

Gendered Lives: A Study of Two Biographies of Indira Gandhi

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Abstract: Post-modern biographical perspective holds that biographies neither 'reveal' a 'truth' about a unified, coherent entity, nor are biographical representations untainted by politico-ideological positions. Rather identities are multiple, decentred and fluid, and subjects are constructed and (re)presented through language and shaped by the positions of those who define them. The representation of women is doubly problematized because the politics of gender also reconfigures the narration. A comparative study of two biographies of Indira Gandhi, *Indira Gandhi: A Biography* by Pupul Jayakar and *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* by Katherine Frank demonstrates the importance of gender to female experience and representation. This paper borrows from Judith Butler's ideas of performing gender and Norman Fairclough's views on power/discourse. It interrogates the representational strategies that forge contrasting images of the gendered subject through an analysis of lexical fields used to interpret specific events and participants.

Keywords: Indira Gandhi, Pupul Jayakar, Katherine Frank, Norman Fairclough

The post-modern conception of life- writing holds that biography does not communicate an essential 'truth' about a stable, unified self; it is only a textural representation or 'fragmentary record' through which a subject is constructed. While earlier biographical research interrogated sources and texts to find a coherent core or meaning, theorists now reject the idea that a text can 'reveal' a life; all one has to work with is language with its conventions, contradictions and silences. This idea stems from the reconceptualization of the individual self as 'decentred, multiple, or unknowable' rather than fixed and open to a final interpretation. In biography, meaning is created and persons, events, and actions crafted through language and grammatical

features, to communicate certain images and ideologies. Discourses of the biographical text implicitly and explicitly set up expectations of the subject and structures the reader's approach and understanding.

Feminist theory, similarly, holds that the category of 'woman' can be understood only in terms of 'performance' – there is no essential 'woman', all we have is a discursively constructed set of gender identities, continuously created, "'becoming' rather than 'being'" (Margdant 79). Multiple, shifting identities are constructed for the female subject in different historical contexts shaped by accepted cultural models. As Judith Butler put it, "...there need not be a 'doer behind the deed'...the 'doer' is invariably constructed in and through the deed" (195). An analysis of biographies of woman subjects exemplifies the extent to which the dominant, hegemonic practices shape the delineation of women.

In the case of female politicians, the participation in political life and the construction of an alternate image of womanhood destabilizes the hierarchy that enshrines political power as masculine. The representation of such a subject is, thus, either through presenting an acceptable 'idealized' image that inscribes her within the masculine discourse, or through 'unflattering' picturization that subverts the binary frame of gender. The authorized biography by Jayakar, *Indira Gandhi: A Biography* (1992), that presents the 'idealised' Indira Gandhi, interpellates her into the cultural images of womanhood, the milieu of domestic ideals and familial norms, where as the narrative by Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* (2001), subverts the sex-role expectations of society and is therefore seen as presenting an 'unflattering' image of her subject. Borrowing from Norman Fairclough, this paper attempts a critical discourse analysis of two crucial aspects of the biographical diegesis – the elaboration of romantic liaisons and the depiction of the declaration of Emergency, and interrogates the representational strategies that forge contrasting images of the gendered subject through an analysis of lexical fields used to interpret the specific events and participants.

Critical Discourse Analysis, which has its roots in Critical Linguistics, shows how language and grammar can be used as ideological apparatuses and texts re-examined for the way different lexical choices affect the categorization of persons, events, and actions. By making apparent the broader set of associations that may not be overtly specified, the underlying ideologies of the text can be denaturalized, (Machin and Mayr 2). "Strategies that appear normal or natural on the surface ... may, in fact, be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends" (5). The practices and conventions within and behind the text shapes and is shaped by the power interests and politics of representation.

