

Naming Practices and Insult Terms: A Study of Women Representation in Ali's *The Stone Woman*

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Abstract

The present study critically analyzes Tariq Ali's novel The Stone Woman (2000) to find out how he has represented women through different linguistic choices. The data, in the form of words and phrases, have been analyzed by applying Mills's (2008) theory of sexism. For the contextual discussion the study is guided by Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) theory of context of situation. Following a descriptive qualitative research method, the data are collected through close reading and note taking techniques and categorized based on the identified patterns. With a focus on two aspects of language use i.e., naming and insult terms for women the study has found that Ali (2000) has presented women in a derogatory way. The study has found the cases where women are not introduced through their names. Moreover, women are also semantically derogated when insult terms are used to represent them with reference to their ugliness, stupidity, immorality, and sexuality. The use of such language which represents women negatively shows a biased attitude of the writer towards gender depiction.

Keywords: *Insult Terms, Naming, Sexist Language, Overt Sexism, Women Representation.*

1. Introduction

The relationship between language and gender has been an interesting field as language plays an important role in shaping the gender ideology. Other than several factors resulting in a change in language use, gender plays a pivotal role in the recurrent changings and trends emerging in the use of language in several discourses. These gender differences prevalent in our society result in the modifications and changes in language practices (Alzharani, 2019). The discriminative use of language furthers the derogation and marginalization of one or the other gender resulting in sexism. This sexism i.e., the discrimination based on one's sex plays a crucial role in cementing or challenging certain belief about women and men in the society. One such form of sexism critically opposed by feminists is the form where women are presents discriminatively in literature. Analyzing such texts to examine the use of sexist language is important to highlight the ways the women are discriminated in a linguistic landscape. Mills (2008) came up with several ways to identify such elements which can come under sexist language. She discusses how the use of generic nouns and pronouns, paired terms for men and women, naming and can be sexist. For a neat division, she divides the sexist language into two types: overt sexism and indirect sexism. The sexist attitude of the language users can be observed from daily life conversations to higher forms of the literature. Novel is one of these forms which portray both the women and the men while mirroring the society and its related issues. The issue of gender is propagated through the use of language in such texts. The present study analyzed such a use of language in a novel *The Stone Woman* written by Tariq Ali. Narrated by a female character, Nilofer, the novel describes the history and the present ongoing events in the lives of Pashas. The language used in this novel

is interesting to note as several sexist elements are found in this novel. With this aim the study delimits its scope to an analysis of language use at word level by covering two main aspects: naming and insult terms used for women with reference to how certain terms are used to portray women negatively.

2. Literature Review

The writers in their writings intentionally or unintentionally exclude a gender which results in biased use of language. The analysis of such a language use has been carried out since years where it is observed that these are the females who are mostly discriminated. The use of sexist language in different genres of literature has been analyzed. For example, the language used in poems, short stories, movies, and novels has been analyzed from different perspectives by several researchers (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amir and Mehmood, 2018; Anwar et al., 2022; Arikan, 2016; Ashimbuli, 2022; Darweesh & Ghayadh, 2016; Denopra, 2012; Qayyum et al., 2019; Kayani et al., 2023; Kudus, 2008; Malik et al., 2013; Mumtaz, 2022; Sher & Saleem, 2023; Usman et al., 2023).

Based on changing contexts the words once used in a sexist way may not be regarded as sexist by the critics and analysts and same is the case with neutral words. According to Mills (2008), the sexist attitude attached to certain grammatical choices and words throughout the history may not be interpreted as sexist in some cases.

Hence, dealing with sexism as a form of gender exploitation one needs to be conscious in the developing gender awareness (Budidarma et al., 2023). Sexism can be divided into two types based on its identification. Firstly, overt or direct sexism is that form of sexism which is easily discernable. The choice of linguistic items in this case is influenced by gender stereotypes resulting in a discriminative attitude. This type of sexism according to Mills (2008) is identified through a number of linguistic markers and linguistic features. Such a sexist use of language is biased as it discriminates women by designating them to an inactive and lower position.

The use of suffixes like “-ess” and “-ette” when added to masculine terms to refer to females result in their derogation. Such feminine suffixes are diminutive in nature and give a concept of smallness to women. As Bravo (2009) demonstrates how females are described through diminutive “-ess” in “waitress” where it is derived from masculine term “waiter”. But some non-sexist terms can also give a sexist meaning depending upon the context of their usage as claimed by Ehrlich and King (1994). For example, the title used to address a woman “Ms” becomes sexist when context describes it as a third term to refer to women. Other than these, the use of masculine nouns and pronouns inclusive of both the genders is also sexist as it sets the masculine term as the norm. Naming practices have also been criticized for being male –centered. No names given to women or names derived from masculine names used for women come under criticism by the feminists. This exclusion of women from naming and defining practices was resisted. Moreover, the terms used to refer women carrying negative connotations also result in gender discrimination even when these are apparently used in a positive sense (Mills, 2008).

