

Metonymy of Madness: Echoing Linguistic Landscape

Abstract

This paper offers an insight into the genesis, role and significance of linguistic landscape of mental asylums and metonymy of madness. It explores the semiotic dimension of stigma through time and space, particularly during colonial period when mental asylums were established. The process of othering or distancing relies on day to day linguistic operation. Network of rumours and gossip, exploring how disability and impairment is constituted as objects within these kinds of discursive formation. The verbal nature of these rumours takes the form of clichés, idioms and proverbs which are thrown at will whenever a ‘normal’ person gets a chance. For example, there is a popular expression, *ranchi jaibe ki* ‘Will (you) go to Ranchi?’ in Maithili, an Indo-Aryan language, to ask someone who behaves “oddly”. The metonymic relations of mental illness is extended to the city of Ranchi, the state capital of Jharkhand, signalling the stigma attached to mental illness refers to one of the earliest mental asylums (now Central Institute of Psychiatry) established by British in India in 1918. Similar linguistic expressions have been found for all mental asylums of India in different languages both the the major language families, Indo-Aryan and Dravidian.

Tracing the history and origin of this idiomatic expression suggests a strong connection between the establishment of mental asylums and emergence of these idiomatic expressions (Kumar, 2019 a & b). Analysing this connection through Critical Toponymies that inform “historical sites are dedicated to the cultural production of their pasts. Such productions, whatever, their ideological suppositions, take advantage of the common perception of history as being an intrinsic quality of local landscape (Azaryahu and Foote 2008). This paper intends to bring the theories of stigma and the naming practices of places that do not have just indexical importance as spatial reference landmarks, but also carry historical and ideological reference point of views that reflect the present and the past of people, places and nations. As Moszberger et al. (2002:5) point out, naming practices are particularly revelatory for tracing changes in representational politics. The paper argues what Critical toponymy explores “power relations, public memory [and] identity formation” in commemorative renaming (Azaryahu 2012: 388) but in a different

manner. Revisiting the sociology of Stigma, as Simon Parker and Robert Aggleton argue, what is frequently missing is social and political questions, such as ‘how stigma is used by individuals, communities and the state to produce and reproduce social inequality’ and combining it with Azaryahu and Foote’s (2008) narrative theory to understand how these places are imagined, described, and portrayed in autobiography, literature, travelogues, film and other forms this paper argues that spatial narrative shapes oral forms of speech in the form of proverbs, sayings, idiomatic expressions which in turns sustain the the ideological baggage of linguistic landscape. The linguistic expressions such as proverbs and idiomatic expressions attached to the mental asylums across the country not only conform but also recast the stigma attached to mental illness. Applying Anand’s methodological intervention to understand the history of disability in India, this paper employs Foucauldian genealogical approach to deconstruct the metonymic relation between madness and mental asylum in understanding history of madness in India.

Keywords: Madness, Mental Asylum, Stigma, Proverb, India

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