

## **Representation of women in Bangladeshi ELT Materials**

**Mian Md. Naushaad Kabir, PhD**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

East West University, Dhaka

Email: [naushaadk@gmail.com](mailto:naushaadk@gmail.com)

### ***Abstract***

*Attitude towards women continues to be accommodating their oppression, suppression, mis-/under-representation, and archetypalization in different ways. The English language teaching materials used in Bangladesh, in this regard, can be cited to have apparently included instances of biased representation of women through its language, stories, characters, and tasks and activities. The focus of the paper is narrowed down to evaluating the role of materials in building up an appropriate mindset towards women. Hence, attempts have been made to investigate into ELT (English language teaching) materials to find out how women are represented and if fundamental features of feminist pedagogy are reflected there. Presenting data including language samples, content, and also tasks and activities, the paper suggests further research into the field.*

**Key Words:** *women; (mis-)representation; ELT materials, feminist pedagogy; Bangladesh*

### **1. Introduction**

Despite several attempts and awareness raising activities both at the level of praxis and didactics across different disciplines, the question

of ensuring equality and equity to women in different aspects of human existence still remains unresolved. Even though people have more access to education than ever, thus getting more opportunities of enlightenment, it is found that their attitude towards women continues to be based on tradition which seems to allow oppression, suppression, under-representation, misrepresentation, and stereotypical representation of women as a regular phenomenon. The failure of the present education system to enlighten human minds may have its root in its inappropriate way of presenting concepts through content. If I, in a particular manner, recall my experience of learning English at the secondary level, I found the textbook was biased towards its representation of women. As educational materials leave almost a permanent imprint on the minds of the young learners, my retrospection leads me to be critical about the role of materials in building up an appropriate mindset towards women, as expected in feminist discourses, with special reference to feminist pedagogy. The representation of gender in course books needs to be carefully studied because concepts, content and language presented there may build up, transmit and strengthen (non-) stereotypical thinking in stakeholders' (especially learners') mindsets and thus can have significant impact on the society. Hence I am inclined to investigate into the ELT materials to find out how women are represented and if fundamental features of feminist pedagogy are reflected there.

## **2. Objectives**

In this article, I propose primarily to inquire into the nature of representation of women in the ELT materials (By ELT materials, I mean the teaching and learning materials used for the students of classes 9 and 10). My attempt will also be to examine if the representation of women in these materials reflect the basic features of feminist pedagogy.

## **3. Research Questions**

The study aims to answer the following questions on which it is chiefly based:

1. How are women represented in ELT materials?

2. How far does their representation reflect the fundamental features of feminist pedagogy?

#### **4. Literature Review**

There has been a paradigm shift in the field of ELT materials production and evaluation where more emphasis is put on cultural suitability and appropriateness of content in relation to its context of operation than on the usual earlier technical, linguistic and pedagogical aspects related to it. Product emerging in an attempt to find a golden means to eliminate the existing mismatches between the culture of the learners and that associated to the target language taught to them is termed as culturally suitable and appropriate ELT content. The use of such content rich materials is generally appreciated for their potentiality to reduce cultural shock that is deemed to increase affective factors hindering effective language learning. However, culture being a loaded term for operationalization is usually brought down to the concepts like learners' religious background, ethnicity, social status, class, caste, age, sex and so on. In this article, I am particularly interested to explore the content of ELT materials used in Bangladesh in light of feminism as perceived in feminist pedagogy in order to find out how much sensitive and aware ELT materials are of their portrayal or presentation of gender politics existing in the context of operation and what role they assume regarding it. My assumption is that I will be able to look at ELT materials from a different dimension and enrich our understanding bringing about positive changes. The discussion that follows chiefly focus on four themes that will help to develop the theoretical underpinning of the study.

