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INVENTED IDENTITIES

The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India

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Contents

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Chapter 1

SPEAKING GENDER:
VĀC AND THE VEDIC CONSTRUCTION
OF THE FEMININE

Sally J. Sutherland Goldman

keyurāni bhūṣayanti puruṣaṃ harā na candrojjivalā
na snānaṃ na vilepanaṃ na kusumaṃ nālaṃkṛtāṃ mūrdhajāḥ /
vāṇy ekā samalaṃkaroti puruṣaṃ yā saṃskṛtā dhāryate
kṣīyante khalu bhūṣaṇāni satataṃ vāgbhūṣaṇaṃ bhūṣaṇam //[1]

Introduction

From the vedic age, the centrality of language (*vāc*) has been recognized. And it is no accident that for the traditional culture, the study of language is the basis of the acquisition of knowledge, specifically religious knowledge. This centrality of language is reflected in a variety of ways. Most important, it is marked through the sacred status granted to the Sanskrit language itself and, by extension, to those who were allowed to learn it. Access to this language of the gods (*devavāni*) was restricted. Those who were pure, or cultivated, cultured (*saṃskṛta*), were set in opposition to those who were ordinary or vulgar (*prākṛta*). Traditionally, only male brahmins could have access to the most sacred of scriptures, the Veda (Gonda 1963: 257). Fundamental to accessing the Veda and performing the vedic ritual was the mastery and the preservation of language (*vāc*), which was carried out through the study of grammar (*vyākaraṇa*; Staal 1986: 39). And, as Greg Bailey (1983: 70) reminds us, 'Functionally, the Vedas and the Vāc are the same. Vāc is the ritual formula.... The source for such formulae is the Veda.'

This centrality of *vāc* and of its correlates, *manas* and *śabda*, to the tradition in general, but especially within the context of the religious

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[1] 'Bracelets do not adorn a person, nor necklaces shining like the moon, nor baths and ointments, nor flowers or jewelled coiffure. Only that speech which is refined (*saṃskṛta*) adorns a person. Mere ornaments will ever fade; the ornament of speech is the only true ornament.' *Subhāṣitatriśatī of Bhartṛhari*, 1.15.

and philosophical spheres, has not gone unnoticed or unstudied by ancient and modern scholars. Numerous commentaries, articles, books and monographs are devoted, in whole or in part, to the subject,[2] and new ones are constantly being produced.[3] Reflective of this interest in language in the tradition is the selecting out of *vyākaraṇa*, the study of language, to be the foremost of the *vedāṅgas*.[4]

Patañjali opens his *Mahābhāṣya*, a grammatical treatise which comments on Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, with an introduction called the *Paspaśāhnika*.[5] His remarks here clearly summarize much of the tradition's attitude towards language, and are significant for our understanding of the traditional focus on the study of grammar. His opening statements outline the reasons one ought to undertake the study of *vyākaraṇa*. First, Patañjali undertakes the definition of a word (*śabda*); those articulated units that constitute both vedic and non-vedic Sanskrit (*laukika saṃskṛta*). Patañjali then suggests that meaning is multivalent[6] and that a sequence of sounds, when uttered (*yena uccāritena*), conveys, through a variety of individual associations, mutually intelligible meaning. Eventually, Patañjali goes on to note a number of important reasons that grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) should be studied: protection (of the Veda, that is, *vāc*), *ūha* (correct, that is, grammatical, modification of the vedic mantra, *v ā c*), *āgama*[7] ('acquisition of *dharma* through the study of the Vedas and *vedāṅgas*'), *laghu* ('facility'), and *asaṃdeha* ('removal of doubt').

In modern Western thought, especially since the days of Ferdinand de Saussure, language, both spoken and written, has been a central focus of study for critical theorists, and this has held true in the era of

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[2] See, for example, Weber 1895 and 1898, Patel 1938, Apte 1943, Renou 1955, Bhattacharya 1957, Brown 1960, Gonda 1963, Misra 1969, Staal 1977 and 1986, Murti 1983, and Sundar Raj 1983.

[3] See, for example, Findly 1989, Padoux 1990, Patton 1990, Holdrege 1994 and 1995, and Carpenter 1994.

[4] *pradhānaṃ ca ṣaṭsv aṅgeṣu vyākaraṇam* (*Vyākaraṇa-Mahābhāṣya* 1.19; Kielhorn 1962).

[5] The name *Paspaśā-āhnika* was given by Annaṃbhaṭṭa in his *Uddyotana*, a commentary on the *Mahābhāṣya*.

[6] Similarly, we see in the Nyāya philosophical system the notion that a word 'denotes the particular (*vyakti*), connotes the universal (*jāti*), and stands for the shape (*ākṛti*), distinguishing the particular from the dissimilar'. All three must be present for a sequence of sounds to convey meaning. Virtually all major philosophical traditions have discussed and argued over the definition of a word. The arguments are sophisticated and insightful, and in many ways serve as a precursor to Western theoretical debates on language.

[7] Literally, 'augment'.

post-structuralist theory.[8] Most recently, language has held the attention of much of the feminist scholarly debate.[9] In this chapter, I would like to steer my focus away from the traditional Indian and Western scholarly debates that surround the word *vāc per se*, those that focus on the purely religious, grammatical or philosophical definitions and uses of *vāc* and/or language. While the majority of these studies are necessary and valuable, their subject has been dealt with in great depth. Instead I would like to engage in a rereading of the word *vāc*, in an effort to understand its traditional constructions from a different, perhaps even radical, viewpoint, one that draws upon theoretical materials from the feminists' debates on the nature of language. In the process I will examine the relation, or obsession, of ancient brahminic culture with *vāc* and *vyākaraṇa*, keeping in mind that, as Patañjali has indirectly shown us, no one representation of a word reveals its full meaning.

'*All Two of Them*':[10] *Vāc* and *Apabhāṣā*

Saussure, perhaps influenced by his knowledge of works on Sanskrit grammar,[11] posited a new and, for the times, radical approach to the study of language, and thus gave birth to modern linguistic studies. His structuralist approach, one that demands a synchronic analysis of language rather than the traditional diachronic one, differentiates language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*), that is, the abstract system and the actual spoken word. Based on this, Saussure makes a division between the abstract concepts, the signified (*signifié*) and the utterances or meaningful sound sequences used to represent them, the signifier (*signifiant*).

Jacques Derrida understands Saussure, in his construction of structuralism, to have privileged the oral over the written, and notes that this primacy is located at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition (Norris 1993: 26; Spivak 1976: lxviii-lxx; Derrida 1979). In his deconstruction of Saussure,[12] Derrida expands his argument:

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[8] The debates, of course, go back to Plato's concept of *logos*. See, for example, Derrida 1979. Cf. Keith (1925: 438), who remarks on Weber's association between *vāc* and *logos*.

[9] Spender, Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva (1974: 267-8).

[10] From the French, *tous les deux*. The phrase is taken from Jacques Derrida's foreword to *The Hélène Cixous reader* (Sellars 1994: vii). He is quoting from *Jours de l'an* (Cixous 1990: 190-1).

