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Social, Cultural and Political Context of Language: *English Vinglish*

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Abstract: With the advancement in technology and globalisation the vogue of English language has risen to great heights. It has become a status symbol, mainly for middle and upper middle class families. English language now has the power to create power differentials not only in the political or social spheres but also in the family. .A language like English determines power equations in the family. It is gradually playing an important role in shaping oneself. It is moving inwards now, moving into ones kitchen and hearth. The language has the power to demarcate between intelligent and less intelligent, important and less important, respectable and less respectable members in the family, and this is mainly decided by the youngsters, especially the children. This state of affairs has far reaching affect on the mother, as it seriously challenges her identity of motherhood, her self-esteem, because the mother being a woman is most susceptible and becomes the victim of this politics of language. Even in post modern times, motherhood is still considered one of the central tenets of a woman's identity, thus forcing her to always make an effort to think and act towards proving herself to be a good mother. Nowadays motherhood is not only about being a good caring mother, but also a smart English knowing mother, a mother who the children could showcase proudly. Not being proficient in English can have dire consequences for the mother and motherhood. This paper, with the help of the film English Vinglish tries to reflect upon the same.

Key Words: feminism colonization globalization multiculturalism motherhood.



Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the pioneers of liberal feminism, in her most influential work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* focuses on the need of education for women so that “they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the modest slaves of opinion”(51). She also insists on the need of education so that they could become “affectionate wives and rational mother”(7). Along with this, education would help them to become a good companion of men.

In today’s times it would not be unreasonable if along with education a woman would focus upon her knowledge of English language to become a good wife and affectionate mother. Again only knowledge of English will not suffice, the need is to be fluent in the language. This is so because in spite of decades of decolonization English is still considered the language of rationality, reason and dignity. In fact people, and especially the youngsters, take English to be the mark of intelligence and respectability in the society as well in the family itself. With the advancement in technology, and globalisation leading to multiculturalism the vogue of English language has risen to great heights, and has become a status symbol mainly for middle and upper middle class families. English language now has the power to create power differentials not only in the political or social spheres but also in the family. A language like English determines power equations in the family. English now is not only the language of the elites or an official language of the inside and the outside world, but is also the language of the common people. It is gradually playing an important role in shaping oneself. It is moving inwards now, moving into one’s kitchen and hearth. The language has the power to demarcate between intelligent and less intelligent, important and less important, respectable and less respectable members in the family, and this is mainly decided by the youngsters in the family, especially the children. This state of affairs has far reaching affect on the mother, as it seriously challenges her identity of motherhood, her self-esteem, because the mother being a woman is most susceptible and becomes the victim of this politics of language. Even in post modern times, motherhood is still considered one of the central tenets of a woman’s identity, thus forcing her to always make an effort to think



and act towards proving herself to be a good mother. Nowadays motherhood is not only about being a good caring mother but also a smart English knowing mother, a mother who the children could showcase proudly. Not being proficient in English can have dire consequences for the mother and motherhood. Howsoever devoted she may be towards her family and familial duties, lack of English language can make her under confident, hopeless and unworthy of being a mother. The humiliation can destroy her self esteem for she always looks upon her family for recognition. However, knowing or being proficient in English or so called being modern does not change her traditional duties of looking after the daily domestic chores which are considered to be of no value socially or economically. But still knowing a language, and, not knowing a language like English can make a great difference, for language has the power of emancipation, the potential of empowerment, making one realize her worth not only for the family but also for the society.

A powerful language like English has a great potential to create binary oppositions in the family. A mother not knowing English or even not able to pronounce the English words is treated as ignorant, a simpleton and not worthy of deserving to be taking part in conversations taking place among the English knowing and so considered intelligent people in the family. Language has the power to bind and also to divide, as it can displace other differences of place, religion or ethnicity. Language is not only a medium of self expression and constructing ideas but also of ideologies-of one's values, beliefs and social and cultural practices.

All these aspects of language, here English language, can be discerned in the Bollywood movie *English Vinglish* by Gauri Shinde. The film focuses upon the real life conditions of women in the society, their domestic and social position as wives and mothers especially, through the protagonist, a woman named Shashi who is a dedicated wife and a mother of two kids, a teenager daughter and a younger son. She is not only a very efficient homemaker but also is an excellent cook who takes care of each ones tastes and choices in the family. From the beginning only we witness her performing all domestic chores adeptly



without getting even a single minute to think for herself. Apart from all her domestic chores Shashi manages to run a small business of laddoo making and thus able to save her own money. Soon after we know that in spite of being a very good wife and mother, Shashi is mocked at by her teenage daughter and husband for not knowing English and its pronunciations. She is highly embarrassed and feels humiliated, and later on tries to pronounce that word repeatedly so as to improve herself. She tries to make her young son happy by doing Michael Jackson's dance. Later on again we see that she is again humiliated by her daughter by her sarcastic remark, "*Tum padaogi mujhe English Literature?*" (Will you teach me English Literature?), when her mother suggests her to study at home and not go to her friends place to study. This is highly embarrassing for her for she never gets a word of appreciation from any of her family members. Her husband likes to have laddoos even though he does not appreciate her job of making laddoos. Shashi, a woman who tries to be an ideal wife as well as a mother is not recognised in the family and belittled persistently by her daughter and husband for not knowing English. Her daughter does not even think of telling her about the PTA meeting in her school. She does not consider her worthy enough to even tell her of the meeting leave alone attending it as her parent. She is again ready with her sarcastic remark, "*PTA ka matlab janti ho?*" (Do you know the meaning of PTA?) She is irritated and feels highly insulted when her mother Shashi is not able to talk to her friend's mother and the principal in English and also becomes too frank and unofficial with him. Shashi is heartbroken and depressed at the rude behaviour of her daughter and feels that it is she who has failed in the examination. She in despair laments that whatsoever she does is not able to make anyone happy.

