

Interpretation of Gender in a Malaysian Novel: The Case of *Salina*

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ABSTRAK

Kebanyakan karya bertulis yang dianggap kreatif, khususnya dari segi plot, latar dan watak terhasil dengan berdasarkan pemerhatian penulis terhadap realiti sekitarnya. Daripada tinjauan, didapati bahawa anggota sesuatu budaya dan masyarakat mempunyai persepsi atau pandangan yang stereotaip tentang tingkah laku lelaki atau wanita dari segi gaya berpakaian, aktiviti, kerjaya dan peranan sosialnya dalam masyarakat. Penulis yang berpegang kepada pandangan ini biasanya turut membuat pemerhatian secara umum dan stereotaip, serta mencurahkan ke dalam karya mereka khususnya melalui watak-watak ceritanya agar karya mereka boleh dianggap logik, realistik, dan berkesan. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis gaya pertuturan watak lelaki dan wanita yang bercorak stereotaip yang tergambar melalui novel *Salina* karya A. Samad Said. Di samping itu, penelitian juga dilakukan terhadap dampak daripada perbezaan gender yang dipaparkan dalam novel ini. Dari aspek fitur linguistik, penggunaan bentuk sopan dan bentuk berkias turut diteliti untuk analisis ini. Analisis akan difokuskan kepada penggunaan fitur linguistik ini oleh watak-watak dalam novel yang dikaji. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa penggunaan fitur linguistik ini berbeza mengikut gender dan unik sebagai ciri masyarakat Malaysia semula jadi.

ABSTRACT

Most written products that are considered creative, particularly in terms of plots, contexts and characters are created based on the writers' observations of 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 analyse the stereotyped characteristics of male and female speech styles as portrayed in a Malaysian novel, *Salina*, written by A. Samad Ismail. It also examines the effect of gender differences depicted in the novel. The linguistic features that are examined for the analysis are the use of super polite forms and hedges. The analysis focuses 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 are uniquely Malaysian in nature.

INTRODUCTION

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 1978; Taylor and Hall 1982). 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 persons in forming impressions about their masculinity and femininity' (Smith 1985:28). 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 males and females (Lakoff 1975; Spender 1975; Coates 1986; Tannen 1991; Jariah Mohd. Jan 1999). 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 the written text particularly in novels, short stories, plays or screenplays. This study intends to examine male and female conversational styles with a focus on speech manifested in the language of the characters in the novel. The focus of attention is to explore whether these manifestations are indeed the writer's own perceptions and experience.

A general observation indicates that most written products that are considered creative, particularly in terms of plots, contexts and characters are created based on the writers' observations of 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 and effective. For instance, the stereotyped 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 characters are often manifested by the writers in their stories in order to make their characters real and acceptable to the readers.

OBJECTIVE

This paper attempts to analyse the stereotyped characteristics of male and female speech styles and to examine the effect of gender differences as depicted in a novel, *Salina*, written by A. Samad Ismail who is a renowned Malaysian literary writer.

GENDERED BEHAVIOURAL CONSTRUCTS AND CONVERSATIONAL STYLES

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 are referred to as behavioural construct. These norms include gender (sex) roles in society, occupation, and language use.

Frank and Ashen (1983) note that language differences are partly due to our social expectations. For instance, since most 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 men to be dominant, aggressive, independent and objective. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to be accepted as submissive, dependent, passive and subjective. As such, the fact that women are expected to 'act as ladies' and to 'respect' people around them reflects their inferior status, and thus, are expected to respect their superiors who are men. These behavioural constructs have empowered men while women are considered as one step below men or rather they hold a secondary status in the society. This encoding behaviour of men and women in the society has significant ramifications on the way they communicate and socialize in inter-gender interactions.

Inevitably, our social expectations and experiences may be a contributing factor to the language differences or differing linguistic styles between men and women at any time and in any situation.

There have been numerous studies that appear to support the idea of stylistic gender differences in conversation. Lakoff's observations (1975 and 1977) of women's language are

considered one of the earliest regarding the differences in speech styles between men and women.

According to Lakoff, the style of language which was typically used by women and thus denied them 'the means to express (themselves) strongly', and instead make them sound 'trivial' and 'uncertain' were as follows:

- i. The use of words connected with women's culture (colour terms, sewing terms) which are not in men's vocabulary, or are used disparagingly by men.
- ii. So-called "empty" adjectives, such as "divine" and "charming."
- iii. Tag questions and rising intonation used with grammatically declarative utterances.
- iv. The use of hedges to avoid being too assertive or direct.
- v. The use of "so" as an intensifier, as in "I like him so much."
- vi. Hypercorrect forms in pronunciation and grammar.
- vii. Being "superpolite."
- viii. Not telling jokes.
- ix. Speaking in *italics* (which presumably refers to women's stress patterns).

