
Exploring Gender Bias in the Elementary Level English Textbooks Published by the Punjab Board: A Case Study

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Abstract

A mixed-method research design has been employed to investigate the frequency of different kinds of feminine erasure in the textbooks published by the Punjab Textbook Board in 2022. Working with English books for three elementary grades of Class 6, 7 and 8, data was analysed with two techniques. The first of them was textual analysis, and in the second, we used the literature method used in (Long, 2022). The findings have revealed that there are instances of every kind of feminine erasure patterns, though they show variance in different textbooks. Moreover, the results also showed close convergence with the results of the studies reported in the previous literature.

Keywords: English Textbooks Feminine Erasure

Introduction

Women have been an easy target of gender bias in several traditional societies. They have usually been shown as a homogenous group whose members share disadvantaged stereotypical social roles, such as a mother, a sister, and a wife. The socio-economic mobility brought by the industrial revolution and the post- industrial globalization has led women to play significantly more powerful political and economic roles. Consequently, their increased presence in social space has resulted in raising the issue of gender bias as a tool of women erasure. Scholars cannot overlook the role of textbooks in perpetuating injustice and lack of recognition of their (women) central role in society. Unarguably, textbooks not only act as teaching and learning materials for content learning but also propagate hidden ideology that provides fundamental lens to understand life and social relations in the world (Arthur, 2010; Kloos, 2021)). Moreover, they become one of the most important tool of naturalizing gender roles and establishing gender concepts. Learners' exposure to gendered roles during their elementary classes has a formidably high and subtle impact on the formation of their system of morality and worldview (Pham & Thuy, 2021). The United Nations Population Fund Agency (UNFPA) reported that the rank of Pakistan in gender equality is the second lowest when seen in global context. It is a matter of serious concern, and any potentially positive change can start with immediate improvement in young learners' gender awareness. The new awareness is not only necessary for the reduction or elimination of gender bias against women but also conducive to the growth of positive attitude towards social gendering processes that are more than often in flux (Jahangeer, 2020). Western scholars' work in the earliest period of theorizing gender bias against women in different textbooks starting in 1940s was mainly characterized by the anthropological concerns (Pham & Thuy, 2021). Later, they shifted towards adopting the perspective of social psychology, and soon feminists started challenging the stereotypical roles to women for which textbooks had a critical role. However, after only two decades, researchers in other countries also showed increasing interest in uncovering the hidden ideologies of imbalanced power relations between men and women. The studies focusing on the role of education were primarily hooked on a wide range of teaching and learning materials used in schools and colleges where they attempted to problematize gender discrimination. The research conducted between 1970 and 1990 studied science, history, geography and English textbooks. The beginning of the 21st century saw a clear surge in research on gender and women erasure in textbooks of various subjects.

Statement of the Problem

The role of textbooks as discourse cannot be overlooked. The writers' preferred discourse is never neutral; they show different areas of life to be either important or unimportant. One of the discourse patterns adopted to convey implicitly the unimportance of certain life elements is known as erasure. Since the erasure of women in the textbooks leads to their further marginalization in the society, it is pertinent to explore whether they are erased in English textbooks in Pakistan and how their erasure affects gender representation and societal structures.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the erasure patterns used in the English textbooks for the marginalization of women
2. To describe how the erasure patterns in the English textbooks influence gender representation

Research Questions

1. What kinds of erasure patterns are used in the textbook for marginalizing women?
2. How do the erasure patterns affect gender representation?