[11] Cf. Staal (1986: 39), who comments on the influence of Indian grammar on European phonology.

[12] Derrida continues this train of thought through his deconstruction of the works of Heidegger, Nietsche and Lévi-Strauss (1979).

dichotomous oppositions similar to the pair writing/speech underlie much of Western logic, and inherent to the logic of this opposition is the subtle privileging of one and the repression or subordination of the other (Derrida 1981, 1979; Felman 1989: 135). This then 'assures the unique valorization of the "positive" pole...and, consequently, the repressive subordination of all "negativity"' (Felman 1989: 135). Although Derrida limits his interest to 'Western' logic, similar prioritized dichotomies can be identified in traditional India's value system.

The word *vāc* is identified with the vedic mantra, thereby marking it as divinely revealed and central to the construction of the early brahminical religious tradition (Gonda 1963: 245, 247, 255; Carpenter 1994: 25). Thus, for example, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* phrase, '*vāc* is the *ṛk* (*Ṛg Veda*)' (*yā vāk, sā ṛk* [*sark*]).[13] One might argue that from the time of the *Ṛg Veda*, *vāc* has been culturally marked as positive, or valorized, and can be understood to function as the positive member of a set of binary opposites. The valorization of *vāc*, I will argue, can be understood to be as fundamental to the construction of traditional brahminic patriarchy, as Derrida understands the spoken word to be in Western culture. At *Ṛg Veda* 1.164.45, *vāc* is identified as a positive and desired construct:

Speech (*vāc*), fourfold, is measured out in quarters: those 'wise brahmins understand. Three portions, hidden [literally, placed within a cave], do not move. The fourth portion of *vāc*, men speak.[14]

The verse, grammatically simple, is semantically complex, and Sāyaṇa in his commentary on the passage offers no fewer than four interpretations. However, in virtually all interpretations, the three hidden portions of *vāc* (*gūhā trīṇi nihitā*) are assessed by an élite group—by the male brahminical world, or some aspect of it—and all equate the fourth portion of *vāc* to the language known as *laukika*, 'worldly', or *vyavahārika*, 'ordinary or mundane'. The grammatical tradition[15] is somewhat more restrictive in its interpretation, as Sāyaṇa reminds us.

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13 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.2.4; cf. 7.2.2.

14 *catvāri vāk párimitā padáni táni vidur bráhmaṇā yé maníṣiṇaḥ / gúhā trīṇi nihitā néṅgayanti turīyaṃ vācó manuṣyā vadanti //*

15 Perhaps the best-known interpretation of this verse is that found in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*. Patañjali tells us that the four represent the four grammatical parts of speech: nouns, verbs, verbal prefixes (*upasarga*), particles and indeclinables (*nipāta*) (Kielhorn 1962: 3.24-9). Cf. Macdonell and Keith (1912: II, 279-80).

For the grammarians, according to Sāyaṇa, understand that 'those who know the proper use of *vāc*' (*vāgyogavít*), that is to say, brahmins who know and use the correct grammatical forms of the Sanskrit language, have access to the three hidden quarters of *vāc*, and 'those who do not know the proper use of *vāc* (*avāgyogavít*) are the *pāmara* ('vile, base, stupid') souls who speak the fourth portion. The interpretations, modified for the individual needs of the audience, are just that, but what they have in common is the valorization of *vāc* and of those who possess her completely, and the devalorization of the absence, complete or partial, of *vāc*, and of those who belong to the ordinary or mundane world and have restricted or limited access to *vāc*.

Regardless of the interpretation, all traditional readings of the passage explicitly restrict the unmarked word *vāc* to the language of the sacred texts (*saṃskṛta*, 'pure, cultured [language]') and therefore understand it to be élite, desired, positive and valorized. In so doing these same readings implicitly set *vāc* in opposition to *prākṛta* or *mleccha* speech. This opposition is made explicit early in the Brāhmaṇa tradition (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.23-4), and is formally integrated in the earliest grammatical tradition.[16] Patañjali is clearly aware of this distinction and employs as an example a passage similar to that found at *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.23 to illustrate why one should study grammar:

Those *asuras*, uttering '*helayo helayaḥ*' [instead of *he arayaḥ*] were defeated. Therefore, a brahmin should never speak a corrupt language (*mlecchitavai apabhāṣitavai*). Indeed the *mleccha* language is corrupt. That we may not become *mlecchas*, grammar should be studied.[17]

The word *mleccha*, 'barbarian', connotes one who does not, or cannot speak Sanskrit, while the use of the *upasarga apa* in both *apabhāṣā* (*apabhāṣitavai*) and *apaśabdaḥ* connotes corrupt, ungrammatical language. The passage then establishes a series of sets of binary opposites: *asura/deva* (demons/gods), defeat/victory, *mleccha/brahmin*, corrupt (non-grammatical)/grammatical. Although there is no explicit employment in this passage of the word *vāc* or *śabda* ('a grammatically

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16 The word *prākṛta* is rarely, if ever, used to mark *vāc*, and is normally paired with another word for speech, *bhāṣā*.

17 *te 'surāḥ helayo helaya iti kurvantaḥ parābabhūvuḥ. tasmād brāhmaṇena na mlecchitavai nāpabhāṣitavai. mleccho ha vā eṣa yad apaśabdaḥ. mleccho mā bhūmety adhyeyaṃ vyākaraṇam.* (Kielhorn 1962: 2. 7-9) Cf. also, *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 2.7.

correct word'), the connection is implied: *apabhāṣā* (through the word *apabhāṣitavai*)[18] opposed to *vāc*, and *apaśabda* opposed to *śabda*. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* passage explicitly establishes the polarization of *vāc* and the language of the other, the *mleccha(bhāṣā)* above. There it is called 'the speech of the *asuras*' (*asuryāh vāc*, 3.2.1.24), marking it as a language other than *vāc*.

Just as *vāc* is understood to stand in opposition to an unexpressed *apabhāṣā* in *Ṛg Veda* 1.164.45 above, other terms, or their absence, similarly delimit the unexpressed. *Vāc* is possessed, and those who possess her are male; the verse is unambiguous when it marks the possessors of *vāc* in all manifestations as masculine, both grammatically and semantically.[19] What is crucial to our understanding here is that *vāc* is possessed only by men. Women are not supposed to have access to this sacred language; they are relegated, like the *asuras*, to the world that must speak *apabhāṣā*. However, this reading of *vāc*, although useful, fails to accommodate a subtext that is clearly articulated in the vedic literature. David Carpenter (1994:25) notes that,

in many brahmanical myths, speech is presented as a deeply ambivalent force, potentially disruptive and in need of being controlled. ...[T]he Goddess Vāc, as the personification of speech, is finally 'controlled' by being 'metered' and integrated into the formal complex of the Vedic sacrifice.

I would agree with Carpenter that the Brāhmaṇas exhibit a deep ambivalence towards *vāc*, and that the control of *vāc* is a central issue of which the complex formulae of the vedic ritual is a reflection. However, I would argue that this ambivalence is reflective of basic psychological and social needs that are far more fundamental than an expression of anxiety over a sacrificial rite and that this anxiety is evidenced in the literature in some of its earliest manifestations.

