Economy of Affect

'I don't smile much anymore,' reported one woman, and a persistent theme was that to be appropriately professional, police officers had to learn to control expressions of sympathy or similar kinds of personal involvement in their official encounters with members of the public. They had to seem 'uncaring', interested only in their own responsibilities as law enforcers. To position themselves as capable professionals these women had to position themselves as unaffected by the plight of those whom they spoke with in the course of duty and thus to deny any affiliative ties with those people. Positioning oneself as cool, collected, and unaffected by the other's troubles will almost certainly involve dampening intonational dynamism, removing the vocal italics. In addition, of course, the semantic content of what she says will be monitored: in particular, words expressing sympathy (whether explicitly or implicitly) will tend to be censored (Eckert and McConnell Ginet, 2003, p. 179).

This passage is about women working in the traditionally masculine profession of the police force. As is explained, by virtue of their job and socio-economic status, these women become accustomed to speaking what can be best described as the exact opposite of 'women's language'. In fact, they consciously present themselves as not women in speech and behaviour, because that is what their status requires. Bonnie McElhinny (1995) terms this phenomenon the 'economy of affect'. This can also be seen in Nell from *Top Girls*, who explains to an interviewee the importance of a female salesperson being able to close deals: 'Because that's what an employer is going to have doubts about with a lady as I needn't tell you, whether she's got the guts to push through to a closing situation. They think we're too nice. They think we listen to the buyer's doubts. They think we consider his needs and his feelings…()... I was selling for six years, I can sell anything, I've sold in three continents, and I'm jolly as they come but I'm not very nice' (Act II, Scene III, p. 122). When Nell uses 'they' and 'we' to indicate the two genders, she clearly expresses the divide that exists in the minds of male employers. Hudson (2001), while analysing linguistic differences, argues that since women look for intimacy, they are often at a disadvantage in situations of work. Women employees are perceived as weaker because of their supposed emotional vulnerability. But as Nell delineates, that is a misperception rather than a universal truth.

Especially the last dialogue is significant as she admits to being 'not very nice', which may be translated into this context as not conventionally 'feminine'. Both Nell and Win, co-workers in Marlene's agency, are conscious of their status as ambitious and independent young people–their talking about men is not in conformity to womanly norms either, as has been seen in Nijo, Griselda or Nora's speech. They are not afraid

to acknowledge their ambitious streaks, as Nell declares: 'I don't like coming second' (Act II, Scene III, p. 112). Hence, it grows clear that confidence and ability really are everything.

CONCLUSION

A detailed analysis and a general overview of the two chosen texts in the context of women's language and socio-economic autonomy have shown how women's speech is subject to normative rules of 'rapport-talk' (Tannen, 1990), imposed by phallocentric systems to keep them subjugated in all senses. But on the other hand, when women realise their potentials as active producers in economy or as financially independent individuals, their speech also undergoes a corresponding transformation. Hierarchy usually means a lot more to men than to women because it is the men who hold the power to negotiate with status. For a woman to be conscious of status, she first needs to be in a position of power, which is not easily accepted by society. Even an empowered woman may very well adopt certain traits of 'women's language', but the intent and the interpretation of those same traits would be very different. A woman in a subordinate position would be seen as deferent but an assertive woman might be seen as respectful even if they use a similar mode of speech. This stems from the fundamental truth that women's speech is not different from men's only because of socialisation in separate sub-cultures (Tannen, 1990), but mostly because society does not accord them the same level of power as men and keeps them economically dependent. Since economy is the base of all the social superstructure, they have no access to power, and are compelled to follow all social niceties. But an economically independent woman can decide to let go of or to follow rules of politeness, and still be very much 'feminine'. That does not make her less of a woman, or more of a man – it simply makes her a free-willed individual not afraid of asserting her choices. From economic autonomy comes power, from power comes choice, and from choice comes speech that is truly ungendered and free.

ENDNOTE

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