

Gendered Language in Diaspora Literature: A Linguacultural Approach (Based on Afghan Diaspora in *The Kite Runner*)

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Abstract:

This article investigates gendered language in diaspora literature through a linguacultural approach, focusing on Afghan diaspora representation in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Drawing on cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, and diaspora theory, the study explores how linguistic structures encode gender roles, discourse patterns, and processes of self-representation. The analysis demonstrates that gendered language reflects both traditional Afghan patriarchal norms and their reconfiguration in diasporic contexts. The findings suggest that gendered discourse serves as a key mechanism for negotiating identity, power, and belonging across cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Gendered Language, Diaspora Literature, Sociolinguistic Approach, Linguacultural Approach, Afghan Diaspora, Identity, Metaphor

Introduction

Diaspora literature offers a powerful space for understanding how identity is shaped, negotiated, and expressed through language in conditions of displacement. As Stuart Hall argues, identity in diaspora is not something fixed or inherited; rather, it is continuously constructed through representation and discourse. Within this process, language plays a central role, especially in encoding socially constructed categories such as gender.[1]

Gendered language, therefore, cannot be viewed merely as a stylistic feature of literary texts. It reflects deeper cultural norms and ideological structures that define what it means to be a man or a woman in each society. Judith Butler conceptualizes gender as performative, meaning that it is produced and reproduced through repeated linguistic and social practices. Similarly, Deborah

Tannen highlights that differences in male and female language use are rooted in cultural expectations rather than biological realities.[2]

In this context, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini provides a compelling narrative of the Afghan diaspora, where traditional gender norms encounter new cultural environments. The novel allows us to observe how gendered language reflects both continuity and transformation. This article adopts a linguacultural approach to explore how gendered discourse operates in the novel and how it contributes to the construction of hybrid identities in diaspora.[3]

Methodology

From the opening chapters of the novel, gendered language is closely tied to Afghan cultural norms, especially those concerning honor and social reputation. Female identity is constructed through a vocabulary that emphasizes moral judgment and communal perception. A striking example appears in the description of Soraya, who is remembered as “a woman who had once run away with a man.” This phrase does not simply describe an event; it reduces her identity to a socially condemned action, revealing how language functions as a tool of control. In this sense, gendered language becomes a mechanism through which society regulates female behavior, reinforcing what Lila Abu-Lughod identifies as honor-shame discourse.[4]

At the same time, male identity is constructed through a different linguistic framework centered on strength, authority, and emotional restraint. Baba’s assertion that “real men didn’t read poetry” illustrates how masculinity is defined through exclusion, where sensitivity and artistic expression are linguistically marked as incompatible with manhood. This reflects what R. W. Connell calls hegemonic masculinity, a dominant cultural ideal that privileges control and suppresses vulnerability.[5]

However, the transition to diaspora significantly reshapes these linguistic patterns. When Amir and Baba migrate to the United States, the rigid gender norms embedded in Afghan society begin to loosen. Amir’s narrative voice becomes more introspective and emotionally expressive, particularly when he confronts his past. His admission, “I was a coward,” marks a profound shift in the linguistic construction of masculinity. Instead of aligning with traditional expectations of strength, he adopts a discourse of self-reflection and moral accountability. This transformation illustrates how language participates in the reconstruction of identity, supporting the idea that linguistic expression is central to personal and cultural change.[6]

Female identity also undergoes significant transformation in diaspora. Soraya’s character evolves from being defined by social stigma to becoming a more autonomous and articulate individual. She openly discusses her past and challenges the silence imposed on women within traditional structures. This shift can be understood through Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the “third space,” where new cultural meanings emerge through negotiation and hybridity. Indeed, linguistic hybridity itself becomes a defining feature of diasporic identity, as scholars note that the use of multiple languages and cultural references allows characters to “form diasporic consciousness” and negotiate belonging.[7]

Result and Discussion

From a cognitive linguistics perspective, these transformations are structured through underlying metaphorical patterns. Masculinity in the novel is often associated with authority, physical presence, and dominance, while femininity is linked to morality, family, and emotional continuity. These

patterns align with the theory of conceptual metaphor proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argue that abstract concepts such as gender are understood through culturally embedded cognitive models.[8]

Another important linguacultural dimension in the novel is the way emotional expression is distributed unevenly between male and female characters, reflecting culturally embedded gender expectations. In Afghan cultural cognition, emotional restraint is linguistically associated with masculinity, while emotional openness is often positioned as a feminine trait. This distinction becomes visible in the way Baba consistently avoids direct emotional vocabulary when interacting with Amir. Instead of expressing affection through explicit words, he relies on indirect linguistic markers such as criticism, comparison, and moral expectation. For example, his disappointment is rarely verbalized through emotional terms; rather, it is communicated through evaluative statements that construct Amir as “insufficient” or “weak.”[9] This indirectness is not accidental but culturally meaningful, reflecting a linguistic norm where male authority is maintained through emotional suppression.