##### *4.1 Feminist Pedagogy*

According to Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009: 87), feminist pedagogy has, for long, been an essential part of women's studies emphasizing empowerment of students' voices and giving proper values to their experiential knowledge, and collaboration and building community. It is also seen as being essential in developing critical thinking faculty and creating awareness among the students by progressive educators from social sciences and liberal arts (Larson, 2005; Markowitz,

2005). Being familiar with gender stratification, its dynamics and politics involved in it, students reveal that consciously constructed web of power politics prevailing in the society is more responsible for inequality and that such design is even responsible for their individual behavior and outlook towards such artificially created discrimination. Hence feminist pedagogy attempts to engage students in discussion of power politics in relation to gender. It also leads them forth to stop such politics of inequality and inequity (Zimmerman, McQueen & Guy, 2007). Teachers here more serves like agents of change and play the role of a catalyst.

Earlier Linda (1990: 1) included issues of gender, class, race, and sexual orientation other than gender in her attempt to defining feminist pedagogy. According to her (Linda, 1990: 1) . . . feminist

pedagogy is about validating the process of teaching . . . Feminist pedagogy make [*sic*] visible the real experience of gender in society, in the school and in the classroom. It unmask the dynamic of power/powerlessness, the devaluation of women and the invisibility of their experience.

Shackelford (1992: 570-576) identifies three major themes of feminist pedagogy. Though they are culture specific, they have relevance for our contexts. They are as follows:

- 1) Examining and denouncing the dominance of white male over minority and female in the classroom; empowering all stakeholders.
- 2) Feminist analysis of gender with a view to giving them a safe place and voicing their 'lived' experiences; comparing and contrasting their unheard stories/ narratives to others'; voicing their lived experiences in contrast to objective norms of knowledge and understanding, thus initiating subjectivity and ensuring multiplicity of narratives by avoiding and denying over simple reductionist explanation. Thus students are actively engaged in knowledge production as opposed to passive recipients of knowledge.
- 3) Emphasizing knowledge and the process of imparting i.e., how one teaches is as important as what one teaches; introducing multiplicity of approaches in knowledge production.

It is noticed that feminist pedagogy begins with revealing gender politics and its process of victimization and develops towards safeguarding the victims' original identity, creating awareness about it, resisting victimization, advocating for and creating platform for raising their voice against discrimination originating from gender and enfolded other factors like ethnicity, race etc. It also attempts to incorporate these traits into curriculum and pedagogy by problematizing such issues related to oppression, suppression and inappropriate domination happening through politicized (mis)representation in education. Hence my next point of discussion attempts to develop understanding of representation, particularly in reference to language teaching and learning materials.

#### *4.2 Representation in ELT materials*

Mustapha (2012: 255) found that reflection is closer to reality than representation is as it might be colored by "the artists' ideological and social values, in other word, representation often reflects the dominant culture that the artist represents and tends to portray." Representation can be propaganda for the politicized dominant ideological views of those who are representing and their way of doing it, not what or who(m) is represented. The objects of representation perennially possess the status of the 'other' whether they are represented as they ARE or as they SHOULD BE. Mustapha further (2012: 259) says, "Gender representation in textbooks might be seen as either reflecting certain ideological values that society holds or a subversion of the cultural norms." Thus, he seems to imply that truth is missing in representation in either ways. For instance, Filak (2001) reviewed a set of ELT course books in Poland and found that women are mostly portrayed as devoted mothers and wives who take care of the house, children, husband; who wash, clean, and cook. Such representation of women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Poland is most likely to be biased, political and exclusive. However, a lot of such instances are presented in section 4.4 where I have highlighted why the issue of representation in textbooks is important.

### *4.3 Impact of textbook*

Jones et al (1997: 8) said, “[the] text book carries a unique authority which is created and maintained through its texts. . . these are understood as the legitimate version of a society’s sound knowledge”. Both Yaqin (2002) and (Robson 2001) surmised almost in similar tone that the perception of textbooks as being authoritative gives it more potential to influence its primary users i.e., the young learners; often learners are found to identify themselves with certain characters. The issue regarding impact of textbooks on learners becomes more complicated when it comes to language education. Kandharaja (2012: 5-6) says, “In the case of language education, textbooks play an even more important role because the content of language instruction is embedded in culture”. While evaluating ESL textbooks from the cultural perspective, Ndura’s (2004) study finds that content of the language instruction material can have significant impact on students. She adds “The content of instructional materials significantly affects students’ attitudes and dispositions towards themselves, other people and society. This is particularly so with students of English as a Second Language (ESL) whose success in a new environment is conditioned not only by their mastery of the new language, but also, and especially, by their ability to negotiate the new culture (Ndura, 2004: 143)”. Hence, Poulou’s (1997) warning that linguistic sexism in textbooks creates damaging representation of the real world and detrimental pedagogical effect especially for women and girls sounds relevant. Asserting the long lasting effect of the textbooks on the learners’ minds in relation to gender bias. Stromquist et al (1998) emphasized modifying textbooks to eradicate such biases in representation as textbooks are used as tools for implementing the political agenda of the curriculum.

