

Shahid Siddiqui. *Language, Gender, and Power: the Politics of Representation and Hegemony in South Asia*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 220. Price PKR. 995 (paperback).

Based upon 10-years' research in sociolinguistics of South Asia, Shahid Siddiqui's book carries a sense of immediacy, for its data is derived not so much from other books, as from lived experience of the community he analyzes. The doctorate degree in language education that he earned at the University of Toronto, has insured the inclusion of Western frames of theoretical filters, that make the book accessible to universal readership

The book, titled *Language, Gender, and Power: the politics of Representation and Hegemony in South Asia*, is divided into six parts, ranging from a section on theory of power to other that have a practical use in understanding sociolinguistics and the gender-shaping role of language. Each section contains two or more chapters that analyze the social processes of stereotyping female gender through language. Each chapter starts with one or more quotation/s, taken from renowned philosophers around the world, reflecting the eclectic readings that constitute the background of discussions that range through the book.

A famous Pakistani painter Basjir Mirza's "Two Faces" that sets up the tone of the following discourse complements the theme of the subject under scrutiny. It offers new ways of interpreting reality, in an almost cubistic pictorial space which parallels the milieu of the female gender in a male-dominated society.

In the first part of the book, Siddiqui contends that the study of language is different from that of linguistics. A language, pervading personal and public life, is active, biased, and, often politicized. It is a dynamic, verbal force that constructs social models and roles which in their turn shape individual speech, behavior, nay, the whole psyche. Siddiqui finds validation of his findings in works of Saussure, Gramsci, Edward Said, Chomsky and Sapir-Whorf. He discusses the nexus of language, gender and politics, ordinarily the carrier of the discoursed of the dominant group, justifying their stance through language. This powerful group serves as a vantage point for all other groups of the society.

Second part of the book, titled "*Language and Gender Construction*" resolves around the prehistoric concept that women are made; rather manufactured through language. Siddiqui draws upon a range of literary, religious, and constitutional sources to prove his

point. These biased representations appear to be so natural that we hardly ever realize their artificial constructions. Language used about women also reveals a lot regarding patriarchal nature of society. For instances, titles, attributes, connotations and privileges can also determine the gender of a being. Siddiqui presents a terrain of South Asian countries in which sons are preferred over girls, mainly because of economic reasons. Within the family, a differential treatment in the family given to male and female child strengthens gender stereotypes. Popular culture, too, supports these roles through the assignment of toys, games, movies and cartoons. For boys, war games, warriors, saviors, heroes; for girls, either dolls or domestic items.

The third section of the book delves into the issue of “Language, Gender and Society.” Here he employs literary references, popular sayings, proverbs, matrimonial ads, and jokes that define the position and the virtues of women in South Asian countries. In literature, the voice of female writers had been silenced by power process and gender politics for centuries. Due to social control, women were obliged to write with male pseudonym. Although some radical female writers emerged in Subcontinent like *Ismat Chughtai* and *Rasheed Jehan* whose novel “*Angarey*” was vandalized. Siddiqui also insinuates that the paucity of strong female critics in literary circles was also responsible for women’s silence. Mumtaz Shireen is the only exception here.

The author further notes how proverbs act as a tool of hegemonic groups, especially where they implicate women. He also presents an extensive chart (80-83) that gives an amusing account of such proverbs. It mediates that folk wisdom, social practices, and culture maneuver gendered proverbs. Siddiqui also makes a distinction between healthy and harmful humor in his chapter titled “Gender and Jokes.” For instance, we always consider women as talkative, less intelligent, inquisitive, coward, capricious, confused, boring (as wives) etc. There are also certain jokes pertaining to marriage, wife, mother-in-law which are supposed to reflect humor. It is a sexist approach, for, in its essence, it is produced at the expense of hurting marginalized group. In Chapter 10 “Matrimonial ads”, give a sample of certain societal expectations and standards that are set for a suitable bride. It includes beauty, age, manners, qualification, profession, family background, nationality, caste, religion, location, and still the list is not exhausted (110-13). Expectations from women are that they should be fair, slim, tall—almost cosmetic and beauty models.

Fourth part titled “Gender and Education” focuses on gender stereotypes with reference to educational means. Classrooms turn out to be places where these stereotypes are instilled with the help of same rule of perpetuation, validation, and construction. In fairy tales, a female character is judged from her appearance, whereas a male

character is distinguished on the basis of his exceptional deeds. Moreover, female characters are sorceresses, enchantresses, and witches. Sacrifices of mothers and sisters are all pervasive. Issues like dowry, waiting for rescue, sexist language, imposed marriages, dependence on male, unequal relationship and woman as an object are prevalent in fairy tales. Such cultural education contributes to the process of manufacturing and perpetuating gendered stereotypes.

Fifth part talks about how media as a social institution influences the minds of people at massive scale through films, songs, advertisements and plays. Its message penetrates into the viewers' mind in such a subtle way that people start accepting it as a social reality. It processes biased information in defining gender roles which is evident itself from male-dominated field of media. Suggestive ads display woman as an object for glamorous proposes, which reflect the male-chauvinistic nature of South Asian societies. The intervention of corporate industry into private channels has brought a commercial aspect to the drama. They cover household (saas-bahu/the mother-in-law vs. daughter-in-law) confrontation in an unrealistic fashion in which women are represented as conspiratorial, back-bitter, and hypocritical.

Pakistani society is orality-based where there is a rich tradition of poetic recitation, sung in a melody. Songs have stronger influence over mind and they carry hegemonic designs in them as they are easy to remember and access. Lyrics are composed by objectifying women's physicality. The author quotes some examples of Pakistani and Indian songs (185) which are very engaging for the readers. It eventually builds an edifice of social reality of representing female gender as objects.

Finally, the last part of the book titled "*Gender Discourse: Reforms and Resistance*," deals with the questions of language reforms and resistance through language. It converges on the quest for a language shift and gender research. Siddiqui propounds that we should promote neutral language and should boycott the gendered expressions. He also gives an account of alternative expressions (p.195) in order to replace them. Then Siddiqui goes on to suggest certain ambitious measures—namely, that language reforms be coached and imparted with the help of social institutions by resisting hegemonic designs, reversing the discourse, redefining applied linguistics, revisiting ELT domain and inculcating critical pedagogy in school curricula.

The topicality of the book, although mundane, challenges the status quo and it is a much timely-needed document, as pointed out by Dr. Tariq Rehman, a renewed Pakistani linguist. This book makes its mark in interdisciplinary studies, ranging from gender studies to

anthropology, sociology to public policy, and social theory to ethno linguistics.

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