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**A Feminist Stylistic Pursuit: Investigation of Sidhwa's *The Bride* (1990) to decode a Gendered Language-Use**

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**Abstract:**

*By applying Sara Mill's Feminist Stylistics (1995), the study aims to unfold the implicit gender stereotyping in Sidhwa's *The Bride* (1990). The fictional work of Sidhwa is investigated to problematize how gender representation strengthens the proposition of Sara Mills (1995) that men are described linguistically according to their names, titles, profession and physical appearance that lead to make them superior in comparison to women. By implying the feminist stylistics as a "toolkit" (Mills, 1995, p.2), it is to highlight a particular type of sexist language-use in the novel that paints a hegemonic ideology for gender disparity. The key objective of the study is to question through the language use as is recommended by the undertaken framework - word, phrase/sentence, discourse to demonstrate how physical appearances, hair style, title-addresses, names and clothing etc. play an overriding role to uphold gender disparity. The ethnic and religious identification of people are categorized also on their specific dresses and get-ups to manifest disparity based on socio-cultural norms. The findings of the present research recommend that socio-cultural conventional gender taboos are manufactured through a specific language-use to serve masculine's interests as a sign of authority and dominance over women. The culturally gendered language portrayed in the novel is meant to discriminate against women, if they resist it, they are treated as 'other' and 'unnatural' by male dominated society.*

**Keywords:** Gender stereotyping, Feminist stylistics, Decoding, ideological motives, phrase, discourse.

## 1. Introduction.

### 1.1. Background Knowledge

Contemporary studies on gender, identity, culture and language have become interdisciplinary that have identical concerns with multiple disciplines concurrently like anthropology, literature, linguistics, feminism, stylistics, psychology and discourse analysis.( Sunderland,2006). The multidimensional appeal of gender studies has made it a rich and fertile area for a scholarly quest to highlight implicit and explicit inequitable roles and structures based on gender disparity in a patriarchal socio-cultural milieu. More relevantly to say, discourse analysis and feminist stylistics aim at decoding an ideological use of language that is meant to facilitate hegemony one group of society over the segregated one through the tool of a language in a text or a discourse. Lazar (2007) and Van Dijk (2005) opine that sexism (sexuality) as a discursive cultural construction shapes gender role on the discrimination foundation. Lazar (2007) argues “social structures of patriarchy systematically privilege men as a social group, and dis-advantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group” (Lazar, 2007, p. 145).However, Judith Butler opposes the stance taken by the two theorists as is taken by the traditional feminist school of thought also who think that it’s sexual dichotomy that determines gender categorization of masculinity and femininity. Butler is of the view that sexism has nothing to do with gender identification; sexuality is a biological and natural characteristic of human beings while gender is a socio-cultural construction. Butler’s (1990) refutes the essentialist school of thought by saying gender as “culturally constructed; hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex.”(p.25). Similarly, Sara Mill (2006) takes her identical perspective with Butler, however a different position from Lazar. She contends that sexism is a linguistic construction encoded in a word, phrase, sentence and discourse in any literary or non-literary discourse. It is a feminist stylistician’s job to decode implicit or explicit linguistic ideological layers and structures in a text. Therefore, by employing Feminist stylistic tool, the study aims at probing Sidhwa’s *The Bride* (1990) that can provide enough research space for problematizing gender stereotyping that is coded in a gendered language or sexist language.

### 1.2. About the author and the selected literary work

Bapsi Sidhwa(1938) is a diaspora American based Pakistani novelist who has a conspicuous standing in South Asian fiction (Suleri,2001). Her multidimensional literary background of an Asian

woman and a minority writer grants her an academic edge over other artists to know how women from Pakistani and Indian background confront gender exclusion as a writer or a common citizen. Therefore, Sidhwa's literary pen has never missed to be a forceful voice for voiceless and segregated segments of society including, women, maids, children, handicapped persons and minorities etc. Her Indian, Pakistani and American background simultaneously armed her art to generate a multicultural appeal for national and international readership. She has infused an international appeal in South Asian fiction that was earlier barren. (Brians, 2003).

