

The Female Voice

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"The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's"

(Genesis 27:23 (NLT))

"The experience of motherhood brings a kinship with life which is not available to men...the need to love, to protect, to nurture, and to assume responsibility... the very elements needed for...growth"

- C.G. Moser, 'Understanding Girls', 1957

Abstract

A study of women's discourse, its sophistication and frustration, the social structures that govern it and that it influences. A call for an inclusive discourse for the development of all, male and female.

The argument that women's voice is absent in social discourse appears trite. Ortner (1974) however argues against its indiscriminate universalization: the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of *woman* are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Furthermore, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and input vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods of the history of specific cultures (Ortner 1974:67). It follows that if women are not always silent or inarticulate, Anthropology has to seek out and understand the genres and discourses women produce (Gal 1991: 192). Gal contrasts perception of women's silence as powerlessness with others which emphasize the paradoxical power of silence, especially in certain institutional settings. In religious confession, modern psychotherapy, bureaucratic interviews, and in police interrogation, the relations of coercion are reversed: where self-exposure is required, it is the silent listener who judges, and who thereby exerts power over the one who speaks (Foucault 1978: 61 – 62).

Gal citing Sattel (1983) argues that silence, in American households, is often a weapon of masculine power. She went on to argue that silence can also be a strategic defense against the powerful, as when Western

Apache men use it to baffle, disconcert, and exclude white outsiders. And this does not exhaust the meanings of silence. Citing Bauman (1983), she points out that for the English Quakers of the seventeenth century; both men and women, the refusal to speak, when others expected them to, marked an ideological commitment. It was the opposite of passivity, indeed a form of political protest (Gal 1991: 175).

Gal further argues that several influential social theories that differ importantly in other respects have in one way or another agree that silence could be interpreted as protest and power. Whether we use Gramsci's term "cultural hegemony"; or Bourdieu's "symbolic domination"; Williams' "oppositional, emergent, and residual cultures"; or Foucault's "subjugated knowledges" the central notion remains: the control of discourse or of representations of reality occurs in social interaction, located in institutions, and is a source of social power; it may, therefore, be the occasion for coercion, conflict, or complicity. Gal however argues that missing from these theories is a concept of gender as a structure of social relations, separate from class or ethnicity, reproduced but also challenged in everyday practice. These theories neither notice nor explain the subtlety, subversion, and opposition to dominant definitions which feminists have discovered in many women's

genres, and sometimes embedded in women's everyday talk. If we understand women's everyday talk and linguistic genres as forms of resistance, we hear, in any culture, not so much a clear and heretofore neglected "woman's voice," or separate culture, but rather linguistic practices that are more ambiguous, often contradictory, differing among women of different classes and ethnic groups and ranging from accommodation to opposition, subversion, rejection, or autonomous reconstruction of reigning cultural definitions (Gal 1991: 177-178). Gal concludes however that those women's responses to powerlessness, although they may also be attempts to subvert male authority, may only end by reproducing it. Gossip itself is women's most powerful verbal tool, but it is two-edged. It tends to subvert male authority, by judging people in terms of values the male-dominant system rejects. But partly as a result of this subversion it is condemned and decried by the dominant culture. Moreover, it is seen by all as a negative form of power that makes or breaks reputations, causes conflict, and disrupts relationships. It is negative in another sense too. Women develop this genre for lack of other forms of power, but they are trapped by it themselves: being under constant verbal surveillance restricts the behavior of women and helps keep them in their place (Gal 1991: 183-184). She argues that much feminist research has demonstrated that gender as a structural principle

also organizes other social institutions: workplaces, schools, courts, political assemblies, treatment and mobility of men as opposed to women. The role of men and women's linguistic strategies within institutions deserves considerably more attention than it has so far received. For instance, in a study of speech in American courts, the testimony of witnesses using the linguistic forms characteristic of women with no courtroom experience and of low-status men was judged by experimental subjects to be less credible, less convincing, and less trustworthy than testimony delivered in a style characteristic of speakers with high status. It appears that courts reinforce the authority of forms associated with high-status speakers, who tend to be men (Gal 1991: 183-184).

The central challenge to women's full participation in social discourse is that societal institutions are not neutral contexts for talk. They are organized to define, demonstrate, and enforce the legitimacy and authority of linguistic strategies used by one gender or men of one class or ethnic group while denying the power of others (Gal 1991: 188). Being unable to express their structurally generated views in the dominant and masculine discourse, women are neither understood nor heeded, and become inarticulate, muted, or even silent. In such cases women may talk

a lot, but they do not express their own, different social reality (Gal 1991:189).

Furthermore, although women's practices sometimes bring change in established structures, often, the strategy may aim to resist male dominance but ends by reproducing and legitimating it. This is in part because men and women interact not as individuals but in institutions such as workplaces, families, schools, and political forums, where much decision making about resources and social selection for mobility occurs through talk. And institutions are far from neutral arenas: they are structured along gender lines, to lend authority not only to reigning classes and ethnic groups but specifically to men's linguistic practices (Gal 1991:197).

In spite of the above challenges to the articulation of the female voice, women's voice remains the subaltern alternative voice, an integrative knowledge, making up for all the gaps, the lapses and the ignorance of which it is so conscious: its claim is that by being subaltern, it can see the whole experience, very much like the proletarian consciousness where, in a world of impoverished and yet fantastically widespread commodification in which everything from the human soul to the product of human labor is turned into a commodity, an inert thing, in which case, only the

viewpoint of the human thing itself can comprehend and then resist the enormity of what has happened (Edward Said in Guha & Spivak 1988: viii).

Whilst being sensitive to the possibility of divergence and discordance in the female voice itself, there is the need to isolate and put that voice on the table of social discourse where the fate of men and women is decided: we must acknowledge and put on the table the subjectivity, autonomous consciousness and, especially, agency of the insurgent/oppressed while at the same time rescuing it both from being covered up in subjective reports, coding and history and from being appropriated by anti-female elites. Then and only then can the needs of the oppressed be truly met. Then and only then can we tap from the oppressed their invaluable knowledge for transformation (Prakash 1994:1479-1481; Gal 1991:175).

It is well established that there is a difference in the way women express themselves as opposed to the way men express themselves. It is however not an excuse that women's voice is a silent voice, a veiled voice, or a muted voice; it is still a voice, a strategic voice of and for development. The female voice must therefore be heard as much and as well as men's voices. It must be heard for its accommodation, it must be heard for its opposition, it must be heard for its subversion, it must be heard for its

rejections, it must be heard for its autonomous reconstructions of the discourse of dominance. The female voice must be heard in all its sophistication and richness and depth. The female voice must be heard in all its shades and nuances: class, ethnic et al (Gal 1991:176, 178, 179-183).

From the foregoing, it is apparent that a very different form of knowledge and practice is likely to emerge when women begin to put their voice and experience on the table. Women see social reality better than men because they engage in a specific kind of labor that disposes them to this realism - human reproduction, human care and manual labor: they feel it, therefore they know it. But we must not push this to a negative extreme which divorces women from their men and children, which is the constant danger of feminism that sometimes makes it the handmaiden of oppression: we must not drive women from oppression at home to an even more deeply unbearable oppression at work, which may both isolate their home, kin and love, which are important to women generally. What are needed are not new 'factory' hands with a different sex. What is needed is a new society that is sensitive to the age-long role of women as the true producer of human society and learns from them how best to reproduce a society that is both male and female. What we have now, a

male society camouflaging as neutral, cannot take us farther than our best achievement in humanity.

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