



ISSN: 1817-6798 (Print)

Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

available online at: <http://www.jtuh.tu.edu.iq>

Sexism in Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray: Linguistic Analysis

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Keywords:

Sexism, Overt Sexism, Implied Sexism, Mills,
Wilde, Dorian Gray.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 Feb. 2020

Accepted 26 Feb 2020

Available online 6 May 2020

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A B S T R A C T

This paper differentiates as a first step between the terms sexism, gender, and sexuality. It deals with the sexist language used by Oscar Wilde in writing his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This literary work is analysed according to Sara Mills model suggested in her book *Sexism and Language*. This model falls into three levels: Overt sexism, Indirect sexism, and Discourse analysis level. Only two of these levels have been adopted in the present paper that are: Overt sexism level and Discourse analysis level.

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.25130/jtuh.27.3.2020.24>

التمييز على اساس الجنس في رواية وايلد صورة دويان كراي: تحليل لغوي

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الخلاصة:

كخطوة اولى يميز هذا البحث بين المصطلحات التمييز على اساس الجنس ، نوع الجنس و الجنسانية. يتناول البحث لغة التمييز الجنسي التي استخدمها اوسكار وايلد في روايته المشهورة صورة دويان كراي . وتم تحليل لغة هذا العمل الادبي باستخدام انموذج سارا ملز والذي اوردته في كتابها التمييز على اساس الجنس واللغة . ويقسم هذا الانموذج الى ثلاث مستويات التمييز الجلي ، التمييز

1. Introduction

The concept of sexism is one of the most controversial domains in the recent linguistic studies for the term has seen the light in an attempt to finding compromising ground between males and females. The term sexism is usually associated with other terms that are engendered by the movement of feminism and its theoretical concepts such as gender and sexuality. Differentiating among these interrelated terms helps to avoid overgeneralizations and misunderstanding. The Britannica Encyclopedia defines sexism as “prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls.” (<https://www.britannica.com>) Gender, however, refers to conditions and points of view that perpetuate stereotypes of social roles based on individual’s biological sex. A common form of gender discrimination is based on the notions that teach particular discourse about traditional gender roles for males and females which characterize the patriarchal communities. According to the patriarchal views, men and women are opposite, with widely different and complementary roles: men are the strong sex and are more capable than women, especially in the realm of logic and rational reasoning, let alone the physical strength which is distinguishing feature of masculinity. Women are relegated to the domestic realm of nurture and patiens and their roles are devalued when compared to men’s who are not fit for domestic work and are not superb at being caretakers (Ibid). Sexuality, on the other hand, indicates the condition of being characterized and distinguished by sex (Pickett and et al, 2000, p. 1596).

The origin of the term *sexism* appeared during the “second-wave” feminism of

the 1960s (<https://www.britannica.com>). Fred R. Shapiro believes that the term "sexism" was coined in 1965, by Pauline M. Leet during a "Student-Faculty Forum" at Franklin and Marshall College. Sexism appeared in her "Women and the Undergraduate" as a forum contribution, in which she defines it by comparing it to racism, stating: "when you argue that since fewer women write good poetry this justifies their total exclusion, you are taking a position analogous to that of the racist—I might call you in this case a 'sexist'". She further asserts that "the racist and the sexist are acting as if all that has happened had never happened, and both ... are making decisions and coming to conclusions about someone's value by referring to factors which are ... irrelevant" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexism>).

Mary Vetterling-Braggins, who is one of the forerunners of sexism, describes sexiest statement as "a statement is sexist if its use constitutes, promotes or exploits an unfair or irrelevant or impertinent distinction between the sexes" (Mills, 1995, p. 83). Thus any use of language that encourages or urges discrimination based on sex is deemed to be sexiest. Sexism is a belief that one sex is superior to or more valuable than another sex or it is the discrimination against women which is based purely on their gender. It imposes limits on what women in a patriarchal community can do in comparison to men. The concept of sexism aims at raising consciousness about the oppression towards girls and women (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexism>).

Generally, sexism is applied against females. Its role is to sustain patriarchy, or domination of male, through conventional ideologies and material practices that repress women on the basis of sex or gender. Women repression, manifested through their absence of choice, usually refers to two main accounts: the

economic exploitation and the social domination which certainly includes violence against women (<https://www.britannica.com>).

Sexism is a transparent manifestation of women's position in the values, culture, and ethics of a given society. It mainly “stems from larger societal forces, wider institutionalised inequalities of power and ultimately, therefore, conflict over who has rights to certain positions and resources” (Mills, 2008, p. 1).