Gendered Language

In Western feminist circles, the notion that language is grounded in gender, and not a neutral or unbiased system, was made clear in Dale Spender's ground-breaking work, *Man made language* (1980). Spender argued that 'it is language that determines the limits of our world, which construct our reality', and that language is neither neutral nor

[18] The word *bhāṣā* is used, for example, in such phrases as *sanskṛtabhāṣā*
[19] Thus, Barbara Holdrege in her recent work, *The Veda and the Torah*, is slightly misleading when she translates: 'The fourth [quarter] of Vāc is what human beings speak' (1996: 42).

objective, but rather the system that allows the construction of one's own reality (1980: 139). Gender is the critical element in Spender's hypothesis: 'when there are a sexist language and sexist theories culturally available, the observation of reality is also likely to be sexist' (141).

Likewise, the French feminists have used language as a fundamental construction underlying their theoretical explorations. Most well known among these women are Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous (Belsey and Moore 1989: 13-15). Both draw upon Derrida and a modified Lacanian theory for their work, and both understand language to be closely bound to sexuality. Cixous and Irigaray, following Derrida, interpret language as a symbolic order of binary oppositions, but they expand their definition to include a gender component which juxtaposes a positive male order (privileged) and a negative female order (non-privileged). Cixous draws upon Derrida's construction of the patriarchal symbolic, supplemental to hypothesize that the feminine is 'supplementary to the patriarchal symbolic, (and) is seen to both exceed and threaten the patriarchy' (Belsey and Moore 1989: 14; Cixous: 1989).

Gender and language are closely linked in traditional South Asia. The 'true' language, the language of religion, the language of power and possession—that is, the language reflected by the word *vāc*—was learned only by males. Gender is an assumption of the language-itself. Sanskrit assigns all nouns to one of three grammatical genders (*pumliṅga*,[20] *strīliṅga*, and *napumsakaliṅga*) and, although grammatical gender does not automatically or necessarily convey semantic gender, clearly with respect to some words the grammatical gender can be understood as semantically significant.[21] Such is the case, I would argue, with the word *vāc*, which is grammatically assigned the feminine gender. The association of the feminine gender with the word *vāc* can in fact be seen as an important symbolic representation of traditional South Asian patriarchy.

As at *Ṛg Veda* 1.164.45 above, the possessors of *vāc* at 10.71.2 are clearly marked as masculine grammatically and semantically. The wise men (*dhīrāh*) create[22] *vāc* (*vācam ākrata*) with their minds (*mānasā*). At verse 3, *vāc* is 'found entered into the *ṛṣis*' (*tām anvavindann ṛṣiṣu prāviṣṭām*), is 'held' (*abhṛtyāh*), and is 'apportioned out'

[20] Note that the word *liṅga* is multivalent; its primary meaning is 'phallus'; secondarily, it means the 'grammatical gender'.
[21] Of course, whether this was originally the intent one cannot say.
[22] Literally, 'make'; here, perhaps, 'access'.

(vyadadhuḥ). Vāc is grammatically feminine: she is possessed and she is selective.

Ṛg Veda 10.71 highlights the élitism, singularity of purpose and privilege associated with the possession of vāc. Repeated throughout the passage are two critical terms, sakhi and sakhyam. They are commonly translated into English as 'friend' and 'friendship' respectively, but the terms are understood in the Veda in a far more restrictive manner. The word sakhyam refers to an élite circle of men who are able to share a common body of restricted knowledge, and sakhi refers to a member of that circle who has access to that knowledge. In the context, of course, the restricted body of knowledge is the vedic mantras. Thus, in his commentary on 10.71.2, Sāyaṇa glosses sakhāyaḥ as 'those who have similar knowledge,[23] whose knowledge has as its range the śāstras, and so on' (samānakhyānāḥ śāstrādiviṣayajñānās te), and sakhyāni as 'knowledge among them' (teṣu [bhavān] jñānāni). Or, he says that sakhāyaḥ means 'those for whom community/comradeship (sakhyam) is bound through vāc' (vacā baddhasakhyās te). The terms sakhi and sakhya establish another set of oppositions, and their use throughout the verses marks privilege, power and sameness, leaving for the most part unmarked, but clearly implied, non-privilege, weakness and difference.

The prioritizing of gender is likewise explicit: sakhis are males who belong, non-males are excluded although not all males are included (non-sakhis). Thus, in verse 2, when wise men (dhīraḥ)—who are said to be like ones 'purifying grain through a sieve' (saktum iva titaunā punánto)—'create vāc with their minds', then the sakhis ('like-minded men') recognize their 'community'. 'It is on their speech (vāc) that auspicious signs are placed' (bhadraiṣām lakṣmir nihitádhi vācí). Although 'apportioned among many' (tám...vyadadhuḥ purutrā, verse 3), only some see or hear vāc (utá tvaḥ páśyan ná dadarśa vácam utá tvaḥ śṛṇván ná śṛṇoty enām, verse 4). For him who has become fat and awkward (sthūrápītam)[24] in his 'community' (sakhyé), he is no longer urged on in the contest (nainaṃ hinvanty ápi vājineṣu, verse 5).

The community of the sakhi is tight-knit: a man who abandons a fellow student, a sakhi, is deprived of his portion of vāc (yás tityája sacívídam sakhyāyaṃ ná tásya vācy ápi bhāgó asti, verse 6). But even so, among this select group difference is recognized, marking a series

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[23] Or, perhaps, 'similar-communication'.
[24] Translated as feist and steif byGeldner (1923: 249); but cf. Kunhan Raja 'well-protected' (1963: 260).

of hierarchical divisions; for even when brahmins who are not sakhis perform a sacrifice, they leave someone, an ignorant man according to Sāyaṇa, behind (tvaṃ ví jahuḥ, verse 8). All sakhis have ears and eyes, but they are unequal in quickness of thought (manojavéṣv ásamāḥ, verse 7). Some are like ponds with water that comes up only to the mouth or shoulders, but others are like ponds that are fit for (ritual) bathing (hradá iva snātvāḥ).

All seek vāc, but those who are not brahmins, who are not pressers of soma (na bráhmaṇáso ná sutékarásah, verse 9), having wrongly employed vāc, are ignorant, like a shuttle weaving thread (síris tántraṃ tanvate áprajajñiayaḥ).[25] But he who gains access to vāc can protect (his comrades) from sin, and bestow (on his comrades) food (verse 10). Power and privilege come to the sakhi, the like-minded man, who belongs to this world of vāc.

