



Esther Morgan's "The Lost Word": A Frantic Quest for a Feminist Identity

Dr. Sunita Malik

Associate Professor
Department of English
Dr. B.R.Ambedkar College
University of Delhi
Wazirabad Road,
Yamuna Vihar, Delhi-
110094

Abstract

Esther Morgan's poem "The Lost Word" is from her first collection, *Beyond Calling Distance*. The very first line sets the theme and tone of the poem – "She's lost a word." The woman is desperately searching for a word she had used once upon a time, but now despite exerting much pressure on her brain, she cannot recall it; a powerful two-letter word the letter referred to here is "No." In a very subtle manner, the poem depicts a woman's powerlessness, even within the domestic space. The poem showcases her inability and inefficacy to say "no" to suggest how women are made to submit to patriarchal authority through gender conditioning. This paper focuses on how, through a short poem, Morgan draws attention to the desperation and helplessness a woman faces because she has lost her ability to say "no." She has forgotten to use the power to say "No" —a woman's struggle to find her tongue and language. The poem points out how women have been subjugated and suppressed everywhere due to patriarchy and its notions about not allowing women to have opinions and the freedom to deny. Gender inequality takes many forms, to fill a woman's mouth with someone else's language; (language is not just words, but within language lies onenativity, dignity and culture), so much so that she forgets her language and in the process, loses her capacity to refuse, refute and reject. The paper Esther Morgan's "The Lost Word": A Frantic Quest for a Feminist Identity" attempts to assert the need for a gender-neutral language where women can respond in negation and forging an identity for themselves.

Keywords

No, Inequality, Helplessness, Lost word, Gender, Feminism.

Esther Morgan's poem "The Lost Word" begins with a woman searching for a lost word. The strange facet is that she does not even remember which word she is searching for but remembers that it is a two-lettered word. She is frantically searching for it everywhere - behind the sofa, in the dustbin, in dusty drawers, she is searching for it in the back of dusty cupboards, not in the fields, forests or offices. This defines her space is only limited to the four walls of house. Her frantic search at first seems absurd as one does not search for a word in the places she is searching for. The readers then realize that the poem is not operating in a physical realm but at a metaphysical plane where searching a word within the domestic space and under or behind the furniture suggests how the woman's life is limited only to her domesticity.

A girl child is taught from her childhood that if she obeys the dictates of the male members of the house and is serviceable to them, then she can live a life of comfort. Furthermore, she can make herself presentable and desirable to men until her prime youth. In that case, she can also get certain luxuries of life, provided she does not question or critique the male-chauvinist discourses, practices, suppression and violence. This kind of "gender conditioning" - the colonization of women's minds - carries on from their girlhood when girls are taught to always provide a response/ reply in a positive manner and never to say "no" to male whims and desires.

Emily Dickinson beautifully represents this gender conditioning when she writes -

They shut me up in prose
 As when a little girl
 They put me in the closet
 Because they liked me "still" (Dickinson, np).

Girls are taught from childhood to shut up and not express their desire, and they are made to submit to patriarchal dictates. When girls do not do so, they are forcefully made to submit in the closet or the attic, as any woman who does not adhere to the patriarchal norms is thought to be mad and locked in the attic. Therefore, following Jane Eyre, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar give the name of their book on the feminist assertion as *Mad Women in the Attic*. The fear of being locked up or being termed as "mad" or even being thrown out of the supposed domain of home to the marketplace, where women again become subject to more violence by men, the women find themselves toeing the line of the patriarchal discourse as they have no path in which they can assert their desire, identity and opposition to coercive practices.

This woman in the poem "The Lost Word" also probably has grown up with a kind of conditioning and thus has been domesticated to such an extent that she cannot think beyond her domestic space. All her life, she has been living within the confines of the four walls of her supposed home where she had been submitting to the authority of males of the house, and thus her life has been limited to that sphere only.

The house's walls demarcate her search for the lost word within her domestic domain, and it is here in her home that she has lost the word. This brings another aspect of gender discrimination, domestic violence. Cultural norms such as traditional gender roles that portray men as dominant and women as submissive contribute to the perpetuation of violence within the safe space of home. A woman is often denied basic fundamental rights within her home only. Patriarchy restricts and restrains a woman in her speech; she is taught to say good things, use good words, be forthcoming, and not have opinions. W.B Yeats, in his poem "A Prayer for my Daughter," says that he does not want his daughter to have an opinionated mind -

"An intellectual hatred is the worst,

So let her think opinions are accursed" (Yeats, np).

From the beginning, women are taught not to have an opinion, to think as told by patriarchy.