Sexist ideology in its extreme form is known as misogyny, hatred of women. Usually in societies of high rates of misogyny, brutality against women is prevalent as for instance, domestic violence, rape, and the commodification of women and their bodies. Mistreatment of women at both the individual and the institutional levels is present in communities that objectify them i.e. where women are treated as property or second class citizens. For instance, a woman being victimized of rape (on the individual or personal level) might be told by a judge and jury (the institutional level) that she was culpable due to her appearance and the way she was dressed (<https://www.britannica.com>).

Society gender studies, which are conducted by feminist linguists, stress the social inequalities between women and men that do not reduce these differences to biological factor. On the other hand, sexism attempts to clarify that prejudice and discrimination depend on sex or gender form the social obstacles that prevent women/ girls from excelling in different scholarly, economic, and professional fields. Dismantling sexism in society means that social patriarchy must be overcome. The solution of gender inequity lies in altering sexist culture and institutions (Ibid).

Literature is abundant with fictional works that exhibit sexist language and are worth studying. Literary works reflect the culture, conventions, and beliefs of the writers and their communities in a given period of time. For example, literary works that had been written in the Victorian Age reflect the conventions that were dominated at that time. To bring about sexism that lurks in any literary work whether fictional or poetic, one should adopt a model that helps to clarify the aspects of sexism in the language used. Mills (2008) has proposed a model that is fit to be used in order to analyse a literary work. Her model is basically founded on several main steps. She proposed that the model is not going to follow the classical method of analysis that relies on specifying the sexist language selection used a work of art and then reforming it to remove its sexist quality. Mills suggests that in order to reform language many critical steps should be taken on many levels which more encompassing than word change or avoidance of using generic pronouns. She believes that change must take place at institutional, educational, legal, and social levels. (Mills, 2008, p.159)

Linguistic sexism, which means sexism imparted within language, is found in various languages and exists in many forms (Pauwels, 1998, p.16). In her analysis of the linguistic sexism, Mills found out that sexism in language may occur in different contexts in the societal build up i.e. at individual level and institutional and even public level. Sexist language is manifested through the asymmetrical way of describing female and male characters, for instance by describing women by their appearance more often than men (Mills, 1995, p.162). She suggests that the exposure of linguistic sexism is one of the necessary methods to alter sexist structures in the community (Mills, 2008, p.159). Mills specified two types of sexism; overt sexism and indirect sexism. The first type comprises hate speech, words and meaning, insult terms for women, as well as

first names, surnames and titles. This type gives priority to male domination over female explicitly. Hate speech is the term that indicate speech that is regarded per se as an incitement to violence and that is sufficiently offensive to constitute violence in its own right (Ibid, p.38). The second type includes sense of humour, presupposition, and conflicting messages which are more complex than the first type in that it implicitly conveys sexism.

Mills emphasizes the importance of sexism at discourse level and she suggests two types of discourse levels in which discrimination against women is evident. They are: firstly describing female and male characters by appearance and secondly describing male and female characters by their relationship to others. Mills (1995, pp.162-3) asserts that male characters tend to be described by their personality while women tend to be described by their appearance. She also confirms that women are more often referred to by their relationship to others specifically as being mothers and wives.

In this paper, Mills' model will be applied to Oscar Wilde's novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray". This novel embodies the Victorian gender roles and ideas on sexism. Oscar Wilde published his work in the late-Victorian Era. Victorian gender roles and thoughts of sexuality are incorporated in the novel. The Victorians are known for their repressive moral codes, and during that time the direct reference to sex or even any indirect reference that brought sex to mind was strictly taboo (Muldoon, 2005: x). In Victorian society, male and female lived in separate spheres. Men were too busy to spend much time with women (Salamensky, 2002, p. 581).

In accordance with Martin Danahay, the Victorian era showed a most extreme form of gender separation, with strict separate spheres for the two genders. Such gender separation was enhanced through images and texts that

implicitly and explicitly mentioned that work was for men only, and not appropriate for women. The dominant public sphere of work was strictly segregated from the private, feminine sphere of the household (Danahay, 2005, p. 2). Victorian women are treated as men's slaves, as "her life is one of continual, abject, and unrequited toil", and "she is exposed to all the violent revulsions of feelings that follow, among rude men, the gratification of animal passion". This states that women were treated as 'the sex', which stressed and they were only identifiable by their natural biological and weak physical functions and that their character was controlled by traditional gender roles (Parker, 1995, p. 6).

The female characters in the novel are secondary and they never play an effective part in the development of the actions of the novel. The only female character which plays an important part in the novel is Sibyl Vane.