Vāc as a Gendered Entity

The text is explicit: those who possess vāc, are masculine, and vāc grammatically is feminine. But does the tradition allow us to identify vāc as semantically gendered? Carpenter assumes that vāc is gendered (1995: 25), but the assumption is by no means universal. While traditional interpretations unambiguously treat vāc as a goddess,[26] Western scholars have not been in agreement as to the degree, if any, to which vāc is personified. W. Norman Brown states: 'Among the gods, and goddesses of the Ṛg Veda the goddess Vāc, deified Holy Speech or Utterance, is so devoid of anthropomorphic qualities as to lack even a minimum of mythology. It might be questioned that she deserves to be called a goddess at all' (1968b: 75). Macdonell considers her personification as little more than a result of grammatical gender (1897: 124). Hillebrandt, too, is of this opinion (1980: 251-2). Keith, on the other hand, feels that 'the goddess seems to have too much life and reality in the Rigveda to be a mere abstraction' (1925: 199).

However, the two well-known hymns of the Ṛg Veda, 10.125 and 10.71, discussed above in part, and the asyá vāmásya hymn (1.164) which is credited to Dīrghatamas and devotes five verses to vāc (43-7), attest to a semantic gendering of the word vāc.

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[25] According to Sāyaṇa, the idea is that they are just dragged along.
[26] See Naighanṭuka 5.5 where she is classed among the gods of the atmosphere. Cf Nirukta 11.27 where she is 'the voice of the middle region'. See also, Nirukta 2.9.

The personification or deification of a figure, I would argue, is carried out, in part, through marking a word as semantically gendered, subjecting it to what Lacan would term 'symbolic remove'. That the word *vāc* carries semantic gender in many, if not all, of its occurrences in the Veda is evidenced through the imagery used in conjunction with the word. One of the most explicit references to *vāc* as a semantically gendered word is found at 10.71.4. Here *vāc* is said to reveal herself to her husband one (male) like a beautifully dressed wife reveals herself to her husband (*utó tvasmai tanvàm vi sasré jāyéva pátya uśatī suvāsāḥ*). The verse clearly links gender and sexuality, and marks *vāc* as a sexual figure. At *Ṛg Veda* 10.71.1, *vāc* has been placed within a cave (*nihitam guhā*), accessed only through affection or love (*preṇā*).[27] Isolated, the verse affords no real substantiation of the gendering of *vāc*; however, in the context of 71.4, it can be read as somewhat more meaningful. This representation of *vāc* as a sexualized figure is significant and deeply engrained in the psyche of the traditional culture; and it is made more explicit in the Brāhmaṇa literature as we shall see below.

Ṛg Veda 10.125 is composed in the first person, as if emanating directly from the mouth of *vāc*, and is a hymn of self-praise. Here again, we find a clear semantic gender associated with *vāc*. In the hymn, *vāc* is portrayed as an all-powerful deity. She moves with the gods, the Rudras, the Vasus, she carries the gods of the vedic pantheon, Mitra, Varuṇa, Indra, Agni and the Aśvins (verse 1). Graced by her, man becomes powerful over other, less fortunate souls. Through her agency a man eats food (*annam atti*), sees (*vipáśyati*), breathes (*prāṇíti*), and hears (*ṣṛṇóti*; verse 4). *Vāc* says what is desired by men and gods, but only those whom she desires/loves (*kāmáye*) will she make powerful (*ugrám*), be it the brahmin, the *ṛṣi*, or the wise man (verse 5). The hymn of self-praise, while reinforcing the sense of privilege associated with those who possess *vāc*, introduces a new dimension to the gender/power relationship, that of the all-powerful female. But rather than emphasizing the sexual nature of *vāc*, the hymn focuses on her role as a maternal figure who supports and sustains (verses 1-2), who nourishes (2, 4) and who creates (7). At verse 7, *vāc* gives birth (*suve*) to the father, and she has a womb (*yóniḥ*) which is in the waters within the ocean (*máma yónir apsv antáḥ samudre*).

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[27] Note that the same phrase is used at 1.164.45, where she is hidden, placed ('protected' according to Sāyaṇa) in a cave.

Nurturing and maternal qualities are again associated with *vāc* at *Ṛg Veda* 1.164: she is equated with the cow (*gaurī*, 40-1; cf. 8.100.10),[28] from her flow forth the (heavenly) waters; therefore the four directions come into being, from *vāc* comes the *akṣara* (syllable), on this the 'entire universe is based' (42).

Mother or Wife

Thus, from the vedic corpus, it is clear that the word *vāc* is semantically gendered as feminine. The myths clearly highlight two aspects to the feminine nature of *vāc*: that of sexual partner (*Ṛg Veda* 71.4) and that of creative force (*Ṛg Veda* 10.125 and 1.164). The former is clearly equated with the role of the wife, even likening *vāc* to a *jāyā*, the latter with the role of the mother. Both of these aspects are capitalized on in the Brāhmaṇa literature. At *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.18-27, we find the story, referred to above, to which Patañjali makes reference in his *Mahābhāṣya*. Here the story is told in greater detail:

...Both the gods and the asuras were born from Prajāpati, and they came into their father's inheritance.[29] The gods inherited *manas*, and the asuras *vāc*. The gods inherited the sacrifice and the asuras *vāc*. The gods inherited that and the asuras this (18).[30]

Then the gods said to the sacrifice [masculine], 'This *vāc* is a young woman (*yoṣā*). Seduce her.'[31] She will certainly respond to you.' Or he [the sacrifice] thought to himself, 'This *vāc* is a young woman. She must be seduced. Certainly she will respond to me.' He solicited her. But the first time she enticed[32] him only from a distance. Therefore a woman, solicited by a man, entices him the first time only from a distance. He [the sacrifice] said, 'She enticed me only from a distance.' (19)[33]

This happens a second time, and the third time she responds to him:

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[28] *Naighaṇṭuka* 1.11. See also, *Nirukta* 2.9 and Durgācārya's commentary.
[29] Sāyaṇa glosses *dāyam* as *paitṛkam dhanam*.
[30] Sāyaṇa glosses 'that' as 'heaven' (*divam*) and 'this' as 'earth' (*pṛthvīm*).
[31] Literally, 'solicit'. Here, following Sāyaṇa, 'call to her with a gesture for the purpose of intercourse'.
² [32] Literally, 'excited' (*āsūyat*).
³ *devāś ca vā asurāś cobhaye prājāpatyāḥ prajāpateḥ pitur dāyam upeyuḥ. mana eva devā upāyan, vācam asurāḥ. yajñam eva tad devā upāyan, vācam asurāḥ. amūn eva devā upāyan, imān asurāḥ. (18) te devā yajñam abruvan—'yoṣā vā iyaṁ vāk. upamantrayasva.hvayiṣyate vai tvā' iti. svayaṁ vā haivaikṣata. yoṣā vā iyaṁ vāk. upamantrayai. hvayiṣyate vai meti. tām upāmantrayata. sā hāsmā ārakād ivaivāgre āsūyat. tasmād u strī puṁsopamantritā—ārakād ivaivāgre sūyati. sa hovāca—ārakād iva vai ma āsūyit—iti (19).*

The gods considered: 'This vāc is indeed a young woman. So that she will not unite with him, tell her, "Come over here where I am standing." Tell us when she has come.' She came to where he was standing. ...He reported when she had come, 'She has come'. (22)

The gods separated her from the demons. Having taken her, having placed her in the fire, they offered/sacrificed a *sarvahuta* ...the gods then took her [as their own]. Those *asuras*, deprived of speech, saying *he*, '*lavo he*, '*lavaḥ* [instead of *he arayo he arayaḥ*]³⁴ were defeated. (23)

That sacrifice wanted [lusted after] *vāc*: 'May I be sexually joined with her.' He joined with her. (25).