Sidhwa earned the Pakistani highest national award of Sitar-e- Imtiaz as well as numerous International awards and prizes due to a prolific voice of her art. The artist has authored five novels, a collection of fiction, "Their Language of Love"( 2013) and a non-fiction work, " City of Sin and Splendour: The writing on Lahore"(2005). Many of her works got translated into different world languages: French, German, Russian, Italian and Urdu.

## **2. Research Questions**

1. What is Sara Mill's Feminist Stylistics used to decode a gendered language- use in *The Bride* (1990)?
2. How gender ideological disparity is to be exposed through the given stages of language in the novel?
3. Why it is substantial to unfold gender identities constructed by gender stereotyping rampant in the Pakistani tribal society?

## **3. Theoretical Research Framework**

The major concern of this section of research is to explain the employed research framework used by the study that is aimed at pursuing the set research objectives. Sara Mill (1995) has for the first time introduced the theoretical framework of Feminist Stylistics to probe the language-use to identify gender bias in a discourse, and text. The theorist discusses that there is a co-relationship between a language-use and gender representation in a literary or non-literary text. Mills recommends unmasking implicit or explicit hidden ideological motives constructed for hegemony and dominance of one group of society. The framework offers the tool of Feminist Stylistics to highlight gender construction that needs to be decoded linguistically. Therefore, the research employs Mill's given framework to

stylistically decode the language used in Sidhwa's *The Bride* (1990) focusing on the "toolkit" (1995) in the novel.

Different stages of exploration of a text are employed according to the "toolkit" (p.2) of the given text that consists of word, phrase/sentence and discourse analysis. It enables research to see how gendered language is used to manipulate gender roles.

### 3.1. Gender Bias through Word Choice

Mills (1995) recommends focusing on gender disparity at the level of individual words or lexical items used by a writer or a speaker. This will help highlight 'sexism' (1995) in the choice of words for specific implicit/explicit purposes. Selection of words can be scrutinized by finding occurrences of sex-specific pronouns, use of generic nouns and pronouns, address terms, titles and negative descriptions of women (Mills, 1995). Through the analysis of word's use in a specific term, address and title can be highlighted to unearth lying gender bias behind these words usage.

### 3.2. Gender Bias through Generic Pronouns

The theorist argues that pronouns tend to be sexist language centric as well as used for professions, titles, and address terms to support patriarchal dominance. These generic pronouns grant men a universal role while an individualistic label to women, "those elements in language which continue a view of the male as a norm or universal and the female as divergent or individual" (Mills, 1995, p. 87). The specific generic pronoun and other patriarchal usage of terms influence our perception about a sexist language. For Further clarification with an example, 'he' as a generic pronoun is commonly used to refer to both men and women but in fact 'he' is obviously a masculine word that is meant for men only as a sex-specific pronoun. Similarly, gender specific pronouns are used in a sexist-language to refer stereotypically to different professions like scientist, doctors, professors, politicians and engineers etc. For Instance, "if a physics lecturer needs a lab assistant, he should contact the secretary' and 'a secretary is permitted to smoke in her own office. (Mills, 1995, p.66). Mill's the next example is very relevant to understand the idea of generic pronoun as she says, " Similarly, where the sex of a person referred to is not known, it is common practice to assume that the person is male ;for example, in this situation where **B** does not know the sex of the director:

**A:** I'm going to complain to **the director**.

**B:** Do you think **he'll** be able to do anything?"(Mills, 1995, p.66).

### 3.3. Gender bias at Phrase/ Sentence Level

Next is the level of phrase/sentence that has been explained by feminist stylistics after doing the word analysis. The historical background, contextual usage in a phrase or sentence in a text is required for making/shaping their particular meanings and imports. Some words have their history of usage which influence the hearer to interpret it in that specific way that is socially established, as we know grammatically, words only can make sense in a context they are used in. "**the word 'girl'** can be a neutral word when it is used in a specific context, such as 'She goes to a girls' school', but may take on sexist connotations when it is used in another context; for example, when someone says to a little boy who is crying, '**Don't be such a girl**', or when someone states, 'The school she goes to isn't very good: it's only a **girls' school**' ( Mills,1995, p.98).

