

## **Constructing Gender Identities in Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Two Short Stories**

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### **Abstract**

*The study under view aims to highlight the issue of social construction of male and female gender identities in text. It discusses the issue with reference to two short stories by a Pakistani writer Haris Khalique and an Indian writer Rohini Kohli selected from their collection of stories titled Unfinished Histories. Since the texts of writers from a particular culture exhibit cultural and societal notions related to different areas of life, this study tries to highlight the construction of social identities of different genders, that is, male and female genders and tries to help understand the notions of malehood and femalehood as they are prevalent in the families of Indo-Pak background, and how they are perpetuated through text. The research method followed by this study is Critical Discourse Analysis.*

Writings of a particular culture provide the readers with a chance to peep into the very fabric of that culture and are considered a good source to understand the societal notions and ideologies related to every sphere of life. What the texts reveal is not only the identity of a culture but also the identities that are assigned to individuals and groups through the systems working in that culture. Society constitutes itself by an organized system of assigning identities to its members. This system of assigning identities is largely discursive and identities are constructed implicitly rather than explicitly, through texts and talk. The studies of Language and Gender are concerned with the issues related to the process of assigning gender identities to different sexes in society, and how assigning one gender to one sex plays its part in giving different recognition in society to the people belonging to one sex as compared to the ones belonging to the other.

The article under view aims to study construction of gender in short stories written by writers who share the same cultural background. Khalique (2001) represents Pakistanis living in the West and Kohli (2001) represents Indians, and the setting of the stories is London where the families interact and have discussion in the background of partition of the Indian sub-continent. The article will take into account the linguistic and discursive measures the writers take to construct gender of their respective male and female characters.

Sunderland (2006:28, 29) opines that normally gender is taken as a 'social correlate of sex'. Different biological sex means that people from one sex are biologically different, and these differences based on sex associate certain social expectations to the members of each sex. Hence, their social behavior, or enactment of gender, is largely dependent on what sex they belong to, that is, male or female. Another view of gender is that it is constructed in talk rather than associated with the biological sex. This means that it is the talk of ideas related to the behavior of males and females that makes them different, rather than the behavior itself. In other words, it is society that constructs their identities in discourse stating what each of them should or ought to be. Boys are always expected to be brave and different from girls, who are always expected to be good listeners.

One important question that needs to be investigated into is that why both sexes are seen to be different in terms of their roles in society, that is to say, why genders are constructed differently and why there is a talk of members of one sex or gender being different from the other.

One possible answer, in the words of Faith, as cited by Lloyed (2005:82), seems to be the aim of man to control 'women's body' and gain dominance by subordinating her through putting her into roles that keep her away from all resources of power. Language is normally the tool to be used for gaining this dominance and subordinating women by creating difference between man and woman and highlighting one as superior to the other (Dominance Theory by Thorne & Henley and Prominence Theory by Maltz and Broker (1982) and Tannen (1990) as cited by Lakoff (1975) in Mayerhoff & Holmes (2003:161).

It is the talk of the differences between individuals and groups rather than the differences themselves that makes the society appear as divided into different categories. Gender, hence, can be taken as one of the axis through which society is divided into groups, mainly in order to give hegemonic control to one group over the other/s so as to serve the interests of that dominant group which is assigned powerful position at the cost of other marginalized groups. Other axis of division in society are social class, race and sexuality, all of which including gender, of course, serve the purpose of dividing a society into different groups and a discursively formulated and implemented strategy makes one group powerful and dominant, whereas the other weak and subordinated. In this article, the terms 'text' and 'discourse' are treated as synonymous, since text is one of the constituent elements that construct a discourse.

Pakistani society is largely a patriarchal society in which all stereotypical characteristics are associated with men and women, and they can be seen in the texts written by Pakistani writers of English language. The researchers have selected the above mentioned texts as representative of the pre-determined ideologies which seem to assign only specific type of roles to individuals belonging to each gender, and hence creating certain 'types' of identities.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

It is normally seen that the writers tend to represent cultural notions of gender in their writings. These notions are normally the stereotypical ideas about roles of men and women as separate from each other. Men are shown as having entirely different characteristics than women, and these characteristics are according to cultural expectations of men and women in the society they live in. Discourse, be it in form of talk or text, is representative of the discursively formed notions of gender, as is suggested by Lakoff, the strategies employed in discourse are used by the dominant group to 'show men as more comfortable with power than are women' (p.161)

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

The present research has been carried out with the following objectives in mind:

1. To explore the role of discourse in construction of gender identities.
2. To highlight the relationship between discourse and the notions of male and female gender in the Indo- Pak society.
3. To expose the stereotypical style of gender related discourse in the works of writers of the subcontinent.