Indra considered: 'Indeed a great monster (*abhva*) will be born from this union of *vāc* and the sacrifice (*yajña*). [I must contrive] so that it will not overpower me.' Having become a foetus, Indra entered that sexual union. (26)³⁵

The passage continues, and Indra enters into the womb of *vāc*, is reborn after a year, and destroys the 'monster foetus' (27 ff.).

For the purposes of my discussion, it is clear that this passage of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* constructs *vāc* as a sexually desired object. The text identifies *vāc* as a *yoṣā*, which according to Monier-Williams (1899: s.v.) means 'a girl, maiden, young woman, wife', and it clearly represents her as the object of the sacrifice's sexual desire. Her creative aspect, while acknowledged in that she becomes pregnant, is ambiguous as she gives birth to a monster, a point to which I will return shortly.

Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 1.27 tells a story in which Soma, as the king of the *gandharvas*, is exchanged for *vāc* who has become a woman:

Soma was the king of the *gandharvas*. The gods and *ṛṣis* desired him (*soma*), and asked, 'How might King Soma come to us?' Vāc said: 'Gandharvas desire women. Barter [him, that is, *soma*] with [for] me who have become a woman.' The gods said: 'No! Without you how could we exist?' She said: 'Sell [me to them]; if you have some need for me, then I

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³⁴ For a discussion of this phrase, see Thieme 1955: 437-8.
³⁵ *te devā īkṣāṁcakrire—yoṣā vā iyaṁ vāk, yad enaṁ na yuvita—ihaiva mā tiṣṭhantam abhyehi—iti brūhi. tāṁ tu na āgatāṁ pratiprabrūād iti. sā hainaṁ tad eva tiṣṭhantam abhyeyāya ... tāṁ haibhya āgatāṁ pratiprovāca—iyaṁ vā agād iti. (22) tāṁ devā asurebhyo 'ntarāyan. tāṁ svikṛtyāgnāv eva parigṛhya—sarvahutam ajuhavuḥ.... tad evaināṁ tad devāḥ svyakurvata. te 'surā āt tavacaso—helavo helava iti vadantaḥ parābabhūvuḥ. (23) so 'yaṁ yajño vācam abhidadhyau—mithuny enayā syam iti. tāṁ sambabhūva. (25) indro ha vā īkṣāñcakre—mahad vā ito 'bhvaṁ janiṣyate—yajñasya ca mithunāt, vācaś ca—yan mā tan nābhibhaved iti. sa indra eva garbho bhūtvaitan mithunaṁ praviveśa. (26)*

will come back to you.' 'Very well' [they replied]. They bought King Soma by means of her, who had become a *mahānagni* [a large tribal woman].³⁶

The story clearly identifies *vāc* as a sexualized female who is desired by males. Manipulation of the *gandharvas*, well known for their sexual desire for women (*strīkāma*), is the means by which the gods can acquire Soma/*soma*. Vāc is depicted as aware of her sexual nature; at the same time, that sexualized self is manifested through a transformation into a 'tribal' woman (Macdonald 1979: 171), a figure associated with sexualized behaviour, or according to Haug's translation a 'large naked woman' (1922: 40). Vāc's sexual nature is outwardly projected.³⁷

Taittirīya Saṁhitā 6.1.6.4-5 has a version of the above story in which *soma* is stolen by the *gandharva* Viśvāvasu. The gods, realizing that *gandharvas* love women, seek to buy back *soma* with her. They turn *vāc* into a one-year-old woman, and buy back *soma* with her. As in the above passage, *vāc* is constructed as an object of desire, although here the sexual component is less explicit.

Yet another version of this story occurs at *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.2.4.1-6. Here the story goes like this:

Soma was in the sky and the gods were here [on earth]. The gods desired *soma*: 'Should *soma* come to us, we might sacrifice through him, once he has arrived'.... (1)

They said: 'Indeed, *gandharvas* are fond of women. We will send *vāc* to them. She will come back to us along with *soma*.' They sent *vāc* to him. She returned to them along with *soma*. (3)

Gayatrī flew up towards *soma* for them. The *gandharva* Viśvāvasu stole [him] from her, carrying [him] off. Those gods realized: 'Soma, removed from the sky,³⁸ now will not come to us. Indeed, the *gandharva* has stolen him'. (2)

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³⁶ *somo vai rājā gandharveṣv āsīt, taṁ devāś ca ṛṣayaś cābhyadhyāyan: katham ayaṁ asmān somo rājā gacched iti. sā vāg abravīt: strīkāmā vai gandharvā mayaiva striyā bhūtayā paṇadhvam iti. neti devā abruvan: katham vayaṁ tvadṛte syāmeti. sābravīt: krīṇītaiva, yarhi vāva vo mayārtho bhavitā tarhy eva vo 'ham punar āgantāsmīti. tatheti. tayā mahānagnyā bhūtayā somaṁ rājānam akrīṇam:*

³⁷ This distancing could in part arise from the association of *vāc* with a cow seen at the end of the passage. A young cow—one year old, according to Macdonald (1979: 171)—is given as the price of *soma* following (literally, 'in imitation of') her (*vāc*).
³⁸ Literally, 'over there' (*parastāt*).

The gandharvas, having followed her, spoke: '*Soma* is yours, but *vāc* is ours!' The gods said, 'Very well. If she should come, do not take [her] by force. We shall court her.' They courted her. (4)

Those *gandharvas* recited the Vedas to her. 'We know [them], we know [them].' (5)

Now the gods, having created a *vīṇā*,[39] sat playing and singing: 'Indeed we will sing to you. We will make you happy.' She came to the gods. However, she came vainly. She came for dance and song, and away from those who were praising and engaging in prayer. Thus, even now, women (*yoṣāḥ*) are vain. For in this way did *vāc* come, and other women follow her. On account of this, he who dances and sings, to him alone, are these [women] most attached. (6)[40]

This passage is important to our concerns in several ways. As in the story above, *vāc* is sent to the *gandharvas* to acquire *soma*. Here, as in the earlier *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* passage, she is called a *yoṣā*. There is no issue of transformation, as there was in the *Taittirīya* passage. Again, *vāc* is desired and seduced by the male gods and *gandharvas*. Her behaviour is also marked as vain (*mogha*) and she is blamed for Woman's[41] vanity. The sexual component is not as explicit as in the earlier passages, but there are clear indications of it, as is seen, for example, at 3.2.4.1: '*gandharvas* are fond of women'.