Referring to Lee (2011), Mustapha (2012: 245) says, “. . . educational materials are key mechanism of socialization that instills values and attitudes in young people, including differentiated gender roles . . .” He (ibid: 245-6) further adds, “The general finding is that the kind of gender bias in texts is inimical to gender equality in the education of learners and it will impact negatively on their development. In fact, the kind of gender unfairness in texts does not only present inequality

in the representation of members of sex groups, especially women, but puts a particular sex group on the other side of the bright light. Thus the overwhelmingly poor representation of female characters in terms of visibility, subordination, stereotyping of personality traits and occupational roles (including illustrations), and derogatory treatment [ . . . ] is reechoed by Lee (2011) as common features in contemporary learning materials.”

Thus these studies provide with the rationale for the present study pursuing the same line of argumentation as is adopted by the author.

#### *4.4 Review of relevant studies*

Sunderland (2000) explored the field of gender representation in textbooks happening in the early 1900s 1970s and 1980s. Gender stereotypes and gender role stratification is found not only in ELT materials but in other subjects like accounting as well (Tietz, 2007). However, I will confine my study within the purview of ELT materials. That educational materials are key mechanism of socialization implanting values and attitudes in young generation is one of the central reasons for these studies. Literature presents discussion of several issues related to representation of women. For example, the use of the generic masculine (pro)noun in English has been seen as one of the factors impeding communication and enhancing discrimination towards women (Kaye 1989; Nilsen 1977). Such discrimination is termed as sexism. Sexism in ELT is often linked to and interpreted in light of generic use of nominalization (e.g., chairman to refer to chairperson), generic use of pronominalization (e.g., he to refer to unknown agent), and general portrayal of women in their archetypical roles (e.g., women as homemaker), as assumed in a male dominated society.

Gender stereotyping in addition to sexism, is another aspect that is prevalently found in the studies done by Hartman and Judd (1978). Kaye (1989) and Sunderland (1992). Hartman and Judd (1978: 383-93) found that males outnumbered women in terms of visibility in the textbooks. They also pointed out certain other forms of sexism in terms of female representation in the textbooks like sexist jokes and conversations. They found stereotypes in representation like

overemotional women; women frightened by movies, and mice; women nagging their husbands, doing household chores like cooking, baking, polishing, mending, sewing etc. They found men being assigned to diverse jobs and women to a few. They presented examples of generic pronominalization (e.g., everyone should do his duty) and generic suffixation (chairman) and attempts to use unmarked forms of titles (director - directress) and criticized them. They (1978:389) pointed that '-girl' as suffix is used to refer to a woman when '-boy', as a counterpart to that word, is not used in similar cases e.g., salesgirl and salesman.

In another study, Kaye (1989) further details that, in many texts, women are even negatively represented e.g., as 'alcoholics', 'drug addicts' etc. Earlier studies of sexism in course books revealed male characters outnumbering female characters and female characters to be stereotypically over-emotional like talking on the phone for a long time, moaning about not being married at the age of 35.

Farooq (1999) analyzed Japanese EFL texts used by junior college students and argued that males were always initiating the dialogues. He found the male dominating in terms of the length of utterances (61%), number of utterances (51%), and average of utterances (60%). In a similar study done in Iran, Ansary and Babaii (2003) found that males were present in 67% of the topics as compared to females. Sivasligil (2006) conducted a study for the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Turkish EFL textbooks and found the males dominating the turns of conversations in both the books. Similar findings are presented in a study by Hamdan and Jalabneh (2009) who investigated into EFL textbooks used in Jordan and found that those books prefer presenting men as the dominant agent in dialogues and reading passages. The results show that conversational topics in EFL and ESL textbooks are guided and dominated by male characters.