(Lakoff 1975:53-56)

Lakoff was working on the principle that women's speech patterns are worse than men's, in that they confirm women's subordinate social status and prevent them from being treated as equals. Women are interested in maintaining harmony and goodwill in their communication and sometimes can be misunderstood as being tentative and full of uncertainties. The use of modal auxiliaries in women's speech is said to reflect this perception.

In 1977, Lakoff further characterized her basic assumptions of women's speech styles under

three (3) main categories, namely lexical traits, phonological traits and syntactic-pragmatic traits (see Table 1).

This study will only focus on two linguistic features proposed by Lakoff (1977) in the analysis which are the use of super polite forms and hedges.

POLITE FORMS

According to Holmes (1995), 'politeness' refers to an expression of concern for the feelings of others. People may express concern for others' feelings in many ways, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Being polite means expressing respect towards the persons you are talking to and not offending them. In other words, politeness may take the form of an expression of goodwill or camaraderie, establishing rapport, as well as the more familiar non-intrusive behaviour which is labelled 'polite' in everyday usage.

Malaysians observe a politeness system that embodies specific codes of verbal and non-verbal behaviour in their interactions with others (Jamaliah Mohd. Ali 1995b: 65). They are generally receptive to those who display good manners in face-to-face interaction. In the Malay community, people are expected to be polite or demonstrate finesse in behaviour whenever they interact with others. This is evident especially in interactions that involve persons of a certain institutional or societal rank. Such behaviour indicates proper upbringing. In addition, the notion of relational distance, respect for elders, hierarchical position as well as status and authority are very much rooted in the Malay value system (Jariah Mohd. Jan 1999: 206).

Some aspects of behaviour that Malaysians consider finesse are as follows (Asmah Haji Omar 1992: 23-24):

TABLE 1
A summary of the characteristics of women's speech styles (Lakoff 1977)

No.	Female Speech Styles	Speech Characteristics
1.	Lexical Traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • special lexicon • imprecise intensifiers • super polite forms
2.	Phonological Traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hypercorrect grammar • clear and precise pronunciation
3.	Syntactic-Pragmatic Traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • epistemic modality and hedges • tag questions • direct quotations

- Not being forthright or assertive or aggressive;
- Not being blunt or direct in expressing one's views;
- Not causing interpersonal conflict or avoiding 'loss of face'.

When someone is being polite, there are many possible features of their use of the language that are being referred to. It is generally observed that polite people tend to phrase their utterances considerately, respond encouragingly and positively to others' talk, and express appreciation generously. They avoid confrontation, public displays of being too forceful or direct because these are all examples of behaviour which are regarded as impolite, coarse, rude, and may even suggest ill-breeding (Jamaliah Mohd. Ali 1991).

Lakoff (1975) observes that in women's speech, there is also a more frequent expression of emotions such as love, endearment, and grief, and avoidance of angry and hostile expressions. In doing so, women tend to use super polite forms and euphemistic forms such as '*would you mind...*', '*I'd appreciate it if...*', '*... if you don't mind.*', '*may*' and '*could*'.

Face

Jamaliah Mohd. Ali (1995b: 75) stipulates that the norms of society require that we abide by social rules in our daily interactions. 'Face' or '*jaga air muka*' is one of the most important factors that Malaysians should observe and adhere to in their daily interaction in order to maintain not only the stability of the interactants but that of the interaction as well.

In Malaysian communities, 'face-saving' means saving another person or oneself, from embarrassment. In other words, the speaker tries not to put the listener or himself in a position in which he or she might be embarrassed. The 'face' that a person maintains becomes important especially when it is subjected to risk and assumes significance particularly when events are being interpreted and evaluated. Therefore, it must be constantly attended to in the interaction.

Ostman (1981: 4) states that there are differences between 'face-saving' and politeness. She explains that the 'face-saving' aspect of verbal and (non-verbal) behaviour is characterised by an egocentric, direct and efficient expression of

wants and needs whilst the politeness aspect works at suppressing such potential egocentricity and prevents it from occurring overtly in behaviour.

In general, people try to build up each other's 'positive face' (the positive image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved by others) and avoid posing threats to the 'negative face' (where one's actions should not be impeded by others) in co-operative interaction.