The word she desperately searches for is a small two-letter but very powerful. The poet leaves it to the readers to find the word; she does not disclose it but gives ample hints. The missing word is "No." The word that has the power to deny, decline, refuse and reject. She has lost the word and, as a result, has become incapacitated to refuse; she is desperate to have it back and is trying to search for it everywhere, including the rubbish sacks. She looks under the carpet and finds many other lost, forgotten words, which she had forgotten that she had swept under the carpet. So she has been losing words, many words over some time; she could not wholly throw them but has brushed them under the carpet, hopeful that perhaps one day she might empower herself and retrieve them; in the process of finding that powerful two-letter word, she finds some words, but alas not the word she had been searching for. Words are not just meaningful utterances but carry within them the personality and identity of the speaker; losing a word means losing a part of one's identity, the inability to put forth one's point of view, not to be able to express, which leads to suffocation and subjugation. The carpet symbolizes taking things lying down, and we usually brush those things under the carpet, which we don't want others to see, and there, under the carpet, she finds lots of lost words. Each lost word signifies sacrifices and compromises quietly made by her, throttling of her desires, leaving her dreams, abandoning her passion not expressing her opinions and views. Leaving one word

after another, leaving her own words and speaking someone else's words, and in the process, she has lost the power to object and to say "No."

The meaning of "no" has been very powerfully portrayed in the popular Hindi film, *Pink*, directed by Anuradha Roy Chowdhury. When the lawyer keeps on saying that the (falsely) accused women were in the habit of taking money in return for sexual favours. She (the falsely accused) firmly says that even if a woman takes money to give favours, one still needs to stop when she says no. NO means just NO. Whatever the circumstances, no just means to stop. In the poem, the woman has lost these two letters, compelling words. She has lost her strength to stop the unjust, unfair treatment meted out to her. She is powerless to disprove, deny and discard.

After searching for the lost word everywhere, she racks her brain but cannot remember because she realizes she has been using someone else's language. Her mouth is full of someone else's tongue.

But all that comes to mind
are failed attempts
when her mouth is full
of someone else's tongue (Morgan, np).

Language is not just a neutral means of communication; it reflects how people think, feel and behave. One's language is an integral part of one's personality and identity. Language holds within it a wealth of knowledge, traditions and culture. It shows a person's beliefs, values, norms and conventions and even the thought process of an individual, the community, and the nation. Taking away language means taking away one's natural self. In the poem "The Lost Word," the woman has been using someone else's language so much that she has forgotten her own language and uses others' language. Substitution of language is also a means to control and dominate.

British used language to divide Indians and introduced their language to rule over us. We imbibed Western culture and norms through the English language and education. The English language had colonized our minds as we tended to learn the language of our colonial masters to become closer to the foreign ruling elites. Ngugi WaThiongo, in his non-fictional book, *Decolonizing the Mind*, spoke about how the colonial masters thought of "catching the colonized young" to make them learn the English language and thus control their minds and achieve hegemony. Such control over one's mind is not easy to decolonize, and therefore, even after many decades of the third-world nations gaining their independence, they continue with their decolonization process.

It is interesting to note that when the woman in the poem “The Lost Word” started searching for the word “no”; she probably started the journey of her decolonization from the patriarchal parameters. She probably had had enough of saying yes to suppression and oppression that she had been bearing within her domestic domain, and now she feels she has borne enough and needs to stand by saying “no.” But when she dares to do such an act, she finds the word to be no more there in her parlance as by not using it for an extended period, she has lost the word. She is unsure where she kept the word and, thus, her frantic search.

The moment she starts the search shows the moment of her dispersal from the male-chauvinist patterns of thought. Still, the question arises will she ever be able to come out of the patriarchal standards as language is gendered where women are “the other” in binary opposition to men? Women cannot assert themselves until they have an identity of their own, and they will continue to be judged and measured in relation to men – as daughters, wives, or mothers. So, there is a need to evolve a gender-neutral language so that women do not find themselves at the crux of being caught in the web of a male-chauvinist language from where they do not find any way out. Therefore, Elaine Showalter writes, “the appropriate task for feminist criticism is to concentrate on women’s access to language ... on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression (that is, the social rather than psychic). The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and forced into silence, euphemism and circumlocution” (Showalter, 183).

Language gives power and confidence – if language is the means to garner consent, then language is also means to oppose, criticize and take a stand. So, if the feminists have to do away with the male-chauvinist language, then they need to make an effort to create a gender-neutral language where women’s vocabulary also would have the word “no.” They will also be able to negate the male discourses and find an identity not just in relation to men. In other words, it can be said that filling the woman with others' tongues is a way of controlling and subjugating her because she has lost her language and the power to say “no,” and now she has no option but to comply and obey. Women's empowerment should also encompass within itself the politics of making a gender-neutral language allowing women to create an identity for themselves.

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