Review of Literature

Different scholars have studied feminine erasure in a wide range of social settings and in a variety of discourse sites. One of important studies on gender bias against women is by Long (2022) in which the scholar investigated how the two versions of EFL textbooks for high school learners published in 2004 & 2019 showed negligible improvement in highlighting women active agency for positive social change. Working with the combined method of manual literature review and text analysis method, the scholar conducted the analysis. The measurement of masculine and feminine characters' relative frequency in both the versions of the textbooks was followed by the description of different male and female characters found in them. Subsequently, the researcher reported the clearly visible difference in the linguistic choices which were used to describe the two genders. The results showed that there were several instances of women erasure. Tiessen and Carrier (2015) investigated why the term gender equality was replaced by the new phrase of equality between men and women. Moreover, they questioned the sudden erasure of the term and studied its implications. The unit of analysis was the political speech of Canadian ministers. The findings showed that erasure of the term denied that "women – and different groups of women – may require different treatment to achieve similar results" (Tiessen & Carrier, 2015, p. 96). It also denies to accept not only the fundamental social norms associated with women but also normal social expectations for young and old females and their responsibility towards the well-being of women and girls. Ferber (2007) provides a brief overview of how recent expansion in literature on race and ethnicity has shifted the focus from the whiteness as more privileged. The scholar argues that without incorporating the holistic intersectional approach in which race and gender are closely intertwined, we cannot understand either of them because both the concepts cannot be studied as two separate phenomena. Rather, they interact with each other, that the study of race without gender leads to "the ideology of color blindness, and organized white supremacist discourse" (Ferber, 2007, p. 265). The scholar's final argument is such studies are also instances of both gender erasures and whiteness bias. Sujinah, Muhammad, & Ngatmain (2023) described different kinds of gender bias found even in the the revised edition of the Indonesian Language High School textbook. They found several instances of "gender subordination bias, gender marginalization bias, and gender stereotype bias; and its relation to social culture in Indonesia" (Sujinah, Muhammad, & Ngatmain, 2023, p. 535). Using a qualitative research design of an exploratory study, they collected the data through documentation technique and their analysis consisted of three stages. In the first stage, they codified and categorized the data. The second step was the data presentation stage and the final stage was of the verification of results. They found that the gender bias found in the textbooks had close association with the socio-cultural reality of Indonesia where women are still considered as second-class citizens and they lack freedom to economic, educational, political, and social upward mobility enjoyed by the women in the West. The content of textbooks fails to attract attention of students (Gul, 2023)The rigorous review of literature clearly demonstrates that the textbooks act as sites of normalising gender roles. Since stereotyping and gender bias against women is systematically strengthened in the selection, depiction and idealization of

different gender roles for men and women in the textbooks, it is pertinent to explore representation of women in Pakistani ESL textbooks. Little research has been conducted on the subject.

Methodology

Approach

Mixed-methods approach was employed. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were combined to quantify and describe the phenomena. The empirical data collected through manual reading of not only textual content but also illustrations found a strong foundation for reaching insightful and relevant conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of erasure introduced by Stibbe (2015) for the critical analysis of eco-linguistic discourse is adapted. He defines it as “a story in people’s minds that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration”. We relied on three-tiered classification of erasure patterns in the linguistic representation of women: the *Void*, the *Mask* and the *Trace*. The first category refers to complete exclusion of women, the second entails backgrounding or distortion of women, and the third refers to partial erasure of women that occurs in different degrees. Relying on this classification, we have analyzed English textbook for Class VI, VII and VIII published by the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board in April 2022 to examine what kind of erasure patterns have been used, and how they influence gender representation. Contrary to the first category, the second and the third kind encompass a wide range of linguistic choices that result in either depriving women of active human agency or obscuring their social identity.

Types of Erasures

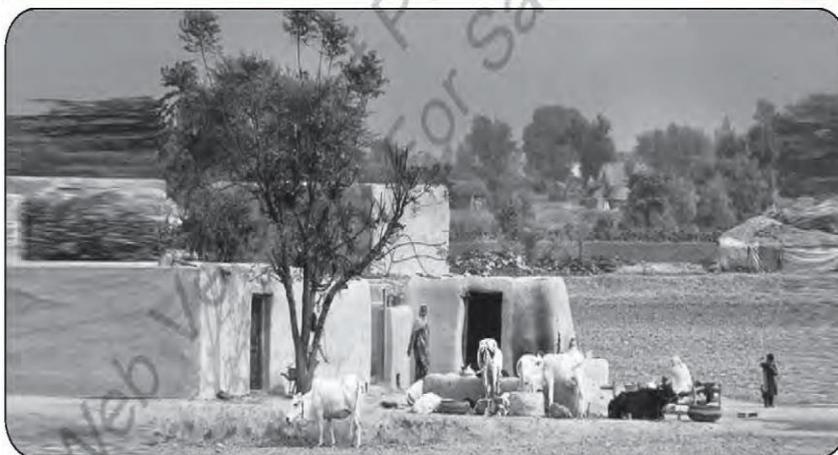
- (a) The Void-complete exclusion
- (b) The Mask- distortion
- (c) The Trace-partially erased

X produces Y (the Mask), the production of X (the Void), Y is produced with X (the Trace) are the expressions that represent three kinds explored in the study.

Data Analysis

The analysis covers three kinds of linguistic representations: illustrations, book contents and lesson content.

Illustrations: There are 17 visuals in total. In ten of them, the discourse pattern of *the void* has been used, and women are completely absent. In the remaining seven where women are shown, *the mask* pattern is used to distort women reality. In the first picture, a woman is standing among animals. In the second picture also, the marginalized women with water pots on their heads are shown to lack active agency to change their social status.