### **1.3 Research Question**

The question this research article will try to explore is as follows:

- ❖ How does discourse play its role in constructing gender identities in English fiction of the writers from the sub-continent?

### **1.4 Delimitations of the Study**

The study under view is delimited to an examination of discursive use of language to construct male and female identity in the short texts by Khalique and Kohli (2001). It will not take into account the themes discussed in the texts, but drawing on the use of language, it will try to explore the discursive strategies employed by the writers, consciously or unconsciously, in representing male and female characters being talked about in the stories as different from one another. As explained in the introduction, by discursive construction of identity is meant the implicit strategies used by the writers in construction of discourse. These strategies help create an identity of the characters due to different roles they are performing, or are shown to be performing in the discourse. This will enable the researchers to highlight how gender identity of the male and female characters is constructed by the writers in a discourse, and how cultural consensus on the stereotypical assigning of roles to men and women is perpetuated in text and through text, which, of course, is a representative of prevalent discourse.

## 1.5 Population of the Study

Population of the study is writings of English writers of Indo-Pak who have a deep understanding of cultural norms related to gender roles as performed in their respective society. These writers use English language to talk about different themes related to their society. Their knowledge of social norms allows them to construct a discourse which is representative of their social norms and beliefs about male and female genders.

## 1.6 Sample of the Study

Sample for this research is two pieces of writing by Khalique and Kohli titled *Roshanara Bagh, Nizamabad, Hounslow, Wembley and Sing me a Poem in Urdu*. Their book *Unfinished Histories* from which the texts have been selected has been jointly written by Khalique, A Pakistani writer, and Kohili, a writer of Indian origin.

## Literature Review

### 2.1 Language and Social Construction of Gender

According to Lakoff (1942), as cited by Mayerhoff & Holmes (2003:162), 'Language reflects and contributes to the survival of the stereotype.' She mentions the lexical strategies that are adopted by the speakers to assign different identities to different genders. For example, she mentions the assigning of words such as 'bitch' to a woman with power since a woman with power is normally not appreciated. Similarly, because men are always expected to be powerful, there are words associated with powerless men such as 'henpecked'. In this way, language plays its part in construction of gender through construction of discourse which is normally taken as a social practice. Demos & Segal (2001:112) state that construction of gender is not a biological phenomenon, like sex may be, but is a socially constructed phenomenon. In the discussion of difference perspective of gender, they cite MacKinnon (1989) and Rhode (1990) who argue that the experience of belonging to a specific gender and sexuality produces a specific identity. As such, women are taken as procreative and having nurturing capacity and a potential to be good mother, whereas men are socially aggressive and as cited by Demos and Segal, their 'patriarchal entitlement encourages the violent potentialities of men's control of women's bodies, sexuality, and emotions (Dworkin, 1987)'.

### 2.2 Discourse as a Social Practice

Leeuwen (2008:06) calls discourse/s as 'resources for representing social practices in text'. This means that discourse is a means through which a society represents itself to the outer world. One's opinion of a community of practice, in Holmes & Mayerhoff's (1999:173) terms, is formed by the ideas and ideologies about ways of living of the people whom their discourse represents. Any literature of a community or society is representative of the discourses that are prevalent and dominant in that society. Mills (1997:25) calls 'literature as a discourse and as an institution' meaning thereby that it is representation of institutionalized practices of a society, and cannot be taken as a piece of writing disassociated from the culture or the society and its ideologies and norms, but is very much representative of the deeply imbedded social practices.