Insult terms used for women are another element that is used to portray women through a sexualized position as claimed by Mills (2008). According to James (1998), the sexist use of language also results in the semantic derogation of women. The neutral terms carrying positive meanings once used for women become sexist with the passage of time. The terms associated with women undergo a change in meaning i.e., with negative connotation. The passive portrayal of women especially in the sexual scenes is also projected through transitivity choices in any text (Wareing, 1994). The transitivity analysis with a focus on 'who does what to whom' depicts female characters according to Burton (1982) as being “acted upon”. Such a depiction presents them

passive and submissive persons. Other than these aspects, women are also degraded through the use of indirect reported speech and sexist jokes.

3. Data and Methods

The research design adopted for the present study is qualitative. This method allows the researchers to interpret the content of a text subjectively by discussing the themes and patterns through a coding system as claimed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Guided by Mills' s (2008) concept of sexism, the present study looks into the use of direct sexism. For the purpose, linguistic choices in the form of words related to naming and insult terms are investigated to find out the attitude of the writer towards women representation. However, the usage of these words is analyzed within the sentences to develop an understanding through context and cotext both. The data in the form of words and sentences have been collected from a novel *The Stone Woman* written by Tariq Ali, a famous Pakistani-British writer. For data collection, the researcher followed a systematic procedure. After finalizing research objectives and deciding about which linguistic items are to be analyzed, a thorough study of the novel was carried out by close reading process. During this process the linguistic items coming under the scope of this study were highlighted. These highlighted items were then arranged according to the set levels in relation to the emerging themes. The codes and categories generated through this process proved helpful in drawing inferences while analyzing the data. Mills' s (2008) ideas related to language and sexism were utilized to discern the way the gender i.e., female is represented in the selected text. The data have been analyzed in the form of words by quoting the examples taken from the text.

4. Results and Discussion

To analyze the sexist use of language, the present study investigates the representation of women through linguistic elements like naming and insult terms. For a neat and logical understanding of these aspects, the following sections discuss each element with the collected examples from the text.

4.1. Naming Practices and Representation of Women:

Names are a token of identity and describing the characters without giving their names is a technique through which these characters are made invisible. This practice is visible in some cases in the description of women characters in *The Stone Woman* where they are not given any name. For example, the character of Salman is introduced in the text as Nilofer's brother while his wife is not given any name. Instead, she is introduced as "*a local woman*", "*an Egyptian woman*" and "*a beautiful Copt*" as given in following excerpt [1] taken from TSW:

[1]. *He informed us that he had stayed with Salman, who was successfully trading in diamonds and married to a local woman [...] an Egyptian woman in Alexandria, "a beautiful Copt" in Uncle Kemal's words (TSW, p. 21-22)*

It is through the female narrator of the story, Nilofer, that Ali (2000) describes the life stories of her ancestors and siblings. For example, while discussing about her uncle's intentions the text introduces her uncle with his personal name as "*Mahmut Pasha*" but the lady he wants to marry is introduced in relation to the Sultan as "*a niece of the Sultan*" (example [2])

[2]. *Mahmut Pasha manufactured untruths because he intended to marry a niece of the Sultan and thought it prudent to improve his pedigree [...] he was permitted to marry a niece of the Sultan (TSW, p. 27)*

Such a description where the personal name of the female is not given, and she is introduced as the niece of the Sultan is sexist as it presents the woman not through her individual identity but through a man. Likewise in example [3] a female character is introduced in relation to her husband and her nephew as in "*his wife*" and "*my aunt*" respectively. Such a description where "aunt

+name” pattern has been suitable to introduce the woman with her own identity, her introduction in relation to men relegates her position to a minor character. Example [4] is another instance where the woman is described in relation to her husband as “*his new wife*”.

[3]. *I had made it very clear to **his wife, my aunt**, that I was not in the least interested in any of her daughters as a possible wife* (TSW, p.137).

[4] *In the conflicts that followed her father always backed **his new wife** against his children* (TSW, p. 30).

[5] *She was **a distant cousin** and had always showered me with affection* (TSW, p. 21).

Other than these descriptions where women are introduced as nieces, aunts, wives and cousin, the texts also describe them as the mistresses of the men as given in examples [6] & [7] where the women are described as “*his mistress*” and “*his Chinese mistress*” respectively.