According to Halliday, the way people are perceived is shaped by representation of transitivity or of how they are represented as acting or not acting (104). Jayakar's biography presents Indira Gandhi as chaste, demure and feminine in the depiction of relationship with her

French teacher at Shantiniketan, the German, Frank Oberdorf. Agency/ verb process belongs to the man, while the woman is given the object/ affected position. Oberdorf is activated – he “comes to Shantiniketan”, is “*attracted* by Indira”, has “no inhibitions *expressing* his admiration”, “*told* her she was beautiful”, “*persist[s]* in love”, “*continu[es]* to *call* her beautiful” (62-63, italics added). He has more voice and, therefore, more power. He is “the active, dynamic force” (van Leeuwen 43), controlling events and making things happen. Indira, on the other hand, is the receiver of the verbiage, and is described through mental and behavioural processes of transitivity. She “*reacts*”, continues to “*offer* friendship”, “*withdraw[s]*”, feels “vulnerable”, “insecure”, “terrified” (Jayakar 62-3). According to Van Leeuwen, ‘reaction’ is a particular kind of mental process, and social actors depicted through mental verbs about sensing and reacting tend to connote passivity (Machin and Mayr 108). Participants made subjects of mental processes are ‘reflectors’ or ‘focalizers’ of action, which makes them seem active even when there is no material process. They are humanized, but since their actions have no goal or beneficiary, they are theoretically categorized as ‘weak agents’.

Lexical or word choices set up different ‘lexical fields’ that “signify identities, values and sequences of activity” (Machin and Mayr 30). Word connotations signify without making overt statements. Jayakar portrays Indira’s words as having an “*elusive* quality”, she can only “*hint*” at a close relationship, she stands at “the *threshold* of a memory” but “*shies* away”, she “*withdraws*” as the intensity of the relationship increases (62, italics added). She “*offers*” friendship – a weak verb – which can be refused, as opposed to the possible verb, ‘give’. The words connote hesitation, irresolution, lack of confidence – a liminal space of indecisiveness and delicacy.

Just as her reserve and decorum are over-lexicalized through the surfeit of quasi-synonymous terms and behaviours – ‘terrified’ at the idea of marriage, “wept and wept” and “reacted angrily” (62-3) to the admiration of men – so is the idea of her sacrifice in the interests of the nation. Two relationships are renounced because “the affairs of the country were *too serious* for such *frivolity*” (Jayakar 62, italics added) and “...all involved in the freedom struggle and during battle no serious person could think of such *frivolities*” (63, italics added). Her conceptualization of marriage is depicted as “the *betrayal* of her father’s dream” (85). This is part of the ‘repertoire of images’ through which a woman political leader can be crafted, an idealized image that “could imprison and restrict women, denying their human needs and desires as it elevated them to the rarefied heights of the ethereal” (Margdant 91).

The life of purity, denial, and sacrifice, in being over-lexicalized, becomes a performance text – a set of actions that are repeated, consolidated by and consolidating the gendered subject. Indira speaks of her ‘despair and loneliness’, her ‘fears of the future’ and Oberdorf is the brief ‘incandescence’ in her life. The positive metaphor of light is here employed to deploy the deliquescent binary of the ‘darkness’ of her “hard, difficult life” (62). In connection with her public and familial role, the liaison is presented through the negative flood metaphor - “She was

not *swept away* by him...her upbringing had left her with a certain *primness* and *rectitude* which she did not lose..." (85, italics added). The lexical choices and grammatical positioning of actors are reflective of a socio- cultural regime where identity categories of duty and decorousness gain positive connotations as opposed to individualism and desire.

Indira performs in and through the text when she 'weeps' in private but expresses herself with "no emotion" (63): the resonance of the text tries to subvert the public semiurgy of strength and dominance by employing the gendered paradigms of sensitivity and suffering, "...signifying gestures through which gender itself is established" (Butler xxxi). The discourse of Jayakar's biography incorporates the powerful, dynamic man who initiates actions and the passive woman who resists and reacts.