### 3.4. Gender bias at the Discourse Level

Mills, at the level of discourse, recommends that scholars can examine focusing on the structures encoded in the text of a discourse that is undertaken after a phrase/sentence's stage as have been deliberated previously. It is to decode what is said, constructed in a textual structure, not explicitly but implicitly in the given discourse. It is not a micro-investigation of structures as is required at word, phrase/sentence level, rather it is a macro-level investigation, "Discourse analysis should...be concerned not simply with micro-contexts of the effects of words across sentences or conversational turns but also with the macro-contexts of larger social patterns"(Carter and Simpson, 1989, p.16). Therefore, an analyst at this part of discourse in a feminist stylistic perspective can yoke and relate earlier stages of word, phrase/sentence elements to see how they are generating an implicit ideology for specific purposes. The beginning of the investigation starts here from an examination of the construction of a character or characters in a given discourse that leads to the next step. In the words of Sara Mills (1995), "I analyze the way that stereotypical notions often inform the language choices which are made when describing characters in fiction and newspapers, and also the way people describe themselves. I also consider the roles that female characters can fill, drawing on a modified version of Vladimir Prop's work on narrative. I then go on to examine particular language choices in terms of the description of the fragmentation of the female body "(p.123).

#### 4. Discussion and Analysis

The plot of the novel '*The Bride*' (1990) unfolds a sexist language that tends to help impose gender disparity in the Pakistani tribal area of Kohistan painted by Sidhwa. The discourses among different characters in the book are uncovered to reveal how the language is gendered that is upheld through the specific way of dressing, names, address titles, physical appearance, ethnicity and faiths. The rampant tribal gender stereotyping can better be understood their association with different characters' vocations, physical appearances, physiques, attires and names. Sidhwa has highlighted these gendered norms supported by a specific language-use at different contextual circumstances in the novel by different characters who consider the style of hair and big moustaches as a sign of men's dominance, power and recognition, "By the trim of his hair and moustache, Qasim could tell that the man was of his faith" (Sidhwa, 1999, p.25). The very outlook of a person determines his gender's status and faith in the patriarchal culture, "By the amulet around his neck" (p.25). The usage of a particular style of hair, moustaches and amulet have been linked with the generic pronoun of "his" only, excluding women as an 'other' group. Mills (1995) describes that generic pronouns and sexist language influence our perception about one's gender identification and role in a society.

Even the identification and acceptance of a child depends upon his/her association with a male member of the family, not a female member. The first appearance of Zaitoon in the novel, as an unknown child (girl) at a time when she narrowly escapes from a bloody incident in which she lost her parents at the eve of the partition of the sub-continent, is reliant on her association with her father's name. She sticks to the legs of Qasim who happens to be there for her life's sake. The discourse between the two clearly shows that some words have their history of usage that influence the hearer for their specific meanings, "

**Qasim drew her to him, what is your name?**

**Munni**

**Just Munni**

**You must have another name.....**

**Do you have your father's name (Sidhwa, 1990, p. 22-23)**

It means that a girl has no recognition, identity and even name without her association with a male member of her family, otherwise like Zaitoon, she would be treated as ‘other’ in her own society that is based on gender segregation.