In the illustration below, two visuals represent women. In one of them, a family comprising three girls and two boys is shown at the park gate. In the second, a woman in the role of a nurse is shown to be serving a patient in a hospital ward.



read newspapers/well informed



take bath/healthy



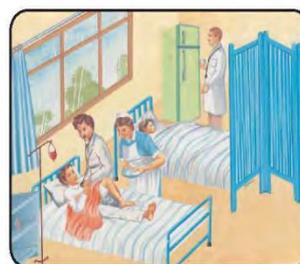
sunny/go for picnic



play games/refresh



throw trash/clean



do not take care/fall ill

In both the instances, the erasure pattern of *the trace* has been used. Instead of individualizing women and reinforcing active human agency, they are represented as mere types.

The study of contents of the book also reveals that the book compilers have failed to represent women as important individual persons who are free to construct their social identity without depending on men. In the 14 lessons of the entire book, there is not even a single lesson on women. There are two poems; both are written by the male poets. While one represents men as the key figures in raising the status of nations, the other visualizes a world where man no longer spreads wretchedness due to racial prejudice. In other words, *the Void* erasure pattern completely negating the importance of women in the society is represented in the textbook. At third level, the study of thematic analysis of lesson

content shows close convergence to the other two levels.

In a lesson on *Inventions and Discoveries*, the writer discusses the scientific contribution of James Watt, the inventor of steam engine; Wright brothers, the inventors of the aeroplane; Marconi, the inventor of radio and wireless; Martin Cooper, the inventor of the cell phone. In this lesson, several important names like Tiera Guinn, the rocket designer at NASA, the world-famous Nobel Prize winner physicist cum chemist Marie Curie, and Maria Goeppert Mayer, another Nobel Prize winner for discovering the nuclear shell of atomic nucleus are completely missing. Put simply, with the discourse pattern of *The Void*, women are implicitly suppressed by their complete exclusion from important field of science. Their historic services have been completely ignored. The textbook does not mention even Fatima Jinnah in the lesson on *Quaid-e-Azam*. The dominance of *the Void* remains a serious issue in women representation in the lesson contents. These findings show close convergence with the results of Rozenberg, Groeneveld, Veen, Pol, & Mesman (2023).

Table 1: Comparison between male and female characters' frequency found in the contents

	Male	Female	Percentage of Male Characters	Percentage of Female Characters
TOTAL	168	69	71	29
BOOK 6	70	40	64	36
BOOK 7	66	25	72	28
BOOK 8	32	4	89	11

In the table 1, we can see a marked difference between the frequency of male and female characters. In other words, the textbook writers, consciously or unconsciously, have shown a serious gender bias against women during the generation of contents for the learners at every stage of elementary schooling. Moreover, we can also observe that such dichotomy is not accidental; rather, it systematically appears in every book, and in the book of class 8 it reaches at an alarmingly high point.

Table 2: Comparison between male and female characters' frequency found in the illustrations

	Male Only	Female Only	Male and Female	Percentage of male only	Percentage of female only	Percentage of male and female
Total	87	28	22	64	20	16
Book 6	38	12	17	57	18	25
Book 7	40	14	2	71	25	4
Book 8	9	2	3	64	14	21

In the table 2 also, we can mark a strikingly high difference between the frequency of male and female characters in the illustrations. Not only do males appear much more times than females in the illustrations in all the three books, the frequency of interaction of male with female characters widely differ in them. We can see that there are a visible number of interactions in the book for class 6. However, neither in the book for class 7 nor in the textbook made for class 8, the number reaches alarmingly low stage.

Since the gap in masculine and feminine characters at individual as well as holistic level is significantly wide, we can easily assert that feminine erasure is a certainly worrisome phenomenon. Unless, scholars conduct rigorous researches to uncover such hidden discrepancies, we cannot succeed in realizing the dream of gender equality and women empowerment that are immediate demands of modern life in the globalized world where attitude towards gender parity determines the character of not only individuals but also nations.

Summary of Findings

The gap between the frequency of male and female characters in the contents of every book is alarmingly wide. It grows wider as we move to higher grades. Similarly, the frequency of only female characters in the illustrations also stays steadily at lowest in every book. Illustrations where male and female characters interact are rather few.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that though the instances of all the three kinds of erasures are found in all the

sample population, the textbooks for class 7 and 8 have the highest frequency of feminine erasure. Moreover, the results clearly demonstrate that the textbooks need immediate and thorough revision by the writers who are sensitive to gender bias in the society.

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