[6] *She became **his mistress*** (TSW, p.30).

[7] *[...] an English plantation owner and **his Chinese mistress**, who lived in the British colony of Malay* (TSW, p.139).

These descriptions where women are not given any name but introduced in relation to men relegates the status of the women. Another way in which women are described other than their personal names is by equating them to the mythical characters. For example, in example [8] a female is introduced as “*a fairy princess*” which shows how Ali (2000) has introduced these female characters through her beauty though with negative connotations as seen in the context of the story. Likewise, the character of Mahmut Pasha is described as an immoral character who takes the kitchen maid by force. This kitchen maid is not given any name. Instead, she is described as “*a Circassian serving wench*” (example [9])

[8] *I went there one day straight from the beach and **a fairy princess** opened the door* (TSW, p.138).

[9] *He responded characteristically by lifting **a Circassian serving wench** from the kitchen and transporting her to a chamber near his bedroom* (TSW, p.31).

The text further narrates how Nilofer describes this kitchen maid as “*the Circassian*” (example [10]) by highlighting that her real name was never mentioned. Such a description where no one bothers to know the real name of the woman, instead the focus is on her sexuality and the physical pleasures that she provides to men relegates her position. Moreover, example [10] highlights the biased attitude of Ali (2000) towards women where he describes this woman as “illiterate”, “a young girl” and “kitchen maid”. She is also described as a commodity who had been “*bought for the household from a passing trader in Istanbul*” as given in the same example.

[10] ***The Circassian**—to this day I have never heard her real name mentioned—was illiterate. As a young girl, she had been bought for the household from a passing trader in Istanbul and trained as a kitchen maid* (TSW, p.31).

Another interesting aspect in relation to women’s naming is that men are introduced by their names earlier in the text while women when introduced through their names are introduced only after being described in relation to men first. For example, a female character “my mother” is described in the initial pages of the novel but it is on the 26th page of the novel that her name is given as reproduced in extract [11]:

[11] *My mother, **Sara**, tightened the shawl around her* (TSW, p. 26).

4.2. Insult Terms for Women

The insult terms used to refer to women lubricate the functioning of patriarchy through reinforcing gender stereotypes. Different insult terms like “bitch”, “slut” and “whore” are used

when referring to the loose and immoral character of the women. Other than these terms used in relation to the sexual experiences, several possibilities of insult terms are also used in different cultures and different societies. The use of language to insult a particular gender is strategic where these are mostly observed to degrade women to build and advocate traditional beliefs about the females in a patriarchal setup. Felmlee et al. (2020) claim that societies set some standards and insult terms are used to accuse the females when they are shown to be falling short of these standards. The women can be degraded when they are insulted for not satisfying the standards related to physical appearance and beauty, intellect, stability, sexual experience, or their age. The novel under study provides some examples which can be considered as gendered insults wherein Ali (2000) describes the females derogatively. For example, the male is shown to be paying least interest in women even as “*engines for procreation*” as reproduced in example [12]. Such a description relegates the women to the creatures whose sole purpose is to give birth to children.

[12] *It was my married half-sister, Zeynep, who told her that the cousin for whom she had intended me was not interested in women at all, not even as **engines for procreation*** (TSW, p. 3).

Likewise, comparing the woman with “*a female elephant*” based on her being bigger and slower because of her pregnancy relegates the women again where they are insulted for their clumsiness and laziness.

[13] There you will only get bigger and slower, like **a female elephant** about to give birth (TSW, p. 57).

Moreover, the description of the female in an insulting way where she is called “*the fat ugly woman*” example [14] hints at the biased attitude of Ali (2000). This insulting attitude of the writer towards the depiction of women is also visible in the descriptions of Kamal Pasha’s wife and his three daughters in relation to their physical appearance and their mental stability. The daughters are introduced in relation to their ugliness (example [15] & example [16]). They are also criticized for their shape and size in example [17] which they have inherited from their mother who is described as an ugly woman. Other than being insulted for their ugliness, the females are also insulted for their foolishness where each daughter is described as “*more stupid than the other*” in example [16] taken from the text. Likewise, the stupidity of the daughters is said to be annoying for their father as given in example [17]. The stupidity of the daughters is ascribed to the stupidity of their mother. Likewise in example [18], Nilofer is describing how her husband considered her “*foolish*” and “*head strong*”. The descriptions like these where women are portrayed either ugly or foolish work to eclipse their characters in an insulting way.

[14] I suppose **the fat ugly woman** must have been his wife and the other one her friend or sister (TSW, p. 117).