### 2.3 Gender, Discourse and Power

Lloyed (2005: 74) discusses Millet's (1970) views of power in which she suggests that power is in man's hands because he has a control of all institutions of coercive power such as industry, trade and police etc. And all this, in her view, is because of the patriarchal system prevalent in society. Lloyed further comments on Patriarchy and defines it as 'a *system* of male power that permeates all aspects of life at all times and in all places.' In his discussion of strategies to gain power, he cites McNay (1992: 155) who suggests that 'difference becomes inequality' through which oppression is produced, and then cites (Hennessy, 1993: 32) who believes in 'a systemic understanding of power as exploitation'. These discussions seem to suggest that discourse is used by man in society in order to gain control of the world and run it in a way that serves his interests. The purpose behind gaining power, on one hand, is to let society serve his interests, and on the other hand, is to make woman powerless and render her unequal in her ability to run the worldly affairs. This process of construction of social identity in discourse hence assigns specific roles to the members of each gender, which are almost totally distinct and entirely non-overlapping.

## Research Methodology

### 3.1 Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework guiding this study is Critical Discourse analysis.

It is not a theory in the common sense of the words, but ‘there is no guiding theoretical viewpoint that is used consistently within CDA’ (Michael Mayer as cited by Wodak & Wiess, 2003:06). Critical Discourse Analysis thus, can be called ‘A theoretical basic structure capable of reconciling sociological and linguistic categories’ (p.6). Further, Van Dijk (1993:352) calls CDA a discipline that ‘studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted in text and talk in the social and political context.’ The research also draws on insights from Robin Lakoff’s work ‘*Language, Gender and Politics: Putting Women and “Power” in the same sentence.*’ (Mayerhoff & Holmes (2003:161-177).

### 3.2 Research Method

Critical Discourse Analysis, which is both a theory as well as a method of research, has been employed in this research to analyse the stories. The researchers have made use of qualitative methodology in order to carry out this research. The data for present research is two texts, and critical discourse analysis of the texts has been carried out in order to establish a link between discourse as a social practice and construction of gender identities. Since critical discourse analysis has little concern with the quantitative representation of facts and is more concerned with the social and cultural practices, qualitative research methodology is suitable to carry out this kind of research.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The source of the data for the present research article is Khalique and Kohili’s jointly written book titled *Unfinished Histories*. The specific source is his stories titled *Roshanara Bagh, Nizamabad, Hounslow, Wembley and Sing me a Poem In Urdu*. The data has been collected by the researchers from the said short stories. All the data is in form of words and phrases, and certain situations have been discussed. The researchers themselves were the key-human-instrument of the data collection.

### Data Analysis

#### 4.1 Summary of the First Story

The first story selected for analysis is “*Roshanara Bagh, Nazimabad, Hounslow, Wembley*”. Shaikh Raziuddin who lives on London is visited by Wajahat Muneer who has brought some gifts for him from Pakistan. They are having a discussion on the ideology of Pakistan and different other issues when they are joined by their neighbor Narinder Kumar Verma. Other characters represented in the story are Saeeda, Nafisa (Shaikh Sahib’s wife) and Verma’s daughter.

#### 4.2 Analysis

The story starts with an account of Wajahat Munir who has come from Pakistan and has been asked by his mother to give *halwa* and a letter. The representation of people belonging to different genders differently in discourse, which is the aim of the present study, needs to be highlighted here. For this purpose, a comparative analysis of characterization of males and females is being made. First of all, the females are given less space in the narration, and greater focus of the discussion is males.

As the story starts, Saeeda, who is Wajahat’s host, opts to stay home instead of accompanying him to visits because of her being female. Instead, she assigns this task of guiding Wajahat to Hussain, a male. When they reach Shaikh Sahib’s home, he meets them with ‘*jolting hugs*’ and ‘*loud Assalam o alaikum*’. On the other hand, his wife is ‘*a little more cautious*’.

Shaikh Raziuddin is said to be having a ‘*tall beard*’ and a ‘*grave voice*’. When he is talked about by the writer, his organizational association

‘*He belonged to Punjabi Saudagaran-e-Delhi, a well to do trading company*’

and the profession ‘*banker*’ are specially mentioned, whereas on the other hand, there is no mention of his wife as to what she does. When the writer talks about Shaikh Raziuddin, he mentions his literary taste and academic skills, as he says, that he

‘*was very fond of Akbar Allahabadi’s and Zamir Jaffry’s poetry, had a good command over English*’.

