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Amitava Kumar, Shiv K. Kumar
Girish Karnad, Bapsi Sidhwa
Michael Ondaatje, Nadine Gordimer
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Interpretation of Gender in Postcolonial Literary Text: Case of a Malaysian writer

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Abstract

Most written products that are considered creative, particularly in terms of plots, contexts and characters are created based on the writers' observations on the reality of their surroundings. It has been observed that members of most cultures and societies have certain perceptions or stereotype views of the behaviour of men and women regarding styles in dressing, activities, career and social roles in society. Writers rely on these usually stereotyped and generalized observations and portray these traits in their writing especially in their characters in order to make their written products believable, real and effective.

This study sets out to examine the effect of gender differences as depicted in a novel, Salina, written by a Malaysian. The contention of this paper is: 1) to analyse the stereotyped characteristics of male and female speech styles as portrayed by the non-native writer in the Malaysian novel; 2) to examine whether the western perceptions of gender differences in speech styles exist in the Malaysian literature.

The linguistic features that are used for basis of analysis include superpolite forms, and hedges. The analysis is focused on the use of these features by the characters in the novel. The findings of the study suggest that there are gender differences in the use of these features and that the western perceptions of the gendered speech styles are not reflected in the Malaysian society.
There have been numerous hypotheses formed on the relationship between people’s general expectations and beliefs about men and women and the behaviour of members of these groups (Worrell; Taylor and Hall). In most societies, men and women see themselves as conforming to the typical behaviour of their sex group. This might involve characteristics of gender-biased costumes, activities, areas of expertise and social roles in society as well as differences in ways of communicating.

Our constructs of masculinity and femininity influence our reactions to men and women. The moment we have categorized someone as a male or female, ‘our gender constructs come into play, providing us with judgmental standards against which to compare a person in forming impression about their masculinity and femininity’ (Smith, 28). Thus, in a particular society, men and women conform to the accepted and desired characteristics, as society’s expectations and perceptions shape their behaviour in that society.

Various researchers have pointed out that there are differences in ways of communicating between male and female (Lakoff, 1975; Spender; Coates, 1986; Tannen, 1991; Jariah Mohd. Jan). However, most empirically based studies of differences between male and female speech styles have been dealt with in the naturally occurring or ‘real life’ conversations in the public sphere (Fishman, 1983; Coates, 1986; Jariah Mohd. Jan, 1999). There has been very little evidence of studies on gender conversational styles in writing particularly in literary texts such as in novels, short stories, plays or screenplays. This study intends to examine this area of male and female conversational styles with a focus on speech crafted by a Malaysian author in literary text.

Most written products that are considered creative, particularly in terms of plots, contexts and characters are created based on the writers’ observations on the reality of their surroundings. It has been observed that members of most cultures and societies have certain perceptions or stereotype views of the behaviour of men and women regarding styles in dressing, activities, career and social roles in society. Writers rely on these usually stereo-
typed and generalized observations and portray these traits in their writing especially in their characters in order to make their written products believable and effective. For instance, the stereotype view of gender characteristics in the society is portrayed by the differences in ways of communicating between men and women. As such, the speech styles that are associated with either male or female are often crafted by writers in their stories to make their fictitious characters seem real and acceptable to the readers.

This paper attempts to examine the effect of gender differences as depicted in a selected novel written by a Malaysian literary writer. The contention of this paper is: 1) to analyse the stereotyped characteristics of male and female speech styles as portrayed by the non-native writer in the Malaysian novel; 2) to examine whether the western perceptions of gender differences in speech styles exist in the Malaysian literature.

In any society, men and women vary in the degree to which they see themselves as conforming to gendered typical norms of personality and behaviour. The cultural norms that are regulated in a society according to the social desire of that society itself is referred to as behavioural construct. These norms may include social roles in society, occupation, and language use.

Frank and Ashen note that society plays an important part in the social function of the language; that language differences are due in part to our social expectations. For instance, since most of behavioural constructs in terms of cultural norms are regulated in accordance with the values of men, we tend to respond to boys and girls differently. Our level of acceptance of their behaviour may differ. For example, it is generally accepted for boys and men to be dominant, aggressive, independent and objective. Girls and women, on the other hand, are more likely to be accepted as submissive, dependent, passive and subjective. As such, women are expected to ‘act as a lady’ and ‘respect those around you’ reflects the role of inferior status, that is women, being expected to respect their superior who are men. These behavioural constructs have empowered men while women are considered as one-step below men or rather a secondary status in
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