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[39] Generally translated as 'lute'

[40] *divi vai soma āsīt—atheha devāḥ. te devā akāmayanta—ānaḥ somo gacchet, tenāgatena yajemahīti... (1) tebhyo gāyatrī somam acchāpatat. tasyā āharantyai gandharvo viśvāvasuḥ paryamuṣṇāt. te devā aviduḥ—pracyuto vai parastāt somaḥ—atha no nāgacchati—gandharvā vai paryamoṣiṣur iti. (2) te hocuḥ—yoṣitkāmā vai gandharvā vācam evaibhyaḥ prahiṇavāma. sā naḥ saha somenāgamiṣyatīti. tebhyo vācam prāhiṇvan. sainaṃ saha sonenāgacchat. (3) te gandharvā anvāgatyābruṇ—somo yuṣmākāṃ, vāg evāsmākaṃ iti. tatheti devā abruṇ. iho ced āgāt, mainām abhiṣahe va, naiṣṭa, vihvayāmahā iti. tāṃ vyāhvayanta. (4) tasmai gandharvāḥ vedān eva procire, iti vai vayaṃ vidma—iti vayaṃ vidma—iti. (5) atha devā vīṇāṃ eva sṛṣṭvā, vādayanto nigāyanto niṣeduḥ. iti vai te vayaṃ gāsyāmaḥ iti. tvā pramodayiṣyāmahe—iti. sā devān upāvavarta. sā vai sā tanmogham upāvavarta—yā stuvadbhyaḥ saṃsadbhyo nṛttaṃ gītaṃ upāvavarta. tasmād apy etarhi moghasaṃhitā eva yoṣāḥ. evaṃ hi vāg upāvartata. tām u hy anyāṇu yoṣāḥ. tasmād ya eva nṛtyati, yo gāyati—tasminn evaitā nimiśitatamā iva. (6)*

[41] Here I define 'women' as humans that biologically can be defined as possessing female sexual functions. 'Women's voices' are women speaking of their own individual experiences. 'Woman', on the other hand, is a social construction. The 'feminine voice' is defined as the construction of 'Woman' which is the result of patriarchal domination over language, culture, texts and the like. See Lauretis 1984: 5-6. Cf. also, Macdonald's comment: 'The ways of women toward men...are explained by Vach's doings' (1979: 136).

As we saw above, the relation between *vāc* and the sacrifice has been depicted as a sexual one. The sexual nature of the ritual sacrifice is reinforced at *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.13, where a striking comparison between Woman and the *soma* sacrifice is made. The passage, rather explicitly, compares a man experiencing a sexual orgasm with the *soma* sacrifice. The woman's body, specifically her sexual organ, is mapped on to various aspects of the sacrifice:

The young woman (*yoṣā*), Gautama, is the fire. Her sexual organ is the fire stick; her hair, the smoke; her womb (*yoni*), the flame; when one goes inside, the coals; the excitement, the sparks. Into this fire the gods offer their semen. From this offering, a man comes into being. He lives as long as he lives, and then, when he dies....[42]

While no explicit mention is made here of *vāc*, the passage leaves no doubt that the tradition reads the sacrifice as a sexual act. What is of special note is that the woman's body is mapped on to the sacrifice, typically the male member, grammatically and semantically. However, the passage reinforces the deeply engrained association between the sexual act and the sacrifice, and can be understood as complementary to the tradition's reading of the relationship between *vāc* and the sacrifice as a sexual metaphor.

Like the *Ṛg Veda*, the Brāhmaṇas present *vāc* as having a creative or maternal function, in addition to her sexual function. At *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.8.8.5, she is explicitly called 'mother of the Vedas' (*vedānāṃ mātā*). At *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 4.6.7.3 and 5.5.5.12, the Veda is said to be the 'thousand-fold offspring of *vāc*' (*tad vā etat sahasraṃ vācaḥ prajātam*). This creative role of *vāc* is most clearly seen in a passage at *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 12.5:

Prajāpati was this [universe]; *vāc* was second to him. He copulated with her. She became pregnant. She went forth from him. She gave birth to these creatures. She again entered Prajāpati....[43]

A similar story is found at *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 20.14.[44] However, in another parallel passage at *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.1.1 ff., Prajāpati is the primary creative force, and *vāc* and her creative role are played

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[42] *yoṣā vā agnir gautama. tasyā upastha eva samit, lomāni dhūmah, yonir arcih. yad antaḥ karoti te 'ṅgārāḥ. abhinanda visphulingāḥ. tasminn etasminn agnau devā reto juhvati. tasyā āhutyai puruṣaḥ sambhavati. sa jīvati yāvaj jīvati. atha yadā mriyate....*

[43] *prajāpatir vā idam āsīt tasya vāg dvitīyāsīt tāṃ mithunam samabhavat sā garbham adhatta sāsmād apākrāmat semāḥ prajā asṛjata sā prajāpatim eva punaḥ prāviśat....* See also *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 27.1.

[44] Cf. *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 10.2.1.

down. However, vāc is still understood as an integral part of the creation process. Here, the gods, who have been kindled (iddhāḥ), create seven separate males (puruṣāḥ, verse 2), which are then combined into Prajāpati (3–5). Prajāpati performs austerities and creates brahma (that is, the Veda) (8). Prajāpati then creates the waters:

He created the waters, that is, vāc, from the world. Vāc was his. She was created. She pervaded all that is. What covers (āvṛṇot), are thus waters (āpaḥ). What pervades (āpnoti) are thus waters (vāḥ).

He [Prajāpati] desired: 'From these waters may I create offspring.' He entered the waters...⁴⁵

As in the Veda, vāc is associated with the cow in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads. At Taittirīya Saṃhitā 6.1.7.2 and 4, in a continuation of the story above, we are told that the cow with which Soma is bought is vāc. Keith associates vāc specifically with Śabalī, 'the wish-fulfilling cow' (1925: 456).⁴⁶ Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 5.8 says 'one should meditate on vāc as a cow' (vācaṃ dhenum upāsīta).⁴⁷ Throughout the tradition, the cow has been well established as a maternal figure (Brown: 1964),⁴⁸ and vāc, like many other goddesses, is associated with the cow as a symbol of her maternal nature.

Now, it has been argued that vāc is marked by the tradition as a positive construction within a set of polar oppositions; wherein the positive following Cixous (1989: 102; Toi 1989: 124–5) is aligned with masculine, hegemony and patriarchy. And yet, vāc is marked as; feminine, aligning it as negative and supplemental to the patriarchy. This seeming incongruity is one that lies at the heart of traditional brahminical society and reflects the conflicting attitudes of the tradition towards women: on the one hand it glorifies the role of the woman as mother, as genetrix wherein the sexual role is devalued, and on the other it fears the sexualized woman.

