

A Brave/Safe New World

by

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About the author

Mr. Ajay Govind is a filmmaker and a corporate trainer. He is a graduate from St. Stephen's College (Delhi University) where he studied English Literature. It was during a part-time course in Media Studies at St. Stephen's that Ajay discovered his interest in cinema. In 2008, he founded the creative agency words. rhythms. images (WRI) and in 2014 the film vertical of WRI Sisyphus Rocks Films (SRF). Ajay's debut film 'after the third bell' released in 2014, and since then he and the SRF team have line produced three feature films, multiple short films and music videos. His latest film is a Malayalam children's film titled 'Madappally United'.

Abstract:-

The essay focuses on how words create safe spaces by directing the manner in which we order our material reality. Observation of daily vocabulary, particularly in informal settings, can reveal the addition of new words that are coming into widespread use due to social media and increasingly accessible technology. Various issues emerge, especially due to usage of outdated words and words that have a change in meaning over time. Utilization of many words may not be politically correct in the contemporary space as they may be signifiers of casual sexism/casteism/racism etc. Thus, the issue of semantics becomes very important. The Sisyphean task of self-scrutiny and empathy is advocated to design safe social spaces.

A Brave/Safe New World

The following conversation captures the essence of a session conducted at Janki Devi Memorial College more than a year ago before the pandemic situation arose. The interaction was part of a series under the umbrella theme, “Building Social and Emotional Well-being in Young Adults,” conducted as an impromptu discussion between Mr. Ajay Govind and a group of students and teachers .

Mr Govind began the session by thanking the college for the wonderful opportunity of interacting with a group of people who he did not know and who did not know him. He said that he always valued opportunities like that because they allowed him to expand his own worldview. Connecting to the larger theme, Mr. Govind spoke on the topic “Young people as designers of safe spaces” describing how words create safe spaces by directing the manner in which we order our material reality.

The following is an extract of the session:

One of the biggest commitments we make, and often without realising its true impact, is with the words that we use. The times we live in give us many avenues to put our understanding of words on display. Yet, most of us struggle to catch up. One just has to observe their day-to-day vocabulary, especially in informal settings, to find that a lot of new words are added all the time. Some, we find, are words that weren't used in the same way earlier; others didn't even exist, say 5 years ago.

It is worth considering that the new words entering our vocabulary seem easier to adopt, since everyone is using them, all the time, on all media. It may not be inaccurate to say that in the modern world, there are haves, have-nots, and those-who-have-smartphones-with-internet.

Thanks to this access to the internet (and social media platforms) these news words are being used by a wider group of people. The exclusivity and elitism associated with technology is fast becoming a thing of the past.

I had worked on a short film, *Purana Pyaar*,¹ two years ago featuring Mohan Agashe and Lilette Dubey, who play an elderly couple who run away from an old age home. In one of the scenes, Agashe's character sends a text message to his son using words such as 'YOLO', 'JLT', etc., to annoy him. His grandson had taught him these words, and he had them noted on a piece of paper, which he carries in his pocket. It was the perfect meeting of the old world and the new, with colloquial abbreviations of the internet era written on a lined piece of paper.

In fact, it could be said that we are moving one step ahead of this game of reinventing and creating new words. How many of you have tried your hand at guessing the name of a film or a book based on a series of emojis that are sent to you via a WhatsApp message? From words we went to abbreviations, and from that to emojis. (Let's take a moment to pause and stare at some cave paintings?)

However, before I go on to paint a rosy picture of the present and the future, of a world united by cute emoji soldiers, let me address some uncomfortable realities.

While access and the spread of the internet is helping in creating a new "lingo", the uphill challenge is proving to be older words. You see, old words, much like habits, die hard. As a result, the phrase "political correctness" sits uneasily in our living rooms and office cubicles, even though people are happy flaunting their levels of awareness on digital spaces and in virtual conversations. How often do we wake up to the news of controversy between factions

debating/objecting to the use of a word? (Can I also point out that we live in times when news isn't deemed newsworthy until reactions to that news is also newsworthy.)

I am obviously using “wake up” in the sense of the word that the world has once again rediscovered. The term “woke” finds its beginnings in the late 1800s when it was used in discussions around issues of race with the “Wide Awakes” movement.² Later the term came to be used as a more generic term to encompass issues pertaining to social justice. And since 2008, when it was used in a song by the artist, Erykah Badu, it has become fashionable for people to wear their “wokeness” on their sleeve (something Badu herself later criticised).³

The path to this blatant display of “wokeness” is strewn with the remains of words that were once commonly used, but now are recognised as being signifiers of casual sexism/casteism/racism etc.