Behaviour which avoids imposing on others or avoids 'threatening their face' is described as evidence of negative politeness, while sociable behaviour expressing warmth towards an addressee is positive politeness behaviour (Brown and Levinson 1987). According to this approach, any utterance which could be interpreted as making 'a demand or intruding on another person's autonomy can be regarded as a potential face-threatening act (henceforth FTA). Polite people avoid obvious FTAs, such as insults and orders. They usually attempt to reduce the threat of unavoidable FTAs such as requests or warnings by softening them, or expressing them indirectly; and they use positively polite utterances such as greetings and compliments where possible.

The mutual relationship between the participants in an interaction is very significant in deciding the degree of face threat. For instance, something that is fairly minimally face-threatening in private encounters, such as a friendly talk, becomes highly face-threatening in public encounters. Competent conversation participants often look for ways that can minimise the threat to face in one way or another. This of course requires an ability to reach each other's signals and to accommodate each other's wants. Furthermore, preserving each other's face in social interactions is very important in maintaining harmony and stability. Failure to do so may result in undesirable communicative consequences. As such, this phenomenon at times imposes further constraints on the conversational behaviour of the participants.

HEDGING – A STRATEGY

Hedging refers to the linguistic forms which speakers use to express their degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition. The forms that realise speakers' commitment are typically modal auxiliary verbs such as '*should*',

'would', 'could', 'may' and 'might'. Other linguistic forms that fulfil the same function are items such as 'perhaps', 'really', and also hedges such as 'sort of', 'I think' and 'kind of'.

According to Lakoff (1975: 53), hedges are "...words that convey the sense that the speaker is uncertain about what he or she is saying or cannot vouch for the accuracy of the statement." Speakers use hedges as a strategy to express their personal attitude in the conversation. On the other hand, Coates defines hedges by the function of items, rather than their grammatical category. According to Coates (1989: 113):

"Epistemic modal forms are defined semantically as those linguistic forms which are used to indicate the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed in the utterance. If someone says, *Perhaps she missed the train*, the use of the word perhaps indicates the lack of confidence in the proposition 'she missed the train'. Lexical items such as *perhaps*, *I think*, *sort of*, *probably*, as well as certain prosodic and paralinguistic features, are used in English to express epistemic modality."

Coates (Ibid: 113-14) also extends the functions usually associated with epistemic modal forms as those that are "used by speakers not just to indicate their lack of commitment to the truth of propositions, but also to hedge assertions in order to protect both their own and addressees' face."

She claims that women, especially in single-sex groups, exploit these forms more than men and they use them to mitigate the force of an utterance in order to respect the addressees' face needs. An illustration of this point is as follows:

(speaker describes an old friend she's recently bumped into)
she looks very *sort of* um (-) *kind of* matronly *I really*

(Coates 1989)

She claims that the italicised forms in the example given "hedge the assertion she looks matronly not because the speaker doubts its truth but because she does not want to offend her addressees by assuming their agreement" because describing a friend in unflattering terms is controversial, politeness as well (Coates Ibid).

The suggestion here is that the instances of epistemic modal forms above have one function of protecting the face of the speaker's addressees by permitting their dissent from the truth content of her proposition. However, according to Coates, the polypragmatic nature of forms also protects the speaker's face. In this instance, the speaker in the example can retreat from the proposition expressed if it turns out to be unacceptable. She emphasised that "Presumably such topics do not trigger the use of epistemic modal forms because they are not so face-threatening". In addition, hedges also function as politeness strategies often used by women in their interaction.

METHODOLOGY

The Malaysian novel, *Salina* written by A. Samad Said who is a renowned Malaysian literary writer was selected for this study. For the purpose of analysis, a translated version of *Salina* by Hawa Abdullah was used. Unlike many other translated versions, this is close to the original Malay version.

Salina is regarded as the line of demarcation which separates the early writers from the present ones (Hanna Sheikh Mokhtar 1993). The style used by the author differs from other writers in that it is told by means of dialogues or conversations among the characters, reflecting the social lifestyles and behaviour practiced by the society at that time. The language use in the dialogues directly or indirectly reflects the social expectations as depicted in the cultural norms and practices of the society.

The story depicts the struggles faced by women in order to survive in the male-dominated world. It could be said that women in *Salina* represent a new breed of women who were modernised by colonial rule and were toughened by Japanese occupation.