As I have argued elsewhere, the role of wife and mother is represented as a conflicted one in traditional Indian literature (Sutherland 1989). It is not unusual to see the wife and mother represented by different figures, commonly in the epic literature as co-wives. Typically the

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⁴⁵ so 'po 'sṛjata—vāca eva lokāt. vāg evāsya sā 'sṛjata, sedam sarvam āpnot—yad idaṃ kiñca. yad āpnot—tasmād āpaḥ. yad avṛṇot—tasmād vāḥ. (9)

⁴⁶ kāmayata—'ābhyo 'dbhyo 'dhi prajāyeya' iti. so...āpaḥ prāviśat... (10)

⁴⁷ Cf. Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa 21.1.5.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ṛg Veda 10.71.5: adhenvā carati māyāyaiṣa vācaṃ śuśruvām aphalām apuṣpām.
See Ṛg Veda 4.52.2.

younger wife represents the sexualized figure, whereas the senior wife is the maternal figure. The male's anxiety arising from sexual association with a maternal figure, identified with his own mother, is projected outwards; the offspring of the maternal figure commonly inherit some moral or physical flaws.

In the early religious literature discussed above, vāc's character is clearly representative of those two roles of a woman. The strength of this need to separate the two figures is evidenced by the fact that the myths rarely conflate the roles without disaster ensuing (for example, abhva, the monster). The tradition also understands vāc as a source of anxiety as is articulated by a passage from the Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa: 'now speech having borne the burden becomes as it were the bearer of a dreaded thing.'⁴⁹ This anxiety is clearly reflective of her sexual nature: 'Let us not consort with speech' for 'we will not approach this speech... as I would not touch a śūdra, yet I would not let her go. I go nowhere else, I go to a prostitute'.⁵⁰

Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 3.5.1.13–21⁵¹ demonstrates this deep anxiety towards vāc in a particularly vivid myth that carries maternal overtones:

Now in the beginning there were two types of creatures: the Ādityas and the Aṅgirasas. Then the Aṅgirasas, first, carried [Agni to] the sacrifice.⁵² Having first carried Agni to the sacrifice, they said to him, 'Announce to the Ādityas our tomorrow-soma sacrifice (svaḥsutyām). Carry out the sacrificial rites at our sacrifice.' (13)

Those Ādityas spoke [among themselves]: 'Contrive in what manner the Aṅgirasas might carry out our sacrificial rites, rather than we [those] of the Aṅgirasas.' (14)

They said: 'By a means other than a sacrifice, there is no escape. We will undertake a different soma sacrifice (stuti).' They prepared [offered?] a

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⁴⁹ vāk pratadohuṣī krūravāheva bhavati (Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa 27.1). Cf. the alternative reading krūraravā (1920: 509, n. 5).

⁵⁰ ...nedvācam āsīdāmety atho...abhiṃśe śūdrān no etān pra saṣrkṣāṇi no tv evānyatra yāmaka-puṃścalyā ayanam me astīti. See Keith 1920: 509, n. 5. His translation reads: 'Now speech having borne the burden becomes as it were the bearer of a dread thing. Therefore is it released [as they think] "Let us not consort with speech... Her I touch not as being a Śūdra; Yet will I not let her go; Nowhere else do I go; To a courtesan is my approaching"' (508-9).

⁵¹ Compare Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 6.34-5, where the earth becomes a lioness, and Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa 3.187 ff.

⁵² According to the commentator: 'Aṅgirasas, first, that is, being prior to the Ādityas, carried [the fire] to the sacrifice.'

sacrifice. Having brought [Agni] to that sacrifice, they said, 'Agni, you announced to us a soma sacrifice for tomorrow. Now, we tell you and the Angirasas about [our] sacrifice for today. You will be our *hotṛ*' (15)

They sent another [messenger] to the Angirasas. The Angirasas having followed Agni, were angry: 'How is it that you, going as a messenger, did not respect us?' (16)

He [Agni] responded. 'The sinless [blameless] chose me. Chosen by the sinless [blameless], I was not able to depart.' Therefore he who is chosen by the blameless will not depart. Because of this, the Angirasas carried out the sacrificial rites for the Ādityas with (soma) bought on the same day (*sadyaḥkriyā*). Thus the *sadyaḥkriḥ* [sacrifice]. (17)

Then, as *dakṣiṇā* [sacrificial fee] for them [Ādityas], the [Angirasas] brought vāc. They [Angirasas] did not take her: 'We are lost if we accept [her]'. Their rite was abandoned as it had no sacrificial fee. (18)[53]

Now, to them Sūrya was brought as a sacrificial fee. They accepted him.... (19)

Now, vāc was angry with them. 'Because of what is that one better than me? Because of what relationship (*kenā bandhunā*) did you accept (*pratyagṛhīṣta*) him and not me?' She went away from them. Having become a lioness, taking [everything],[54] she went about in the midst of both the gods and the asuras, who had prepared to fight.[55] The gods called her over, as did the asuras. Agni himself was the messenger of the gods and Saharakṣāḥ was the messenger of the asuras and asurarākṣasas. (21)

About to [willing to] approach the gods, she said: 'If I should come to you, what would be mine?' 'The offering will reach you before [it reaches] Agni.' Now she said to the gods: 'Whatsoever prayers you would offer through me, all that will be accomplished for you.' Thus, did she approach the gods. (22)

...Since the gods said to her then, 'The offering will reach you before [it reaches] Agni, therefore the offering reaches her before Agni. For, correctly (*nidānena*) this *uttaravedi* [high altar] is vāc. Now when he [the sacrificer] raises up (*upakirati*) the *uttaravedi*, (it is) for the completion of the sacrifice. For indeed vāc is the sacrifice, vāc is this (*uttaravedi*). (23)[56]

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53 Literally, 'but that rite which has a sacrificial fee, is not abandoned'.
54 According to the commentator, 'she accepted everything nearby with a desire to destroy' (*jighatsayā sanipasthaṃ sarvaṃ svīkurvaḥ*).
55 *saṃyattān*, literally, 'on guard', 'ready'.
56 *dravyo ha vā idam agre prajā āsuḥ, ādityāś caiva, aṅgirasaś ca. tato*

Here, vāc is presented as a figure who, rather than being desired, is rejected. The reason for the rejection is expressed in the word *hāsyāmahe* ('we will be abandoned') which is glossed by the commentator only as *tyakṣyāmahe* However, the result of the rejection is anger. *Vāc's* anger results in her transformation, not into a sensuous, seductive woman as above, but rather into a frightening, destructive animal, who begins to consume all within her reach. The rejected woman has been transformed into the destructive, even castrative, mother. Once appeased, here by the gods agreeing to accept her, she becomes the beneficent mother, granting all wishes.

This anxiety is again, I would argue, reflected in the myth above where as a result of her union with the sacrifice (*yajña*), a monster (*abhva*) is conceived. This myth provides an excellent example of this deeply engrained anxiety of males towards women who function as both sexual partners and mothers. The offspring is a result of what is perceived to be an illicit sexual relationship, and Indra's subsequent destruction of her womb is further evidence that the tradition is most uncomfortable with the maternal and the sexual being represented in the same figure.