In Madappally United, the Malayalam children's film that I wrote and directed, there is a scene where a 16-year-old girl rebukes her mother for calling her “mad.” Let me share a small excerpt from that conversation to explain exactly what I am saying.

Mother: What? You've joined the cricket team? Are you mad?

Daughter: Ma, I've told you this before! Don't use the word “mad” loosely.

Mother: Oh! What times we live in. You can't call a mad person, mad anymore.

How many of you have found yourself in a situation like this, where you are told you are being too sensitive. Or when you try to correct someone and they start a sentence with “I just meant...”

So, yes, we live in times, when you can no longer “just mean” something by using words that are loaded with a history you may be unfamiliar with. A history that is a lived experience for an entire people, who know just what that word implies.

This brings me to one such word that has been embroiled in debate. But before that, I am reminded of a disclaimer that I began my session with. This being a session in an all-girls’ college, I find it imperative that I acknowledge the irony of a man talking to a group of women about “designing safe spaces.” I would like to believe that more than a claim to being any “ist” I am someone who is open to improving aspects of myself that need to be worked on. And I have trained myself to be constantly aware that we human beings are more ignorant than knowledgeable; and that allows me to be more adaptive to change.

Coming back to the word that I was referring to. In 2014, ex-Google employee, Ellen Petry Leanse, shared an observation about the use of the word “just.” The observation turned into a small-scale experiment and ended up as a LinkedIn post and an article that had millions of hits online. Women, Leanse observed, used the word “just” a lot more than their male counterplace in the workplace and otherwise. This made a lot of women step back and pay attention to the use of the word in situations when it wasn’t really needed. While the word “just” typically helps soften a sentence, its excessive use gives a “message of subordination” and even comes off seeming “self-effacing”, Leanse wrote.⁴

Clearly, our relationship with words is increasingly becoming a complicated puzzle. That too a puzzle whose pieces seem to constantly change shapes. Words seems to fit in so well one day; the next day it just doesn’t.

As you can see, I am moving further away from that image I had earlier painted of a world united by emoji soldiers. This new lingo and emojiery (have I coined a new word?) has actually brought semantics to the limelight in a whole new way. As a result, in addition to all our pre-existing conditions (almost in the clinical sense as used in the context of covid-19), newer battle lines are drawn within homes and across screens.

Incidentally, these battles fought across geographies and issues have a common war cry. It all began in 2007, when Chris Messina, a social technology expert, asked followers on his Twitter handle if the good old pound or hash sign could be used to signify a grouping⁵. He had suggested this in the context of an upcoming technology unconference, not realising that hashtags would have a strong and lasting impact on the way we communicate. Imagine the journey of hashtags: what it has become today from its earlier avatar as a symbol used in programming language and as a means to say “yes” on landline phones.

And now? Well, you can just as well say “no” using hashtags too. As it often happens, a popular hashtag movement is often met with a counter hashtag movement, making it one more way in which people are polarised. There may be a spectrum that exists between two warring hashtags, but it’s easier to reduce that also to a # – therefore we merely acknowledge a #spectrum. (Trivia: #spectrum shows 863K posts on Instagram)

For instance, some days ago, the photo of the first American Vice President of colour was allegedly whitewashed by the leading international fashion magazine, Vogue.⁶ As with other issues, the world was divided on this topic. One side says this form of whitewashing is extremely problematic and the other side’s argument is: stop taking things too seriously.

In fact, this counter argument is summed up in yet another word. That is, referring to “woke,” therefore “oversensitive,” people as “snowflakes.” The term is said to have come out of the 1994 book and subsequent 1996 cult film *Fight Club*, written by Chuck Palahnuik. Although Palahnuik has clarified in an article that he didn’t intend for the pejorative sense in which the word is now being used.⁷

But the word actually has a much longer history, one that predates Palahnuik by over a century.⁸ “A Snowflake” was the term used for a person who was opposed to the abolition of slavery in 1860s; therefore, had a preference for white people, over black. The term later went on to become a derogatory term to describe white people or even a black person who was seen as acting white.

Interestingly enough, the term “Generation Snowflake” was coined in reaction to an incident at Yale University, where reacting to a series of events, students from minority backgrounds confronted a professor and asserted that they felt the university was not a “safe space.”⁹ The videos of the outraged students seeking accountability from the professor went viral and it became one of the more prominent campus clashes that are used to further the “snowflake” cause.