On the other hand, Katherine Frank's biography constructs Indira Gandhi as an assertive figure with complete agency. She is described as a "mature and serious seventeen year old" who found herself "strongly attracted to a man" (97), thus, capable of actions that have an outcome. The stereotype of self- sacrifice is undermined as Indira is described as unwilling to go abroad – "she did not wish to leave the Abode of Peace or possibly, Frank Oberdorf, or both" (98). The auxiliary verb "did not" constitutes high transitivity and the authority level of a person so encoded is substantial. She is also represented in terms of interactive material (affecting people) and verbal processes – " ...she wrote to [Oberdorf] that she *did not* love him, and, she *brutally* added, she *did not want* to love him either 'even if he was the last man on earth'" (118, italics added). In addition to the high authority auxiliaries, the lexical connotations of 'brutal' with its implications of ruthlessness and remorselessness, produces the discourse of a woman in control and authoritarian, and inverts Jayakar's picture of an outwardly strong, but inherently sensitive woman. Frank further connotes the theatricality of Indira's hyperfemininity and sex role expectations of society – "Though she often *appeared* frail and vulnerable, there *was* a hard and resilient core in her: she *never* collapsed" (112, italics added). Structural oppositions are set up between appearances and actuality which problematises the gender constructs and foregrounds how it is "an act of cultural *inscription*" (Butler 199, italics in original).

The narrative on the declaration of Emergency commences with a discussion of feminism and womanhood in Jayakar's biography where Indira declares that she is "not a feminist in the accepted sense of the word" and repudiates the example of the western woman who equated emancipation "with an imitation of men"(265). This is a relational verb process about states of being, where western women and feminism are imbricated as conceptually opposed to the dignity of women. Significantly, the biographical component, which deals with the brutality of Emergency, is introduced through the prism of creative energy of women and the destructive ego of men (266-7).

A technique used by Jayakar in detailing the circumstances of the Emergency is the use of functional honorifics. She receives a “message from Prime Minister” (265), Dikshit “was convinced that there was a conspiracy against the Prime Minister” (271), “Information had reached the Prime Minister”, “‘Siddhartha, we cannot allow this,’ said a tense Prime Minister” (274). Functional honorifics represent people in terms of what they do and suggest superiority and respect, connotes importance and authoritativeness. Jayakar, thus, obscures Indira behind the legal title, mitigating her role and legitimizing the Emergency. At the same time, functionalisation reduces the person to a role, dehumanizing the social actor and denying her agency.

Similarly, Jayakar’s biography individualizes only members of Indira’s coterie – Siddhartha Shankar Ray, Barooah, Bramananda Reddy, Om Mehta, Bansi Lal – while, apart from Jayaprakash Narayan, Morarji Desai and Deshmukh, those opposing her are collectivized as “other senior leaders” and “the Opposition”. This transfers empathy and humanism to the former while denying it to the others. While the reader is given an insight into the mental processes of the former and therefore, evokes empathy, the text is silent on the deliberations and state of mind of the Opposition. On the other hand, Frank’s biography personalises all the social actors so that the reader identifies alternately with both.

Indira’s responsibility for the declaration of Emergency is removed further by the use of the passive sentence structures. “News had percolated to her...”, “Secret reports had reached her...” about the conspiracy (270), a method by which actors are hidden and ambiguity is created so that the reader’s vision is channelled and narrowed. The text becomes dense and compressed but the details of the events themselves are reduced and agents backgrounded, so that the resultant action is constructed as justified.

The semantic and grammatical forging of female dependence in Jayakar’s biography is foregrounded in the deliberations over Indira’s resignation. While Frank states that she “discussed the situation with her son, Sanjay” (372), a verbal process where she initiates the verbiage, Jayakar delineates how Sanjay “took his mother to her room, and told her *angrily* that he *would not let* her resign” (272, italics added). The man is the actor/active participant in the material process, while the woman is the goal/ patient; he is associated with the verbal process and has high deontic modality, she is the receiver of his verbiage. Indira’s modality is further reduced when another authority has to be named in decision- making – “The Prime Minister *and Ray* realized that unless immediate action was taken... there would be chaos in the country” (275, italics added). The decrease in power is indicated both by recourse to a male authority and by the use of the passive voice which removes her agency – “On Siddhartha Shankar Ray’s advice, a decision was taken by Indira Gandhi to promulgate Emergency laws...” (275). Actions can also be played down by grammatically positioning it later in the sentence. While the process mitigates responsibility, it also elides power.

Indira is also passivised through verbs of mental process: “...she felt trapped...” (275). The verb of cognition in Jayakar’s work does not connote agency or position her as a doer, though it gives the reader a glimpse into her inner turmoil. In terms of transitivity, Indira comes off as weak.

