Title
Panel Review: "From Our Doorstep: Contemporary Politics"

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Author
Pazargadi, Leila

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As the Obamas settle into Washington and the excitement of the election finale fades, many pundits, voters, and academics are attempting to make sense of the political debacle that was Election 2008. It was very timely that at this past February’s Thinking Gender conference at UCLA, one set of panelists discussed contemporary American politics, with special attention to the linguistic and visual elements that both the candidates and media manipulated to influence voters. Presenters from the panel entitled, “From Our Doorstep: Contemporary Politics,” moderated by UCLA Professor Juliet Williams, spoke about current issues ranging from the media’s portrayal of the election, to the emergence of neoconservative feminism resulting from Sarah Palin’s nomination, to the confrontation of America’s occupation in Iraq.

From a linguistic perspective, UCLA Applied Linguistics scholar, Netta Avineri, jump-started the panel with her talk, “Language and Gender: The Mass Media’s Portrayal of Two U.S. Presidential Candidates.” Avineri conducted a back and forth assessment of the campaign strategies of Democratic candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. In so doing, she attempted to neutralize issues concerning party differences, instead focusing her discussion on gender differences and the subsequent current of sexism running throughout the election. By analyzing the media headlines, news stories, and campaign strategies, Avineri discerned that the media representations of each candidate could be broken down into the following five themes: “fighting and competition,” “emotions, personality, and temperament,” “being ‘real,’” and “independence and guilt.” By comparing the portrayal of each candidate in these categories, Avineri attributed gender differences to the media’s privileging of Obama over Clinton during the campaign. As an example, she spoke about the theme of “fighting and competition.” The media positively described Obama and his campaign as “tougher” and “a fierce competitor,” whereas in reference to Clinton and her strategies, the media used more combative language. For example, they described Clinton as engaging in “trench warfare” with a “slashing campaign” that was “bruising the Democratic Party.” Avineri maintained that these differences were due to gender differences that held Hillary Clinton to a higher standard than Barack Obama. By presenting these categories of the media’s portrayal of Obama and Clinton, Avineri provided her audience with an innovative look at the gender bias of the election from a linguistic perspective. What could have been better developed was her inclusion of race.
By focusing her case study solely on the gender differences between Obama and Clinton, she omitted critical race issues. If she had compared Clinton to McCain, for instance, she might have been able to discuss white privilege as well.

Like Avineri, Laurel Peacock, a literary scholar from UC Santa Cruz, also discussed the strategic use of emotion during the campaign. She reviewed the instances that Clinton was called “overly emotional” and considered the ramifications for women. Peacock displayed a network’s recap of the Vice Presidential debates using MSInteractive’s “Perception Analyzer,” a device which measured the positive and negative responses of 32 undecided, mixed-gender, Ohio voters. During the Biden/Palin faceoff, lines gauging the emotion of audience members streamed across the bottom of the screen like the electric currents of a heart monitor. The “Perception Analyzer Dial” was used to anticipate the reactions of undecided voters; however, like many bloggers and critics of these superficial technological advents, Peacock questioned the usefulness of the dial and what it was meant to evaluate, as it seemed to reify Palin’s strategy of appealing to women voters.

Another panelist, John Farrell Kelley, a scholar in English at the University of Alaska, remarked that many women from his home state, Alaska, approved of Sarah Palin, stating, “I want her watching my kids.” In his talk “Be Afraid: Sarah Palin and the Emergence of a Neoconservative Feminist Standpoint,” he investigated the changing ideologies of liberal feminists who are beginning to include neoconservative perspectives within their feminisms. Kelley noticed that many women were mistaking Palin’s portrayal of über-femininity as feminism and that they were substituting appearance and the ability to go head to head with a man as feminist qualities. As liberal feminists advocate equal rights, they push for the idea that women must “have every opportunity that a man has,” which according to Kelley, signals the emergence of a new feminism that is really an “anti-feminism.”

By analyzing numerous blogs, articles, and rhetoric written about Sarah Palin’s perception throughout the election, Kelley reiterated what many onliners were asking: “Is Sarah Palin a feminist?” Kelley concluded his talk by questioning the so-called feminist platform that Palin had been invoking throughout her campaign, one which simply recycled neoconservative values.

To conclude the panel, Susan MacDougal, a Near Eastern Studies scholar at the University of Arizona, finished the discussion of contemporary American politics by evaluating the language concerning the American occupation of Iraq. She specifically discussed the framing of the war, which shifted from the threat of nuclear weapons to the liberation of Iraqi women. By evaluating memoirs and blogs, MacDougal investigated the writings of modern Iraqi women who are remembering life before and after the invasion. She made reference to Nadje Al-Ali’s *What Kind of Liberation?: Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (2009), a new book that investigates the organization and progress of women’s movements in Iraq from the 1940s to
the present day. By doing so, MacDougal touched upon the various policies regarding women’s social mobility before the invasion and after, while also addressing the interference of liberal feminists who seek to supposedly “liberate” Iraqi women according to American values. I especially enjoyed MacDougal’s talk, because she spoke about the rising trend of Iraqi women’s memoirs in the market, a critical move which mirrors my own project of investigating the life narratives of Muslim immigrant writers in the US and Europe. Her findings corroborated mine, which demonstrate how the market has been sensationalizing Muslim women’s memoirs. By recycling orientalist stereotypes of the downtrodden Muslim women, some memoirs justify the colonizing mission, which operates on the platform that indigenous women are in need of saving by the so-called wisdom of the West.

Leila Pazargadi is currently a graduate student in the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA with a concentration in Women’s Studies. Pazargadi focuses on Muslim women’s life writing and issues of immigration, exile, and diaspora, especially as they pertain to the social positioning of women. She engages in texts written in English, Persian, and French, in order to conduct research on the identity politics of third world women writers relocating to the US, UK, and France.