2. The Analysis of "The Picture of Dorian Gray"

The picture of Dorian Gray is one of the most prominent and controversial novels that Wilde has ever wrote. The novel, which was published in the late Victorian age, has aroused hostile criticisms against the Wilde himself. It was considered immoral and reflects Wilde's homosexual tendencies despite Wilde's refutations for these dangerous allegations. Wilde considered the novel to be a form of hostile criticism against the prejudice of the Victorian people and their hypocrites of strict moral codes and self-denial. The work, generally, reflects the sexist nature of the Victorian age and oppression which was inflected on women during this age.

The sexist nature of the novel, which will be examined by the use of Mills

model, is clearly seen in the following aspects: the dominance of male characters for the whole novel is about three male characters that are: Dorian Grey, Lord Henry, and Basil Hallward, hate speech, misogyny and insults represented mainly by Henry's views towards women, and titles and names which mostly reflect male characters.

2.1 Overt Sexism:

Overt sexism is evident in the novel and it appears in the following aspects:

2.1.1 Hate Speech and Misogyny:

This explicit aspect of sexism is expressed by the speeches of Lord Henry Wotton whose views about women are always negative and reflect his open antipathy toward women. He is, in fact, presented as a misogynic character whose charisma is sophisticated and contagious. He considers women to be loud, silly, and unpleasant. Lord Henry put his misogynic opinion straightforward when he addresses Dorian saying:

‘My dear boy, no woman is a genius: women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly. They represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as we men represent the triumph of mind over morals ... I believe that women appreciate cruelty more than anything else. They have wonderfully primitive instincts. We have emancipated them, but they remain slaves looking for their masters, all the same. They love being dominated. (Wilde:pp. 45-5)

This unmistakably sarcastic speech reflects Henry's view towards women. It reflects his misogyny marked temperament and the inferiority of women in the Victorian age. Women are discriminated against in many possible ways in this speech. Hate speech is one of the apparent aspects that can be clearly traced here for example; "*no woman is a genius*", "*they have nothing to say*", and "*women are a decorative sex*" are purely sexist expressions emphasizing the inferiority and the predominant social oppression of Victorian women. Viewed as weak, hollow, and primitive, women appear to be living in a different sphere that is not suitable for men counterparts. Furthermore, the passage offers clear evidence on open antipathy or misogyny towards women as in the idea of slavery. Henry, who is an aristocratic upper class man, believes that women are naturally and biologically fit to be slaves and that it is men who can emancipate them from this slavery yet they still need male domination.

2.1.2 Insult Terms:

Another aspect of overt or explicit sexism in the novel is insult terms which are mainly used by Lord Henry. Insult terms are an effective means used to discriminate women. Words such as "*primitive instincts, slaves, dominated*" are used in order to affirm male domination over women and show their inferior position. Another example of insult terms is used once again by Lord Henry who attacks women saying: "Never trust a woman who wears mauve, whatever her age may be, or a woman over thirty-five who is fond of pink ribbons. It always means that they have a history" (Mills, 1995, p. 130). Here Henry insults Victorian women of being promiscuous and have illegitimate affairs which are out of marriage. Through the rest of the novel, it is Henry's task to inflict insults to women in general and to some female characters in the novel in particular.

Thus Henry, imposes himself as a misogynic man.

The other character that shows an implicit type of insult is Dorian Gray. The following example shows implicit, yet hurtful, insults toward women Dorian stated while he was talking with Harry.

“Ordinary women never appeal to one’s imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in one of them... They have their stereotyped smile, and their fashionable manner. They are quite obvious” (Wilde:pp. 60-1).

In these lines Dorian lashes severe implicit insults towards women. He considers them shallow and trivial. For him, women are busy with their appearances and have no or limited inner resources therefore they are easily approachable and hence controllable. This view, once more, is compatible with Lord Henry's and it proves that it's deeply imbedded in the thought and consciousness of the society towards women. Furthermore, it reflects the prevailing sexist nature of the society and its institutions. In the beginning of the novel, Dorian was presented as an innocent and handsome young man who values, loves, and respect women. Because of the negative and sexist view toward women Dorian was forced to change his view to match the prevailing sexist view of his society. Consequently, he appears to blame women to be predictable and stereotypical and he disregards that they acquired these negative qualities because of the oppression and discrimination the society imposes by force on them. Men are viewed as superior to them because it is them who made

the rules and it is them who determine what is decent and what is not for women.

The social claim that individual's sex does predict about his/her capability, brilliance, or personality is the reason behind Dorian's negative and sexist view about women. Extracting social behaviour from biological determinism permitted huge amount of freedom for women to change the stereotypical gender roles and expectations.