[15] He could divorce his wife, but he would still have to maintain her and **his ugly daughters**, (TSW, p. 202)

[16] He had three daughters, **each uglier and more stupid** than the other, (TSW, p. 211)

[17] What is really annoying is that all my daughters have inherited their mother’s **shape, size and stupidity** (TSW, p. 153)

[18] [...]my husband, convinced me that I was being **foolish and headstrong** (TSW, p. 11).

Other than these examples, the use of linguistic item “*the old crone*” (example 19) becomes an insulting term when analyzed in the situational context. The situation described shows how an old woman is such an evil natured ugly woman that she feels pleasure in other people’s disappointment.

[18] **The old crone** must have seen the disappointment on my face, for it registered a degree of pleasure on her own (TSW, p. 140)

Other than their insulting presentation through their ugliness, evil nature and stupidity, the women are also described as immoral and debased creatures. In example [19] Mariam, a female character is described as a “*loose and crazy woman*”.

[19] *Marco’s wife referred to Mariam as a loose and crazy woman* (TSW, p. 150).

Women are also presented as of immoral and debased nature when they are described in relation to their sexuality and availability as sex workers. As given in Example [20] the phrase “*this particular concubine*” refers to a maid who is engaged in a sexual relationship with Sabiha’s husband. Likewise, the propagation of ideology that how marrying to the courtesans is disapproved by one’s family members presents such women in an insulting way, but the man is portrayed as a brave and independent character who can take his own decisions. For example, the use of the phrase “*a Japanese courtesan*” in extract [21] is important to note where the woman is described through her debased profession instead of being introduced through her name. Likewise, Salman’s mother is discussed as “*a prostitute*” (example 22) who was married to a nobleman but after years when her identity is revealed she is degraded.

[20] *Why did Sabiha care so much about this particular concubine?* (TSW, p. 31).

[21] *It was said that her father’s decision to marry a Japanese courtesan had upset her greatly* (TSW, p. 30).

[22] *Hasan Baba, are you telling me that Salman’s mother was a prostitute?* (TSW, p. 30).

The data have given examples where women even when they are forced and harassed sexually by their masters are called their “*keep*” as shown in data given in examples 23 & 24. This description relegates the status of a woman to a thing or a commodity that can be possessed by the man as his keep.

[23] *She told me she had no desire to become a rich man’s keep* (TSW, p. 84).

[24] *She who was the wife of a prince has become the keep of a carpenter* (TSW, p. 152).

Another insult term used to refer to woman in TSW is the term “*procuress*” as shown in excerpt [25]. The text while narrating how the female maids are used by the masters in the house of the Pasha family narrates the status of the oldest maid servant who was once the favorite one during her youth time. But now she is old and of no use and this humiliation is felt by her when she is serving as “*Pasha’s procuress*”. She acts like a procuress i.e., she procures the young maids for her master now.

[25] *Now she had been reduced to the status of the Pasha’s procuress, but this had made her warm-hearted. I think, deep in herself, she understood the humiliation* (TSW, p. 36)

Another example which is analyzed as an insulting remark for the women is the use of “*a drunken prostitute*”. Example [26] can be examined to see the biased attitude of the writer where he compares the Ottoman empire with a prostitute who is lying with her legs wide open. Such a description where an empire is compared with a woman (and not a man or any other thing) of the profession further relegates her position and presents her negatively.

[26] Your Ottoman empire is like **a drunken prostitute**, lying with her legs wide open, neither knowing nor caring who will take her next (TSW, p. 24).

5. Conclusion

Based on the discussion and analysis of the data for the selected aspects, it can be concluded that Ali (2000) has used sexist language to represent women in his work *The Stone Woman*. The search for how the unnamed women are described in the text has resulted in two patterns emerging from the text. Firstly, women are described through their beauty as “a beautiful copt” and “a fairy princess” where they are not introduced by their names. Secondly, they are introduced in relation to their relationships with men in their lives like they are introduced as nieces, wives, aunts, cousins, and mistresses. Such a description where women are not given any personal name results in their less visibility and hence, less important in the description of the events. The second aspect analyzed by the researcher was the use of insult terms for women. The analysis has shown that women are degraded through different insult terms where their clumsiness, foolishness, ugliness, and sexuality are highlighted to relegate them to lower status. They are described as sexual beings in possession of the men. Overall, the researcher has found that gender discrimination against women persists through the sexist use of language in the selected texts. The researcher urges the need to conduct more and more studies to analyze such type of texts to highlight various other types of sexism resulting in gender discrimination.

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