His introduction further includes a mention of his ideological association with the cause of Islam, Kashmir, Pakistan, Urdu. As the writer states,

he is *'The protector of the ideology of Pakistan, promoter of Urdu language, and felt personally responsible for finding a good match for every boy and girl in the vicinity.'*

He uses the pronoun 'we' when he mentions the creation of Pakistan. Then he mentions that he has written some books so that his children could stay in touch with Urdu and Pakistani and Islamic roots. During the absence of Verma, when he left for a brief period to listen to a call, they again talk about the political and ideological issues and as Shaikh Raziuddin says,

The next male character talked about in the story is Verma. In his introduction again, the writer mentions his political association as he says that *'He was an ardent supporter of BJP.'* He is said to be talking about the people killed in their Kargil war with Pakistan as martyrs, and Shaikh Razi criticizes says that his blood boils when he calls them martyrs.

After seeing a comparison of the representation of males and females in the above characterization, we now move back to Nafisa, Shaikh Razi's wife to see how males and females are represented differently with different characteristics, through discourse. The writer mentions her

looking *'elegant in her embroidered kurtas'*

and her quality which is specially mentioned is that of *cook*. She is shown to be complaining of the household workload as she has to do all the work herself. One small mention is of Verma's daughter who comes to give him his cell as there is a call from Delhi.

As critical Discourse Analysis studies the relationship of language and discourse with the social practices, the construction of gender can be seen in that light. Some questions a Critical Discourse Analyst can ask himself are (i) how a discourse is constructed by society? (ii) how much space in discourse is given to whom? How identities are constructed in social interaction through discourse? and finally, from Feminist Post-structuralist Discourse Analysis perspective, how the society constructs genders in discourse? Social practices revolve around the politics of dominance and subordination. Societies create their own axis of division such as gender, race, ethnicity, class and sect, which become axis of power and hence axis of inequality. Those assigned superior role and superior identity are able to gain dominance over the other and those who are given weaker identities are left behind in the struggle of power and are subordinated by those who wield power. This power is not coercive, but, as is the basic premise of the present study, discursive and implicit.

The above article seems to be constructing gender discursively through the discourse the writer has made use of. The identities of males are represented as very strong, vigorous and as holding all power in terms of their will to fight for ideology and dedicate themselves for the greater goals in life. Females on the other hand, are shown as a subject of their will, ready to work all the time in the kitchen, and to serve food to the males who are busy in political and ideological talk, something that they are shown to be worthy of. Females are not worthy of any grand venture of mind and soul. They are merely 'body' that is there to serve the men folk. The identity of Shaikh Raziuddin as a political and ideological worker and fighter and the personality of Verma as ardent supporter are examples of discursive distribution of roles to different genders. Men are discursively said to be suited for dealing with the political and ideological issues, the realms that are the sources of power production. The hold of men on the institutions of power is possible only when women in the society are also given a specific role or role, the roles that could keep her away from all institutions of power such as politics and ideology. They are shown as soft, weak and mild creatures, whose primary business is to 'look elegant' as did Nafisa. They are discursively told by the society to stay at home and do not keep visiting people, as can be seen in Saeeda's case, and to be cautious in talk, serve food to the guests and be an expert cook, as in Nafisa's case. They are also expected to take care of the other greater businesses than men are doing in society and help and facilitate them. No major role is to be assigned to women so that they could be kept away from power, which, as the society prescribes, does not suit them.

The employment of tools such as discourse in order to construct men's identity as physically and intellectually strong, and women's identity as someone who can only do household work can be taken as one discursive measure that the society uses to give dominance to one gender and push the other in the ditches of subordination. Discursive structures in society do not allow certain gender to take role for itself that the society has assigns to the other gender. Hence, men must be at the helm of affairs, of not only the family, but the locality, and above all the whole society.