Five excerpts from *Salina* that featured the conversations of male and female characters portrayed by the writer were selected at random. The excerpts were randomly selected to avoid inclination towards the existence of the features of the speech styles if they were studied and analysed beforehand.

Analysis of the male and female speech styles in the selected excerpts is based on two linguistic features stipulated by Lakoff (1975) i.e. i) the use of super polite forms and ii) hedges. Examples were extracted and quoted

from the excerpts as evidence of the use of the linguistic features by the characters.

Aspects of the phonological traits of the discourse that include intonation and voice pitch were not included in the analysis. Table 2 summarizes the speech characteristics in the study.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Use of Super Polite Forms

In general, analyses of the data indicate that most of the characters in *Salina* are polite to each other. The degree of politeness and impoliteness is difficult to measure as this varies from culture to culture.

Although politeness in the characters' speech is not clearly illustrated in terms of the use of special words, or phrase, it is found that both the men's and women's speech styles are consistent with Holmes' descriptions of politeness that is "polite people tend to phrase their utterances considerably, respond encouragingly and positively to others' talk, pay compliments, and express appreciation generously" (1995, 24-

25). This is a typical feature of the Malaysian culture that "... when talking, we need to moderate our voice, and not talk in a way that hurt others' feelings" (Shasel 1997). Except for two instances of the use of *please*, there is no other evidence of the use of other polite forms in speech among the female characters.

- Idah, *Please* sit down ... p 283
- *Please* light it, my hands are wet. p 212

The Use of Expletives

Analyses of the data show that expletives are used among male characters in *Salina*. The findings show that there is only one instance of strong expletive attributing to male style. The weak forms are those used by the male characters and these forms are attributed to the female style (Table 3).

The examples shown in Table 3 are utterances made by Abdul Fakar who is one of the male characters in *Salina*. His language reflects his flirtatious behaviour. He speaks gently

TABLE 2
Examples of linguistic features examined in *Salina*

No.	Female Speech Styles	Speech Characteristics	Examples
1.	Lexical Traits	Super polite forms Expletives • Strong expletives • Weak expletives	• <i>Would you mind ...</i> , • <i>Could you please...</i> , • <i>Damn, I'll be damn, Shit,Hell</i> • <i>My goodness...</i> • <i>Oh, dear...</i>
2.	Syntactic-Pragmatic Traits	Epistemic modality and hedges • Modal auxiliary • Modal adverbs • Qualifying adjectives • Egocentric sequences	• <i>May, might, could</i> • <i>Perhaps, possibly, may be</i> • <i>So, very,</i> • <i>I believe, I think, I guess</i>

TABLE 3
Strong and weak expletives used by male characters in *Salina*

Strong Expletives	Weak Expletives
<i>That wretched tramp! He doesn't know his place ...</i> p 76	<i>If you become dead wood in the house, <u>goodness</u>, the tramp will take advantage...</i> p 321
	<i>My! Oh my!</i> p 324
	<i>Lo and behold</i> after that, the clerk disappears for months. p 325
	<i>Very well! You say it is difficult ...</i> p 79

and appears to understand women very well.

The linguistic features used by Abdul Fakar indicate that his speech lacks male characteristics. As such, except for the strong expletive mentioned earlier, all the other expletives used are weak and considered to have feminine style.

Other expletives found in the excerpts are:

- *Oh dear, you shouldn't have troubled yourself, sis ...* p 47
- *Oh! Such a pity!* p 198
- *Praise be to God.* p 198

Another male character in *Salina* who uses these weak forms of expletives is Hilmi. He is portrayed as an educated person, as well as polite and respectful to others. His religious background and good upbringing influence his speech when interacting with others.

It appears that the female characters use more weak forms of expletives compared to the

male characters in *Salina*. Forms of endearment such as 'dear' and 'my sweet' are widely used in the text as indicated in Table 4.

The Use of Hedges

There are seven types of hedges used by both male and female characters in *Salina*. The use of this feature is tabulated in Table 5. Contrary to the assumptions that hedges are exclusively a female speech style, there is considerable evidence of the use of this feature in male speech as found in the selected excerpts from the novel, *Salina*.