'ṅgirasaḥ pūrve yajñaṃ samabharan. te yajñaṃ sambhṛtyocur agnim—imāṃ naḥ śvaḥsutyām ādityebhyaḥ prabrūhi. anena no yajñena yājayateti. (13) te hādityā ūcuḥ upajānīta yathā vā 'smān evāngiraso yājayān. na vayam angirasa iti. (14) te hocuḥ—na vā 'nyena yajñād apakramaṇam asti. antarāṃ eva sūryāṃ dhrīyamāhā iti. te yajñaṃ saṃjahvuḥ. te yajñaṃ sambhṛtyocuḥ, śvaḥ sutyāṃ vai tvam asmabhyaṃ agne pravocaḥ. atha vayam adyasutyām eva tubhyaṃ prabrūmaḥ, aṅgirobhyaś ca. teṣāṃ nas tvam hotā 'stīti. (15) te 'nyam eva pratiprajīghyuḥ angirasaḥ—accha te hāpy angiraso 'gnaye 'nvāgatya cukrudhur iva—kathaṃ nu no dūtaś caran na pratyādṛthā iti. (16) sa hovāca. anindyā vai mā 'vṛṣata. so 'nindyair vṛto nāśakam apakramitum iti. tasmād u hānindyasya vṛto nāpakrāmet ta etena sadyaḥkriyā 'ngirasa ādityān ayājayan, sa sadyaḥkrīḥ. (17) tebhyo vācaṃ dakṣiṇāṃ ānayan, tāṃ na pratyagṛhṇan; hāsyāmahe yadi pratigrahiṣyāma iti. tad u tad yajñasya karma na vyamucyata, yad dakṣiṇam āsīt. (18) athaitbhyaḥ sūryaṃ dakṣiṇāṃ ānayan taṃ pratyagṛhṇan...(19) tebhyo ha vāk cukrodha—kena mad eṣa śreyān, bandhunā 3 kenā 3 yad etaṃ pratyagrahiṣṭa, na māṃ iti. sā haibho 'pacakrāma. sobhayan antareṇa devāsurān saṃyattān siṃhī bhūtvādadānā cacāra. tāṃ upaiva devā amantrayanta, upāsurāḥ. agnir eva devānāṃ dūta āsa, saharakṣā iti asurarakṣasāṃ asurāṇām. (21) sā devān upāvartsyanty uvāca. yad va upāvarteya kiṃ me tataḥ syād iti. pūrvaṃ eva tvā 'gner āhutiḥ prāpsyatiti. atha haiṣā devān uvāca—yāṃ mayā kāñcāsiṣaṃ āśāsiṣyadhve sā vaḥ sarvā samarddhiṣyata iti. saivaṃ devān upāvavarta. (22) ... devā abruvan—pūrvāṃ tvā 'gner āhutiḥ prāpsyatiti. tad evaināṃ etat pūrvāṃ agner āhutiḥ prāpnoti. vāg ghy eṣā nidānena. atha yad uttaravedim upakirati—yajñasyaiva sarvatvāya vāg ghy eṣā. vāg u hy eṣā. (23)

The semantic gendering of vāc, and the inscribing on to the concept of vāc the feminine roles of wife and mother, addresses masculine fears or concerns about female sexuality. As vāc is inscribed as feminine, on to her are projected anxieties that underlie issues of sexual power and possession. Moreover, the feminine world as constructed by the male world of brahminical society is one wherein levels of sexual control and purity are measured. On to this conflicted notion of vāc, we can then superimpose vāc set in opposition to apabhāṣā, that is, all that is not vāc. The result becomes a metaphor for Woman in traditional brahminical society. She does not really belong within the group, and like the asuras is relegated to the world of the Other. Neither can she be totally denied. For need necessitates a controlled and limited access to her, but this access is not without its own internal conflicts.

Through these limited examinations, we have come to see that the word vāc carries a highly nuanced and complex set of meanings in the religious and mythic traditions of brahminical India. These meanings reflect a deeply engrained and important set of semantic markers that cannot be ignored in our understanding of the word vāc and its role in the tradition.

The Patriarchy and Vyākaraṇa

One of the most important areas of scientific enquiry in traditional India was grammar (*vyākaraṇa*, literally 'analysis'). The similarity that this has to the West's concern with language is not accidental, and reinforces the fundamental notion of French feminists, such as Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, that control over language, and thus knowledge, is central to the preservation of the patriarchal society. *Vyākaraṇa* is seen as the basic tool of scientific enquiry, and from the earliest extant materials we see evidence of the preoccupation that the tradition had with grammar. One of the most famous works in the language, one that has been widely praised in the West for its genius, is a grammar, that of Pāṇini composed somewhere between the fifth and third centuries BCE. It is upon this work that the grammarian Patañjali comments. The grammatical system as articulated in Pāṇini's master-piece is known for its conciseness and allows for the generation of virtually every form. In addition, it has an elaborate and systematic mechanism of coding the functions and categories of the language. The rules are written in a technical language, so that to a non-initiate, the grammar is impenetrable.

The need to control the text, to control language, is a fundamental concern of the tradition, as is the need of an élite population of males to serve as the conservators of the text. With the text and its language as their object, the male conservators of tradition sought to maintain the purity and exclusivity of vāc, to rid her of corrupt elements, to make her conform to an ideal, or rather to perfect her. Vāc inscribed as a feminine entity, or a representation of the feminine, is originally pure, divinely revealed, unpolluted, untarnished, but in her current form is either corrupt, and in need of restoration to her perfect form, or is always at risk of becoming corrupt and must be kept pure.

Thus the traditional brahminical mechanism of 'language analysis' is reflective of a socially dominant and normative code of behaviour through which élite males are allowed to control feminine objects. The pandit (*paṇḍitaḥ*)[57] measures success, and therefore pleasure, from an excessive investment in an idealized feminine object/female, especially in physical perfection and the preservation of that perfection. In this context, the saying 'grammarians consider the birth of the son like the saving of a half-syllable' (*ardhalāghvamātreṇa putrotsavaṃ manyante vaiyākaraṇāḥ*) becomes more than an amusing aphorism.

Now consider Laura Mulvey's words in her essay 'Visual Pleasures' (1975) on the mechanism with which males cope with anxiety:

The male unconscious has two avenues to escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the reenactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery) counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object…; or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring or other than dangerous (hence overvaluation…).

She elaborates. The first option, which is connected with voyeurism, 'has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control, and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness'. According to Mulvey, the second 'builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying' (1989: 21–2). For the pandit, *vāc* has become the fetishized feminine object, which is then overvalued; the form and perfection of the text are idealized; the text has been transformed into something controlled by him and so

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[57] In the case of the Western philologist, success and therefore pleasure is derived from assuming the corruption or guilt of a feminine object/female and subjecting the feminine object/female to an ongoing examination and exposé of its corruption, and restoring its true, that is, non-corrupt, state.

'satisfying' him. The need to control vāc, the need to be in possession of vāc can thus be seen as an expression of and means of controlling his own anxieties of castration.[58] Perhaps it is this fear of castration, so carefully contained and repressed through the discourse of vyākaraṇa, that stimulates such strong resistance to new forms of discourse within the traditional brahminical world.

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[58] In the West, it is this fear of castration, so carefully contained and repressed through the discourse of philology, that stimulates such strong resistance to new forms of discourse.

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