Risman (2004:429) calls gender a social structure. By this she means that it is institutionalized structure of social fabric, which just like other institutionalized social structures such as economy and politics, is deeply rooted in society. Members of a society see the roles of gender in the same light as they are institutionalized by the society through discourse. The discourse of the powerful, that is male gender, prevails and gives only certain identities to certain genders. Hence, men in the story under discussion are shown as strong, professionally oriented, politically and ideologically committed and the wielders of power through establishing norms of the society. As Raziuddin says in the story that

girls 'should compulsorily cover their heads',

It shows how men are given the role by the society to direct female behavior. The distribution of power in the light of roles performed by different genders is done in a society implicitly by constructing discourse which serves the purpose of the strong. It not only assigns identity to different genders differently, but also makes one gender stronger than the other.

As Lakoff has also discussed, the female gender is said to be different because of her different behavior than men. But he says that it is not the behavior that makes a gender appear different from the other, but the distribution of power in society that puts each gender in different social role. Due to the requirements of these discursively assigned roles they are forced to behave differently in social interaction.

To continue this discussion, let us discuss Pakistani Society to establish a link of the text, and hence the gender related discourse of Harris Kahliq's story under discussion. Pakistan is a patriarchal society in the sense as conveyed by Lloyed in the Literature Review portion. Men are the bread earners as well as the setters of norms of civilization. They are the ones to control female behavior in their families and the society at large. Women are normally reduced to household assignments such as cooking in the kitchen, washing clothes of all family members including men and children. They are not encouraged to compete with men in professional life. Although the trends are changing with the advent of modern education and the emerging cultural changes, yet men are the dominant gender and are assigned the roles of all powerful beings with the expectations of the society attached more to their strength and pride than to women. The resources of hegemonic control such as police, industry, army, and other institutions such as politics and economy are still dominated by men folk. In such a scenario, only the discourse of the powerful is to prevail. And the females, who are dominated and subordinated by the permeation of the stereotypical notions associated with her gender, are reduced to nominal existence. The stereotyping is normally done through discourse, and this story is the best example of gender stereotyping in which men and women are shown to have different behavior in interaction and in normal family life due to different nature of their responsibilities, which again are discursively assigned.

Saeeda and Nafisa are true representative women of Pakistani society who are aware of the roles assigned to female gender. The gendered stereotyping, as Lakoff (p.162) uses the term, is visible in their acts as Saeeda prefers to stay at home instead of visiting people. She assigns Hassan the task of being a local guide for Wajahat. Nafisa is busy in cooking, and talks about the traditions to be followed when the Muslim and Indian families come in mutual interaction, as she tells Verma that she took care of not stirring vegetable with the same spoon with which she cooked meat because she knows that he is a Hindu and would not like that as they do not eat meat. She is a guardian of the family values, whereas the males are the guardians of ideologies and identities.

### **4.3. Summary of the Second Story**

The second story selected for analysis is *Sing me a Poem in Urdu*. It starts with the description of background of a Pakistani expatriate Rafiq Sardar whose parents belonged to Gurdaspur in India but later migrated to Lahore at the time of partition. He is joined by a Pakistani and some Indian friends in a club where all of them share their views about Urdu and Hindi. In the course of discussion, Rafiq shares his experience of interaction with Urdu and Punjabi and the subsequent identity crisis emerging on the basis of languages he spoke. Nalini is the only female character present in the talk. There is a mention of some other females although they do not appear in the discussion going on.

### **4.4. Analysis of the Second Story**

The story starts with the introduction to Rafiq's background and the readers are told that he belonged to a family in which Urdu was spoken as a mother tongue and Punjabi was spoken by the members just because they needed to interact with the community.

As for the representation of male and female characters, we see that most of the talk is dominated by the males and their only female friend either stays quiet during the discussion which is supposed to be “scholarly”, a realm in which ‘women’ are shown to be lacking interest and understanding, or, when she speaks, she is presented as an outsider who lacks intellectual understanding of the scholarly debate about languages that is going on in the story. As discussed earlier, one can see the mirror of a society through its writings, the same can also be seen in this story in which one can easily have a comparison of the male and female roles as assigned to them by the society and are so reflected by the writers. The male characters are shown to be involved in the roles that demand more intellectual strength and demand managing skills whereas women are shown to be engaged in the lesser demanding roles, both management wise and intellectually.