Shashi, the protagonist of the film is the typical example of an Indian woman, a dedicated and selfless woman for whom her family is everything, and who sacredly performs all her duties. For her, motherhood is the most important thing for a woman, and she at any cost must try to satisfy others, for her satisfaction depends upon the happiness of her family. Shashi even after doing her level best to become a good mother and wife looks at her



husband and others for recognition. All her efforts of becoming a good mother are futile just for one reason, and that is that Shashi is not fluent in English. This is the hindrance to everything she aspires to become—a good mother and wife. Her identity as a wife and mother largely depends upon being skilled in English language. She realizes the lack of it and knows that knowing English only can bring her respect and make her a successful mother.

The turning point comes in her life when she has to go to the U.S.A. to her sister's place for assisting her in her daughter's marriage before a month of her own family. She is highly under confident about her journey. Fortunately she meets a gentleman in the plane who boosts up her courage by his dialogue, "Nobody can help you better than you." And his statement that one should love oneself stands well not only for Shashi then but for all the women around the world who look at others and especially men for recognition, and for whom their existence is merely for serving others. This meeting and later on seeing her own sister who has been a widow since long and is running her own business and has brought up her daughters well all alone by herself makes her hopeful. Her sister though mentions that it was because of her husband's support that she could carry on with her life. This statement of her sister forces us to go back to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where she urges that men should try to understand women and never consider them less in intelligence. She should always be considered a companion by men and encouraged to adorn herself not with artificial things to enhance her beauty but reason and intelligence to support the family. And this liberal attitude of understanding is emphasised in the movie. 'Where there is a will there is a Way', they say, and the same thing happens here. Shashi's strong feeling and desire to learn English leads her to join English speaking classes where she meets people of different nationalities and ethnicities who too have joined it to learn English. During the introduction of each of the members by the English teacher, Shashi comes to know that the little business and her hobby of making laddoos is entrepreneurial and she is an entrepreneur. She is overjoyed, feels proud and keeps murmuring this term to herself. The language can make a difference in creating self-esteem. The way the teacher and others look



up at her hobby and gives it a respectable name 'entrepreneur' boosts her morale that her hobby and business of making laddoos which is accepted so reluctantly by her husband is respectable and important enough. She is also encouraged by a Frenchman in the group who too is a cook, and supports her in developing self confidence. She realizes with him for the first time that making food is an art and love, and that she is a beautiful and intelligent woman. Another aspect of Shashi's personality is reinforced in the film when one day their English teacher is heartbroken because he has broken up with his boyfriend. This aspect of Shashi shows herself to be a free thinking, broad minded, liberal and very understanding woman. Earlier in the film we witness this character of her when her little son tries to poke her mother with his complaints about his sister that she had gone out to have coffee instead of studying, and she was wearing a small skirt, and also that boys too were there in the group. This complaint of his goes a waste as Shashi never forces her daughter in any kind of boundation or restriction. More than this her liberal and broadmindedness is reflected when crossing all the boundaries of nationalities or communities or ethnicities, she shows herself to be a human being with understanding and tolerance for all and everyone's feelings. This becomes apparent when there is a gossip in the English class that their teacher is heartbroken as he has broken with his boy friend. Others consider it to be a taboo and start making fun of him, but Shashi is the one who like a citizen of the world and liberal human being, at once defends him. She asks them not to make fun of the teacher. Her dialogue, "We all are different. David sir is not normal for you, you might not be normal for David sir. Pain is pain whatsoever." clearly shows her to be a very tolerant human being. Dealing with a complex issue like homosexuality in a group with people from various nationalities, ethnicities and attitudes makes already a broad minded, liberal, tolerant and intelligent family woman Shashi a more universal figure. English language provides her with an opportunity to express herself to a broader audience. A language has the power to bind, and English is such a language. She earns love and respect from all her colleagues for her understanding and tolerance.



Shashi is a simple, under-confident self-sacrificing wife and a mother, the one who values family the most. Her attitude towards life, her philosophy remains the same even after she goes to the U.S.A. and learns English. Learning English imparts her opportunity to meet different people of different kinds, and gives her a chance to express her ideas on a bigger platform, to motivate and change peoples attitude also towards things around. She also gets to know herself and the importance of loving and helping oneself to become a good wife, mother and a woman. At last we witness her to be the same Shashi but more confident after learning English, to express herself to a wedding gathering. Now she knows how to express and is well aware that she is being heard carefully by everyone, even her colleagues and the teacher. She is declared pass with distinction by the teacher and she is elated. Her speech to the newlyweds emphasises upon the role of a domestic woman. She focuses upon the equality of husband and wife, man and woman in a family. She says that family is never judgemental and a woman should never feel inferior, rather should help herself. Altogether she is still a domestic woman who thinks of the same traditional roles for a woman without any radical transformation. The film focuses upon what Mary Wollstonecraft had demanded years ago, education for woman so as to make her a responsible wife and a caring mother and a good and intelligent human being, and the film also reflects the same, for English speaking Shashi is worth a good mother and a wife and is readily accepted by her husband as well as the daughter at last. Nothing as such changes, the patriarchal ideologies are not challenged, the traditional role of a woman remains the same, but Shashi, by learning a language like English makes herself important and acceptable in her family.

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