Next is Sara Mill’s proposition of generic pronouns and nouns that tend to grant universal role to men while individualistic and subservient role to women. She argues “By examining examples of usage such as the sex-specific pronoun use, the misuse of generics, address terms and the negative descriptions of females in a variety of texts, it is hoped to show that language-use can present and perpetuate a particular view of women”(Mills,1995, p.62 ).This kind of gender biasness can be found in the novel when Zaitoon is named after an **Olive** (Zaitoon) tree due to their alike traits of humbleness, care and utility of the both. They are both treated as a commodity. “**Munni, you are like the smooth dark olive, the Zaitoon that grows near our hills. The name suits you.... I shall care you Zaitoon**” (Sidhwa, 1990, p.23), Trees in our land depend upon the mercy of timber-mafia for their survival, similarly the girls/women do, and both are therefore at the mercy of a dominant group of society.

It is pertinent to mention in the light of feminist stylistic that the novelist ‘s representation of gender bias that can be exposed in the Kohistani culture in which people don’t dare asking about women by their names publically like they ask about men-folk in their greetings. It is a taken for granted norms that naming a woman in front of men is a big question on the concept of ‘honor’, “look, **nothing about my wife concerns you.... You don’t ask a hill-man anything about his woman-folk, understand? I would have slit your head**”(29).

There is an excessive gendered language that is replete with gendered words, phrases/sentences in the novel that are problematized for decoding. It shows how phrases and sentences play a substantial role due to their historical background, their usage in the specific contexts to shape implicit meanings for specific gender’s hegemony. The words, phrases and sentences used in the novel that can help understand the contention of the present research in the light of Mill’s Feminist stylistic theoretical framework are as follows, “Abba (p.12), **Women-folk** (14), “She **is brazen**” (p.29) **bastard, tribal honour** (16), **Hush Munni**(25), “**Death was the price for daring such an insult to his tribe, his blood and religion**” (p.16). The concept of ‘honor’ is linked only with men, the use of the pronoun, of ‘**his**’ repeatedly in a single sentence shows the dominance of men over women through a language-use. Moreover, “She **sobbed, ‘Abba, Abba, my Abba**” (22), the sentence contains a repeated word of

‘Abba’ that illustrate to put an emphasis on a male-generic nouns and titles to be used by women at a time of their help.

The concept of cowardice is linked with women because they are fragile in the tribal society and dependent upon men for their wellbeing, safety and survival. Sidhwa has pictured this, “**Come, all you effeminate crybabies all**”(p.30). The only criterion to be bold and valiant is that one should not be like females as per the standards of the socio-cultural depiction of the novel. Women are supposed to blindly abide by what is decided by the male members of their family for them with regard to their future, career and marriage without uttering a negative word. As has been instructed by Qasim to his adopted daughter, “**A decent girl does not tell her father to whom he should marry her**” (Sidhwa, 1990, p.137). The taken for granted term of ‘decency’ of a girl lies in her blind submission to what is decided by her male member of society.

## 5. Conclusion

The article problematized gender representation in Sidhwa’s *The Bride* (1990) from the perspective of Mill’s Feminist stylistics to question gender stereotyping prevalent in the tribal part of Pakistan, Kohistan. Analysis on the basis of undertaken research framework of feminist stylistics helped to unearth implicit hegemonic ideology for gender bias. Sidhwa in her work pointed out through her language use - word, phrase/sentence, and discourse to demonstrate how physical appearances, hair style, title-addresses, names and clothing etc. play an overriding role to maintain gender disparity. The ethnic and religious identification of people highlighted to illustrate are categorized on their specific dresses and get-ups. To be brief, socio-cultural conventional gender taboos are manufactured to serve masculine’s interests and are used as a sign of authority and dominance over women. The culturally gendered language portrayed in the novel is meant to discriminate against women, if they go against the drawn lines, they are labeled as ‘others’ and ‘unacceptable’ by male dominated society. As is illustrated here by Sidhwa, the incident of a daughter who resists the marriage imposed upon her but her father reacts, ““I have given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands” (Sidhwa, 1990, p.158).

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