So, what’s the point I am driving at? I started out by saying that one of the biggest commitments we make, often without realising its real impact, is to the words that we use. I delved into how we are adding words to our day-to-day vocabulary more often than we are adding clothes to our wardrobe (although, that’s partly thanks to Marie Kondo). Also, that we no longer live in a world where you can throw a word around without having a 360-degree understanding of what it implies. Yet we somehow, we stand the risk of falling apart, rather than coming

together. This machinery that is generating a new lingo for us to work with is tempting us to take sides without understanding the nuances of each story.

As a result, something as complicated as someone's politics get simplified down to the lowest common #hashtag. A case in point, ask someone which news channel they watch and observe yourself typecasting them this way or that. Or being wary of them. And this is the real deal. I specifically ask you to observe yourself because that truly is the point of you, as young people, becoming designers of safe spaces. It is so easy to keep vigil on others and watch the things they say and the "exact words" and "expressions" they use to say it. It is so easy to tell other people how to...#AnythingUnderTheSun. Especially when this expression brings with it the safety of anonymity that virtual interactions allow. As you engage in these word games, it might be worth putting yourself under that same level of scrutiny for every word and every step, then see what you realise.

Before I get to my final point, let me share an anecdote that gave me an insight into the problem I am talking about.

In a heart-to-heart conversation, and a moment of surprising openness, a young man told me how he recognised his own "toxicity." In fact, he repeatedly used the phrase "toxic masculinity" and how he had, during the course of a few relationships, absolved himself off it. I was impressed by this critical candid self-awareness. Unfortunately, the feeling was short-lived. It so happened that when we had this conversation, I was sharing a residence with this young man and a few other people (men and women). I happened to notice at the end of the day, that he didn't clean his own plates, even though he knew fully well that there was no one else to do that chore in that shared space. Maybe at his home his mother or sister probably took care of the dishes, without him realising this very common and gendered division of labour.

Please note the decision to use the word probably, therefore give benefit of doubt to another human being on their path of evolution and becoming better.

The fact of the matter is, becoming aware of one's privileges and the problems that results from it (toxic masculinity, bigotry, racism etc) is a huge part of solving the problem. But that's only the beginning.

And that, my friends, is it. The distance between knowing something and acting upon that knowledge is a lifetime's work, that needs to be addressed every single living minute. It is indeed the never ending, Sisyphean task. Especially in a world whose ethical compass is constantly evolving.

The more arduous part of this knowledge is to actively examine both our words and our actions from a complex lens until, it becomes a "natural" habit. We are used to adapting to inconvenient habits, aren't we? Imagine if, between sleep and work, there wasn't such an inconvenient thing as the act of brushing your teeth! Regardless of how sleepy you are, or lazy, or negligent, most of us brush our teeth. The example may seem absurd, but let's examine the flip for a moment. When you do not brush your teeth for any reason, are you not conscious of not having done something you should have? Or are you going to simply cite your individual freedom as the reason for your foul breathe?

Moreover, imagine someone says "Hey, looks like you didn't brush your teeth today." They are not saying "You are a filthy person who never brushes their teeth." But the reaction to that former statement is typically as if it had implied the latter.

Remark: "Hey, what you said is sexist."

Common response: “Hey, but I am a good human being!”

Let me give in to the temptation of one more analogy. Would you refuse to instantly apologise to someone after finding out that you stepped on their toe and hurt them?

“I didn’t do it on purpose.” Is that really the correct response?

The point is not whether you did it on purpose, or not. The point simply is that you stepped on someone’s toe. The same goes with words. Why resist an apology when you are told you overstepped with your words?

And this brings me to my last point: that moment of humility, of vulnerability, of realising you made a mistake, is the starting point of empathy. It’s when you are willing to take more than what is apparent, into account (including the probability of you making mistakes). And only by being empathetic can you truly design a safe space around yourself. A space where others, regardless of what makes them an “other” to you, feel comfortable to express and be themselves.

It is not going to help the cause, if we sit on top of the high horse of hashtags and communicate in emojis. I have nothing against either, but I do feel the convenience of this new form of shorthand may be choking the way we communicate, quite like the once-convenient plastic bags are now choking our rivers and streams.

There really are no shortcuts to building upon our humanity and words are a wonderful foundation. It’s what we build up from that foundation, which will make all the difference.

Indeed, one of the biggest commitments we make, and often without realising its true impact, is to the words that we use. So, our choice of words, must enable us to be more empathetic rather than display our wokeness. It seems simple but obviously isn't because of how often, the best of us, seem to be getting this wrong. And the proof of the pudding is in the next trending #hashtag which makes you outraged and type OMG!

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