When talking about Rafiq’s family, we see that the first female character, which is Rafiq’s sister, has been mentioned in the context of her marriage. The second sister, who is teacher, is also talked about in the same context. She is widow and lives with her brother in law. His brother is a banker, and his brother’s son “*knew half of Iqbal’s poetry by heart*”, a characteristic which he shares with his uncle Rafiq. Rafiq himself is a bachelor who has spent most of his life in traveling and learning languages and is now working as a broadcaster. His command of Urdu language and literature as well as broadcasting is described as “*phenomenal*”. Wife of Rafiq’s brother is again a teacher. The next prominent character in the story is Balvinder who is a Punjabi poet from Amritsar. Just like Rafiq, he too has a great taste for Ghalib’s poetry and

*“recited a quarter o Ghalib’s Divan on seeing him”* at the reception of the club.

Now let us compare the representation of Nalini who becomes “*apologetic*” for not being able to understand much of Ghalib’s poetry and blames it on her southern descent. In the later lines, Kumar rejects her excuse by saying that

*“I also come from south and can easily make out the difference when Pakistanis speak.”*

This puts Nalini at a disadvantage when she is seen to be someone who genuinely lacks understanding of literature just because it is not her area of strength in terms of intellectual ability, the one that is to be found only in men, and is making different excuses. When Kumar has made his point, Nalini again tries to take the discussion forward and again exposes her intellectual weakness as she utters a “*dumb comment*” which would make no sense, and she herself realizes her mistake. She says

*“Pakistani Language is a mix of Urdu and Hindi. I don’t know why they speak like that”.*

Again, this point is highlighted in the following text when the description of Rafiq’s ability to have detailed discussions on different languages is presented in contrast with Nalini’s inability. The writer says that

*“Language was Rafiq’s forte”* and that *“He could indulge into a monologue now without feeling guilty”.*

This obviously is a contrast depicted by the writer between the female and the males, and the portrayal shows females possessing lesser ability to opine in the matters falling under the intellectual arena.

Before the story closes, there is a mention of another female character Jharna Mukharjee who was an “*elegant Bengali housewife*” whose manner of talking to Hussain is described as “*flirtatious*”. And the last female talked about in the story is Meenakshi ji (“ji” is normally used in Indian language to show respect to somebody) who is Kumar’s aunt living in Scotland. When Kumar asks whether he can write Urdu as well as Hindi in his CV as the languages he knows, Hussain laughs and says

*“Meenakshi ji will never ask you to read a poem in Urdu”.*

The following narration reveals that when Hussain went to see Meenakshi ji, she had said to him “*Sing me a poem in Urdu and I will make you some mulled wine*” despite that she knew little Urdu.

All the above details regarding representation of male and female characters in the discussion reveal the thread of discourse as knit by the writers in a way that constructs the kind of reality suitable for one of the social groups. Whether the construction of such kind of reality suits or does not suit all groups is a question to look into. Discourse in a society runs parallel to politics in the sense that the individuals or groups using language use it to represent reality in a way that suits their purpose the most. Meanings are constructed in a way that brings one group in a society in charge of the affairs whereas pushing the other groups on the margins or in the background.

Construction of gender through assigning only specific roles to specific genders is one good example of what is called by Holquist (1983) and Shapiro (1988) (as cited by Wenden, 2005) ‘politics of representation’. The same is evident in the above discussion of male and female roles where females are shown to be more interested in the domestic side of life, having more to do with households and romance than intellectual aspect of life, which is presented as men’s domain, who are thought of as intellectually higher than their female counterparts.

### 5. Conclusion

This article has tried to highlight the issue of gender construction in society through written discourse. The short story by Khalique and Kohli, English writers of Pakistani and Indian origin respectively, were selected for this purpose to identify the element of social construction of gender. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis as a general methodology, this research has tried to explore the relationship between discourse and social practices pertaining to construction of gender identity. In the analysis of the data collected in form of words, phrases and representative sentences, it has been found out that the traditional norms of society related to gender identities are perpetuated through the discourse. Discourse, hence, can be seen as a means by which not only the identities of individuals are shaped as belonging to different social categories such as gender, class, race, ethnicity and cast or sect, but on the basis of these overlapping multiple identities, form the identity of the society in general.

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