The data in Table 5 shows that in contrast with the general expectations based on the perceptions of the gender speech styles, the male characters have been portrayed to use more hedges compared to the female characters. This finding on the use of hedges, contradicts the claim made by Lakoff (1975) and other researchers (Coates 1986; Githens 1991; Jariah

TABLE 4
The use of polite forms and expletives in *Salina*

Female Speech Styles	Male Speech Styles
<i>Dear me! Exercising so early in the morning?</i> p 36	<i>Dear me! If it is as you say, the landlord's simply squeezing money from us.</i> p 40
<i>Goodness! What a hope!</i> p 39	<i>Oh dear you shouldn't have troubled yourself, sis ...</i> p 47
<i>How long is it since he passed away?</i> p 45	<i>Oh dear! Why swear?</i> p 86
<i>Goodness, it's been going on for so long, how could you not know?</i> p 75	<i>Goodness! Tonight, I'll give you a treat.</i> p 89
<i>Goodness! Now you say: Praise be to God.</i> p198 p 90	<i>Good Gracious! You embarrass me, of course I have the money.</i>
<i>I am fond of you, my sweet.</i> p 210	<i>Dear me, what a shame!</i> p 247
<i>Idah, Please sit down ...</i> p 283	<i>Oh my sweet. You are clever to talk, aren't you?</i> p 288
<i>Please light it, my hands are wet.</i> p 212	<i>How clever you are, my sweet.</i> p 289
	<i>Oh dear, you shouldn't have troubled yourself, sis ...</i> p 47
	<i>Oh! Such a pity!</i> p 198
	<i>Praise be to God.</i> p 198
	<i>If you become dead wood in the house, goodness, the tramp will take advantage...</i> p 321
	<i>My! Oh my!</i> p 324
	<i>Lo and behold after that, the clerk disappears for months.</i> p 325
	<i>Very well! You say it is difficult ...</i> p 79

TABLE 5
Gender and distribution of hedges in *Salina*

No.	Types of Hedges	Male	Female	Total
A	Modal Adverbs			
1.	really	15	8	23
2.	perhaps	9	5	14
3.	surely	7	6	13
	Total	31	19	50
B	Modal Auxiliary			
1.	would	15	5	20
2.	should	6	2	8
3.	could	3	2	5
4.	must	10	2	12
	Total	34	11	45
C	Adjectives			
1.	too	6	1	7
2.	so	23	8	31
	Total	29	9	38
D	Egocentric			
1.	I know	16	6	22
2.	I do / I don't	24	15	39
3.	I think	8	1	9
4.	I hope	4	0	4
5.	I want	6	0	6
6.	I feel	2	0	2
	Total	60	22	82
E	Fillers			
1.	well	13	6	19
2.	of course	8	5	13
3.	you know	11	6	17
	Total	32	17	49
	Total (A+B+C+D+E)	186	78	264

Mohd. Jan 1991) that women use these features more than men do.

As can be seen in Table 5, the male characters in *Salina* use more hedges, especially the egocentric types such as *I do/I don't* (24 items) and *I know* (16 items), compared to the female characters. The assertive behaviour of the male characters is reflected in their use of hedges (60 items). On the other hand, the female characters appear to be less assertive (22 items) and seldom relate their needs and true feelings about matters that are of importance to them.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study suggest that there are gender differences in the use of the super polite

forms and hedges. The speech styles portrayed in *Salina* exhibit clearly features of male and female language. However, unlike the previous claims (Lakoff 1975; Tannen 1990; Githens 1991; Jariah Mohd. Jan 1999), these linguistic features seem not to be exclusively used by one gender only. Both the male and female characters in the novel are portrayed as using them. Although the speech characteristics in this study have been claimed as associated with female speech style, the results of this study show that it is the particular requirement of the conversations that motivate the use by either a male or a female character. It is suggested that the occurrence of the styles portrayed in the male and female speech is not determined or influenced by the gender of a speaker, rather, the context itself

has a strong bearing on the choice of styles to be used.

In most studies, claims of gendered speech styles have been made based on the western perceptions. In *Salina*, however, both men and women characters have been pictured to have used similar linguistic features in their conversations. The characters are also sensitive to the behaviour of their conversational partners and thus adapt their speech style accordingly.

The findings suggest that the speech styles of male and female cannot be generalised for they differ from one cultural context or society to another. However, it is reasonable to conclude that writers, regardless of their culture and societal background, appear to perceive or conceptualise male and female speech as a collaborative social activity rather than being restricted to their personal traits. As such, when they write the speech for their characters in a novel, they take into account aspects such as the role and status of the characters within the particular society and the context of the conversation rather than gender.

Perhaps it would be best to conclude that the perception of the different speech styles between men and women lies in our own beliefs and perceptions. To a certain extent, we tend to exaggerate perceived differences in the verbal styles of men and women because we live in an environment that stresses differences rather than similarities.

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