Arikan (2005: 36) counted the images of male and female in two course books *The New Headway* and *Think Ahead to First Certificate*, and found that women are underrepresented in these visual materials (29.80 % females versus 70.20 % males). Lee and Collins (2008) revealed that women are still commonly associated



with household chores and men, with work outside; women are weak, and men, strong; women are more naive; and men, more active; women, less frequently mentioned than men in both the written and visual modes. Mukundan and Nimehchisalem (2008) conducted a study on gender representation in Malaysian secondary school English language textbooks and revealed gender bias discriminating against women. Porreca (1984) identified slight changes in the textbook writers' attitude to represent women stereotypically though she rather confidently surmised that men still remained the beneficiary. However, in a more recent study than Porreca's, Dominguez (2003) conducted a content analysis of a *New Interchange Intro* course book and found that the book represented women in an atypical way e.g., they are seen in jobs other than the stereotypical ones like housewives and babysitters. In the book, women are found not to experience subordination as is seen in other books. Mustedanagic (2010) found non-stereotypical representation of women in Swedish school textbooks.

Primarily drawing on Sadker and Sadker's (2001) classification of seven types of gender bias i.e., invisibility, linguistic bias, stereotyping, imbalance, unreality, fragmentation and cosmetic bias, and later extending the classification to more variables like nationality, ethnicity, race, religion and social class, Ndura evaluates a set of ESL textbooks and finds 3 types of cultural biases to be prevalent there: stereotyping, invisibility and unreality. Ndura's study suggests five strategies to teachers to confront the cultural bias in the textbooks. They are - 1) creating students aware of the cultural biases in the textbooks 2) critically examining the instructional materials 3) producing supplementary teaching materials 4) avoiding the avoidance game i.e., introducing controversial issues to the students and asking them to participate and 5) listening to the student's version of their own culture. Thus Ndura's study not only identifies instances of discrimination but also suggest measures to deal with them in a pedagogically constructive way.

Spender's (1980) arguments that women are given a 'negative semantic space' in language, particularly in English, and are forced to go through semantic derogation is well substantiated as she draws

attention to the word pairs like mister – mistress, bachelor – spinster etc. In each of the cases, the female counterpart has at least one negative connotation while all the connotations of the male counterpart are positive. Such claims that (English) language contains a lot of sexist issues more necessitate creating awareness about the representation of women in language education materials.

In short, the studies reveal that conversational topics were guided and dominated by male characters in ELT materials. Gender bias is still prevalent in texts (Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Lee, 2011). It is found that awareness about gender representation in educational materials has been able to draw the attention of the materials writer and bring about desired modifications in the nature of materials. The issues discussed above are hardly explored in Bangladeshi ELT materials. A cursory look at the materials seemingly suggests that it is worthwhile to explore the field of ELT materials in Bangladesh in the light of feminist pedagogy.

## 5. Method

The data required for the article is collected following the qualitative tenets of research. Content analysis technique is used. Selected chapters from the course books are analyzed and evaluated to arrive at the findings. While analyzing the content of *English for Today* (2012), the focus of analysis, as in Kandharaja's study (2013: 57) at the time of analyzing the Tamil Nadu textbooks, is chiefly on themes, language, exercises and pictures. 'Impressionistic evaluation' (Kabir, 2012: 145) of 4 units of the book chosen purposively is employed.

Since the author himself analyzes and evaluates the course book (*English for Today*, 2012), inquiry of such type might have the risk of being subjective. Hence, he has taken every caution to present as much detail as possible so that validity can be reached through replication. The study is done neither within the vertical nor the horizontal paradigm and so its generalizability, too, is neither sought for nor claimed. Since such study is first of its kind in Bangladeshi context, it falls more within the purview of academic exploration. The intent of the article is not to make any highly critical claims but to present modest efforts towards revisiting the educational materials

from new and different perspectives, not employed upon in this part of the world.

## 6. Data Analysis

The analysis followed by its discussion on the four units of *English for Today* (2012) is presented below.