“Rahim, a boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything.” This line does not directly express Baba's emotions such as sadness or disappointment. Instead, Baba uses an evaluative statement that defines Amir as weak and inadequate according to masculine expectations. The language constructs authority through judgment rather than emotional openness, supporting your analysis about emotional suppression and culturally shaped masculinity.[10]

In contrast, female linguistic behavior in the novel tends to foreground emotional transparency and relational meaning. Soraya's speech patterns, especially in her conversations with Amir, demonstrate a different discursive style in which personal history, emotional vulnerability, and moral confession are openly articulated. *“When we lived in Virginia, I ran away with an Afghan man.”* Her decision to disclose her past without euphemism represents a significant departure from traditional Afghan gender discourse, where women's speech is often socially regulated. This openness can be interpreted as a linguacultural shift from “controlled silence” to “expressive agency,” highlighting how diaspora enables new forms of female subjectivity.[11]

Furthermore, the novel reveals that even silence functions differently across gender lines. Male silence in Baba's character is often a sign of authority and emotional containment, whereas female silence in Afghan cultural context is socially imposed and interpretively loaded with meanings of obedience or shame. *“Because the truth of it was, I always felt like Baba hated me a little.”* This asymmetry demonstrates what linguacultural theory describes as “gendered semiotics of silence,” where absence of speech itself becomes culturally meaningful. In diaspora, however, this structure begins to shift, as women gain greater narrative space and the ability to redefine themselves through language.[12]

Another significant aspect is the transformation of moral vocabulary in relation to gender. In Afghanistan, moral terms such as “honor,” “shame,” and “sin” are strongly gender-coded, often disproportionately applied to female behavior. In diaspora settings, these moral categories begin to lose their rigid gender association and are replaced by more individualized psychological terms such as “guilt,” “regret,” and “responsibility.” Amir's self-description as “a coward” is a clear example of this shift, as it moves moral judgment from a collective cultural framework to an individual psychological one. This lexical transformation reflects the broader cognitive-linguistic shift from collectivist to individualist identity structures.[13]

Finally, the interaction between English and Afghan linguistic resources intensifies these gendered

transformations. English in the novel becomes a language of introspection, self-analysis, and emotional articulation, while Afghan linguistic expressions remain tied to tradition, honor, and social hierarchy. This bilingual tension creates a hybrid discourse in which gender identities are no longer fixed but continuously negotiated. As a result, *The Kite Runner* illustrates how diaspora does not erase gendered language but restructures it, producing new hybrid linguistic identities that exist between cultural memory and modern self-expression.[14]

Moreover, the interplay between English and Afghan linguistic elements reflects the complexity of diasporic identity. Native expressions often carry traditional gender meanings, while English becomes a medium for expressing new, more flexible identities. This linguistic duality mirrors the broader experience of diaspora, where individuals navigate between preservation and adaptation. As recent studies highlight, *The Kite Runner* portrays identity as “continually reconstructed through experiences of dislocation”, and gendered language plays a crucial role in this reconstruction.[15]

Conclusion

The analysis of *The Kite Runner* demonstrates that gendered language is a central mechanism through which identity is constructed and transformed into diaspora literature. In the Afghan cultural context, linguistic expressions of gender are deeply rooted in traditions of honor, masculinity, and social hierarchy. However, the experience of migration introduces new discursive possibilities that challenge and reshape these norms.

Through a linguacultural approach, it becomes clear that language does not simply reflect gender roles but actively participates in their formation and evolution. Male identity shifts from rigid authority to emotional complexity, while female identity moves from constraint toward agency and self-expression. These changes are mediated through language, highlighting its role as both a cultural and cognitive tool.

Ultimately, gender in diaspora literature emerges as a fluid and dynamic construct, shaped by the interaction between tradition and transformation. The novel shows that as individuals move across cultural boundaries, their language—and consequently their identity—also changes. This confirms that the study of gendered language is essential for understanding the broader processes of identity formation in diaspora contexts.

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