



THE GLOSSY magazine cover hit me with its bold red title: "BITCH", it screamed. The first thing which came to mind was, "This is a womyn's magazine," but something did not seem right. The "cover girl" was no glamorous, svelte beauty all made up in Estee Lauder and dressed up in some Yves St. Laurent outfit. Instead the "cover girl", which stared endearingly into my eyes, was a collie dog, with her head cocked slightly to the left and one of Santa Claus' berets sitting on her head (it was the Christmas edition). After a moment's confusion, I understood that "Bitch" was indeed a womyn's magazine.



I THINK (WITH LANGUAGE) THEREFORE I AM (WHAT LANGUAGE MAKES ME) by Jacqueline Ann Surin

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Language and Reality

Language is more than a system of symbols. Because we attach meaning to these symbols, language has the power to define our reality.

A clear example of how language reconstructs reality for us is the use of the word "bitch" for a womyn. Not only is this description meant to be derogatory, it also connotes a womyn who is predatory, unreasonable, power crazy, difficult, scheming and malicious. The minute this word is used on a womyn, it immediately conjures up such an image in the minds of people.

However, the use of the word in such a context is erroneous if we look at the word "bitch" in its original form. The bitch, or female dog, is the one which is hounded by male dogs. She is the one which is relentlessly chased by packs of male dogs

and is at their complete mercy once they catch her. The concept of Bitch, the magazine, was indeed a brilliant one because it not only shocked and induced its readers into turning the pages, it also challenged the fundamentals of how meanings are attached to language, and by doing this the magazine also exposed how this process can reconstruct our reality.

Another example of how language can re-colour and re-shape our reality has been the use of euphemisms in government propaganda. In the Gulf War, the senseless deaths of innocent Iraqi womyn and children at the hands of the Americans were dubbed as "collateral damage" by the US Government.

This propaganda succeeded in masking the brutality of US bombings in Iraq as

something which was necessary and inevitable. The question to ask then, is how are meanings attached to the words we use in any language. Who defines the words we use? Which social group benefits from the definitions we attach to the words we use?

Language is Arbitrary

It is important to realize that words are given their meanings quite arbitrarily. In the example of the Gulf War it was a clear case of the US having the power to define, arbitrarily, what the reality of the situation was in Iraq.

In the example of derogatory or disparaging descriptions of womyn, it is the patriarchal society which holds the power to define what words mean. Case in point - "bitch". Because we use language to think, to visualize, the atrocities of allied bombing in

Iraq are reduced to a necessary evil that could not be avoided. Because we understand our surroundings through our verbal descriptions of it, a womyn who is a "bitch" is no longer the one who is being preyed upon but has become the predator instead. Thus is the power of language to define our reality for us.

As has been demonstrated, meanings are attached arbitrarily. Social, political and economic factors all come into play to define the meaning of the words we use. The fundamental issue at hand here is that the power to define our language and subsequently our realities lies in the hands of those who are in positions of power to do so.

Patriarchy & Language

In a patriarchal society language serves the interests of the powerful and dominant group in society, i.e. men. The existence of a power relationship between the two genders is clearly manifested in the language we use.

For example, in academic fields, degrees are called "bachelors" and "masters". Academic qualifications have nothing to do with marital status, yet it is described in terms of the male gender. Why not call universal degrees "spinsters" and "mistresses", instead? But in patriarchal society it would not do well to attach intellectual competence to the female gender.

Languages Subordinates Womyn

Language is used to define womyn as being in a status lower and less noble than men. Look at how the English language describes womyn as either madonna or the whore. The female sex is constantly being sexualized or infantilized. As a result womyn are seen as either sex objects that can be wolf-whistled at or "fondled"; or immature and unable to own property, to apply for a bank loan or to fill in the income tax forms.

In a marriage ceremony, the couple are pronounced "man and wife", but never "husband and womyn" because a womyn has no identity of her own unless she plays the role deemed superior to her sex, by society.

At the office womyn are continuously categorised as "sweet-young-things" or "Dragon Lady". In the social arena, womyn are either the "perfect housewife and mother", or a "homewrecker". Often also, the female gender is attached to disasters and symbols of dread. A police van is called a "Black Maria" while hurricanes carry numerous female names like Arabella and Betsy.

Womyn are put in subservient, subordinate positions to men through negative name-calling that not only defines how a woman should act, it also derogates and dehumanizes her. Examples abound - "sweet young thing", "pussy", "bitch", "witch", "iron lady", "Queen control", "homewrecker".

Nobody would call an assertive man, "iron man". In fact, the only Iron Man I know is a fictitious character in a comic book and his name is in reference to his superpowers and not to his personality. Concepts such as "he" representing both men and womyn are not only arbitrary, they marginalise womyn by making men the dominant group in society. Language is thus used as a form of social control to ensure that womyn adhere to the social norms that will perpetuate the subordination of womyn. The desire to be independent, to be free to decide on her own, to achieve excellence academically and in her career, and to pursue her own ideals, are all seen as deviant behaviour which should be controlled.

Need for Change

It is for these reasons that feminists reject the so called "natural" use of words, terms and concepts that give men dominion over womyn. It is for these reasons that

feminists see the need to change the language we use.

It is also for these reasons that we must all make a conscious effort to address women as spokeswomyn, not spokesmen; womynkind, not mankind; and even womyn, not woman. It is imperative that womyn learn to reclaim their identity and individuality through the language we use so that we can be free from one more structure that continues to subordinate us.▲