In contrast, Frank returns full responsibility for action and prepotence to Indira – “Indira did not want advice; she needed an imprimatur for a course of action that had already been set in motion the previous day...” (375). She has the capacity for agentive action as she is grammatically positioned in the dominant clause. She is attributed verbiage: “...she told Ray that she did not want to discuss Emergency with the Cabinet until *after* it had been imposed” (376, italics in original). The mental process verb, ‘want’, and the typographic variation serve to convey a sense of decisive individualism and audacity. In Frank’s text, the decisions and deeds are instantiated by Indira and, grammatically and diagetically, she regains primacy in discourse. However, her centrality and agency subvert the received notions of gender and propriety. Frank follows Jayakar in detailing how “She was *convinced* that India would self- destruct if she relinquished power” (375, italics added), but Indira is not functionalized or in need of male authority to add credence to her beliefs. Also, ‘convinced’ is a stronger mental verb than ‘realized’.

In addition to grammatical features, another representational strategy is suppression or lexical absences – absences of elements and activities that reveal the underlying ideology of the text. “What is missing from the text is just as important as what is in the text” (Machin and Mayr 85). Both Jayakar and Frank narrate the details of the meeting of Ray with Indira on 25th June, 1975, basing their record on personal interviews with Ray. In Frank’s account,

...with great emphasis and far from spontaneously, she repeated, “Some drastic, *emergent* action is needed.” Ray was struck both by the adjective ‘*emergent*’ and by the fact that grammatically Indira used the passive rather than active voice – she said action is *needed* rather than they must take action. (374, italics in original).

The transcript verb, ‘repeated’ marks the development of the discourse, and demonstrates that the initial postulation of Emergency lay with Indira, and the ‘emphasis’ manifests the implicit agenda of the consultation. Ray, himself, comments on Indira’s use of the passive – the grammatical device which hides agents and actors. When ideologically Indira constructs the necessity of strong action without implicating herself, the discursive framing of the text presents her as the person *using* the voice – the provenance of power lies with her. Responsibility and power/knowledge is attributed to her, it is the man who is attributed the mental process of being ‘struck’ by her verbiage and is the receiver of information. The verb processes represent her strongly as a ‘doing’ kind of agency.

Jayakar's biography, as a restitutive text, is silent on the event. Along with omitting crucial elements in Ray's narrative, Jayakar over-lexicalizes Indira's anxiety and uses the us/them division in pronouns used.

"Siddhartha, *we* cannot allow this," said a *tense* Prime Minister. "*I* want something done..." (274, italics added).

The use of the functional honorific adds credence to the anxiety on national interests, and the use of the mental verb process grants the reader a glimpse into the mind of the character. Secondly, the personalization of the social actor and the use of pronouns like 'us' and 'we' help the reader identify and empathise with the speaker. These pronouns "are used to align us alongside or against particular ideas. Text producers can evoke their own ideas as being our ideas and create a collective 'other' that is in opposition to these shared ideas" (Machin and Mayr 84). Jayakar positions the reader to empathise with Indira, but these representational strategies also situate her as the nervous woman whose modality and authority have to be reinforced by a male figure.

An analysis of language in a text reveals the pressures of interested investment that shape and naturalize the practices, values and ideas communicated by the text. The two biographies of Indira Gandhi reveal the subjective selective perception in the shaping of the same elements, events and actors. Neither reveals a 'truth' or 'life' but embody the 'multiple, shifting identities' constructed for a subject. The grammatical patterns, structure and omissions reveal how the authorized biography "written with the close collaboration of her subject" (Jayakar, blurb) reinstates a political leader widely regarded as autocratic and ruthless, into the matrix of normative femininity, while the other critical text presents Indira as "a woman who played a dominant role in the history of the twentieth century, and ...was voted the Woman of the Millennium" (Frank, blurb). One legitimises actions and exonerates the subject by emphasising the first element of the hyphenated identity: woman- politician. The other ascribes agency and power to the woman by not construct the subject to follow a gender script. The authorized biography creates the public woman through the discourse of female and family; it is the un-idealized image that can present a woman as being autonomous and wielding power.

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