UI	L	Topic	Protagonist	M	W	N	Task & Exercises
Good Citizens	1	Can you live alone?	A young man	2 4	9	2	E. Matching pictures with statements
	2	Knowledge, skills and attitudes					C. 1. Reference to Abraham Lincoln 3. Tisha and Ritu assigned household chores 6. Mouli's mother's anxiety
	3	Good character					
	4	Responsibilities	Rony's mother and Rony				D. A girl and a boy passing by a dirty place where dirt is thrown outside the dustbin

Table 1: Analysis of Unit 1

[U = Unit; L = Lesson; M = Pictures of clearly identifiable Men; F = Pictures of clearly identifiable Women; N = Pictures of unidentifiable/ gender neutral people or inanimate objects]

### 6.1 Analytical discussion and interpretation

The story of L1U1 is about a man who leaves his social life and goes to the woods. After some days, being unable to live alone, he 'took a wife to cook meals' and becomes a social being again. The content of the next two lessons are gender neutral. The story of L4U1 is about Rony and his mother. He is sent by his mother to buy salt and

chillies. When tasks and exercises are analyzed, it found that in task (E) in LIU1, women and men are given stereotypical roles. In picture (b), a man is found helping his wife with cooking but in other pictures, men are portrayed in central and more heroic roles like boys fighting and other boys preventing them from doing so, a vendor selling vegetables to a housewife, the head of a family sitting on a high stool and accompanied a lady sitting on a low stool counseling the children, a male driver driving and a male service worker cleaning the streets, the male security guards, the male village chief and the young males doing social works. In exercise (C) in L2, a quotation from Abraham Lincoln is mentioned, Tisha and Ritu are seen busy with household chores, Mouli's mother is given the role of a caring mother. In exercise (D) in L4, a girl and a boy are seen passing by a dirty place where dirt is thrown outside the dustbin. However, the boy walks attentively and guides the girl who curiously looks at the dustbin and follows the boy.

It is noticed that female characters are presented stereotypically here. They are helped by men in kitchen but they are not seen in the diverse roles of a village chief, driver, vendor, security guards, and other jobs. Even their individual identity is denied. For example, Rony's mother does not have a name. She is known by her son's name. Neither does Mouli's mother. Mothers seem to have no name of their own. The young man 'took a wife', does not even get married. Such way of describing marriage has a Biblical connotation, definitely not indicated here. It sounds vulgar the way it describes the act of getting married to a woman as if women were commodity and could be taken. Such expressions fall much under critical discourse analysis which, at this moment, is not employed upon here.

U5	L	Topic	Protagonist	M	W	N	Task & Exercises
Climate Change	1	The greed of the roaring rivers	Meherjan affected by river erosion	1	1	12	D. a typical homeless woman who lives in a slum
	2	Environmental pollution					

	3	Man and climate					
	4	Putting our fish in hot					D. Fisherman
	5	A friend of the Earth					

Table 2: Analysis of Unit 5

It is noticed that in the title of L3U5, 'Man' is used generically to mean both man and woman in spite of having options for using a more neutral and familiar noun like people or human. In reading task (A) in L1U5, Meherjan is represented as the tragic protagonist who is a representative of 'a typical homeless woman who lives in slum (as it is presented in task (D))'. Does it imply that all the women in Bangladesh who are victimized by river erosion and lost their husband and family live in slums? How does such overgeneralization of women in distress do justice to working class woman affected by natural disaster in the country and why is a case for a woman in prosperity not generalized? In task (D) of L4U5, another case is use of generic noun is found e.g., fisherman though there were words like fisherfolk or fisher which do not have sexist undertone.

U7	L	Topic	Protagonist	M	W	N	Task & Exercises
People who stand out	1	Zainul Abedin, the great artist	Zainul Abedin	11	5	4	A. man-made plight
	2	The art of silence	Partha Pratim Majumdar				
	3	Flashback					
	4	The beginning	Mother Teresa				
	5	The missionary					
	6	Love for humanity					

	7	The wizard of Apple	Steve Jobs				
	8	Job's childhood					

Table 3: Analysis of Unit 7

Unit 7 is basically about 4 great people in their respective field. Three of them are male and one, female. It has 8 units out which 3 units are allocated of Mother Teresa and the rest for Zainul Abedin, Partha Pratim Majumdar and Steve Jobs. If the lesson titles are observed, it will be found that the names of the two male personalities are mentioned there whereas Mother Teresa's name is neither mentioned nor clearly indicated. In task (A) of LIU7, one example of using gendered compound formation is found in words like 'man-made' though there were ways to avoid using gendered word e.g., artificial. Some of Zainul Abedin's paintings portray women holding jars and men in cultivation. Selection of such paintings seems political.

U1 2	L	Topic	Protagonist	M	W	N	Task & Exercises
Roots	1	My roots		4	2	2	
	2	My roots -2					A. 7 remarks from 4 male & 3 female characters D. Mr Islam, the protagonist & his brothers
	3	The return of the native	Michael Madhusudan Dutt				
	4	In search of Identity					Task B a letter about a problem is written by Mithun to Avajon

							E. TV anchors: Mojnu Mia slum dweller, Fazlur Rahman Immigrant to UK, Nilima Chowdhury social scientist
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Table 4: Analysis of Unit 12

During the analysis the task (A) in L2U12, 7 remarks on the roots of their family are mentioned. Out of them 4 remarks are from the male characters as their names suggest and 3, from the female characters. In task (D) of the same lesson, Mr. Islam is the protagonist. His and his brothers' decision to stay in the village and work there is heroically glorified. It's an all-brother family, having no sister as if a sister cannot be there to be a part of such heroism. Michael Mashusudan Dutt is the protagonist of L3U12. In task (B) of L4U12, 2 letters are presented. Mithun, whose identity cannot be clarified as it can be a name given to both the sexes in Bangla, writes a letter to Avajon, a pseudonym given to a fictional character who responds to readers' queries in the newspaper. However, the name Avajon is not generally given to people in Bangladesh though it may be used as a noun, and as an adjective without any change in morpheme with both male and female nouns. In most of the cases it is used with male nouns. In task (E) of the same lesson, one TV anchor interviews two male characters who present two different cases of migration and a female social scientist. Here attempts have been made to assign a non-stereotypical profession to a woman though in this case, unlike the case of Meherjan, no attempt of generalization is made. As for the pictures, in U12 L1, a picture sequence is presented where men are seen hanging from the train. No female representation is made.

Four units of the book are analyzed. The analysis includes both texts, characters, themes, words and phrases, tasks and exercises and pictures. 40 characters (51.95%) in the photos are male, 17 characters (22.07%) are female. It was not possible to analyze 20 instances of picture content (25.97%) as they include either gender neutral

portrayal or inanimate objects. Similar kinds of results were found as the author elsewhere (Kabir, 2012) asked the practicing teachers to find out the number of males and females in the textbook (*English for Today*, 2001). Though variation was found in their counting, all of them found the underrepresentation of women in pictures. However, women are found to be underrepresented in both the books. In *English for Today* (2012) instances of stereotypical representation, gender biases, under representation, often misrepresentation, and sexism are found there to a significant extent. Care was taken to reduce generic use of (pro)nominalization, Only one or two instances are there where women are seen in non-stereotypical roles.

Excessive stereotypical representation of men can create the impression that women are not capable of doing what men can do. It confines learners' perception of women, their social and familial roles, their capacity to work, and their equality.

## 7. Conclusion

The impressionistic evaluation of the course book unfolds that disparity and distortion characterize the representation of women in the course book used for grades 9 and 10. Women are not appropriately projected there. The fundamentals features of feminist pedagogy are hardly followed. Such finding calls for more in-depth research based inquiry into the matter across the materials used in all classes; creating awareness among the textbook writers and teachers; and replacing such elements from the book as soon as possible with a view to creating a nation, not corrupted by the politics of gender, linguistically, socially and culturally.

**\*Endnote:** An earlier draft of this article with the same title was presented in the **National ELT Conference on “ELT Programmes, Pedagogy, and Researches: Issues and Challenges”**, organized by Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka, on 21 March, 2014.



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