2.1.3 Names, Surname and Titles:

The sexist nature of the novel is also traced in the domain of names, surnames and titles. Sybil Vane is the name of the leading female character. She fell in very short love relation with Dorian and dies tragically in the end. Her name, which is pronounced in the same way as 'vain', is a direct indication of the vain fate that awaits women in the Victorian age. Mills believe that "women first names tend to have diminutive forms" (Mills, 1995, p. 61) a case which is reflected in the name of Sybil Vane. The second part of Sybil name is a direct indication to the value of women in the Victorian sexist society. Women at this age, as Wilde assumes, live their lives in vain and are disparaged by men.

It is customary for Victorian women to hold the names of the family of their husband which means that any married woman must drop her original family name. "Surnames have displayed a form of possession of the woman by her husband on marriage. Taking the husband's surname coincided with the appropriation by the husband of the wife's possessions and property"(Mills, 1995, pp. 61-2). This objectification of women is present too in the novel despite the fact that there are few female characters. For example, the name of Mrs. Leaf, who is Dorian's housekeeper, is not stated in the novel. This means that

Mrs. Leaf is a possession and a property of her husband for she is identified and made known by her husband's name. Other examples of this type are Lady Henry and Lady Brandon. Both are identified by their husbands' names and not by their own names. Thus, their names, with which they should be identified, are not functional and deactivated. Women in the novel are depicted as nameless character whose lack of identity is only complete when it is bound with a male identity.

2-2 Sexism at Discourse Level:

The other level of sexism is discourse level sexism. It is divided into two types: discourse context which describes women by appearance and discourse context which describes women by their relation to others.

The novel is rich with sexist texts which describe both women and men by appearance. The most striking aspect in the difference between men and women is that male characters are mostly described in a positive way while all female characters, except, of sure, Sybil Vane, are described negatively. In fact, the physical qualities that are naturally attributed to women are attributed to male characters particularly to Dorian Gray. For example, When Basil Hallward described his first meeting with Dorian, he states:

“A curious instinct of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. I did not want any external influence in my life” (Wilde: 10).

Here Hallward's first impression upon meeting Dorian are more suitable to be

expressed when meeting a charming beautiful woman. This description is not related to appearance level only; it is, no doubt, includes the personal level and thus affirms the sexist nature of the novel.

A more explicit example on the sexist description in favour of men over women is when Lord Henry first met Dorian. Looking at Dorian, Henry, in a form of monologue, states:

“Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candor of youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity” (Wilde, p.25).

Henry's description of Dorian is entirely fit for a female character. Phrases as *" finely-curved scarlet lips", " frank blue eyes", " crisp gold hair"*, and *" passionate purity"* must be attributed to a female character because biologically such qualities are feminine not masculine. Thus, the descriptions are not only a form of bias to men but a form of deliberate discrimination against women.

On the other hand, women are usually described by appearance and not by personality or deeds. The most prominent examples are pronounced by Lord Henry. Addressing Dorian, Lord Henry unleashes his misogynistic speech stating:

“There are only two kinds of women, the plain and the colored. The plain women are very useful. If you want to gain a reputation for respectability, you have merely to take them down to supper. The other women are very

charming. They commit one mistake, however. They paint in order to try to look young. Our grandmothers painted in order to try to talk brilliantly. Rouge and esprit used to go together. That has all gone out now. As long as a woman can look ten years younger than her own daughter, she is perfectly satisfied. As for conversation, there are only five women in London worth talking to, and two of these can't be admitted into decent society" (Wilde, pp. 54-5).

Lord Henry in this speech expresses his sexist treatment of women by describing their looks. Here, he identifies two type of women who play different roles in the community. Plain women or in other words ordinary women will enable man to gain respect in the Victorian community while the other type which is referred to as the coloured play different role and alludes to negative and sexist connotations. This type is not fit to be taken to public because they put too much make up and draws a negative attention. Furthermore, Henry points out that women are found of looking young. Their only concern in life is to look young and beautiful. In this respect he never attributes this quality to men.

Another example on the sexist nature of the female appearance description is when Harry Hallword described Lady Brandon's voice saying "**her shrill horrid voice**"(Wilde, p. 11). Lord Henry replying said "**Yes; she is a peacock in everything but beauty**"(Ibid). Henry's sexist statement dismantled her from all the qualities of feminine beauty.

The second aspect of discourse level sexism is clearly seen in the female relation to others. This type of sexism appears evidently in the relation between Sybil Vane and Dorian especially at the end of their relationship. Sybil Vane committed suicide not only because she loved Dorian but because she believed

that her existence in this world will never be complete without Dorian who eventually regarded her as passing memory.

3. Conclusions

Sexism is one of the multifaceted aspects in the study language nowadays. It is a product of the feminist movement and aims at achieving equality between men and women and to fight against any type of discrimination against women. The paper tackles the concept of sexism in literature specifically in Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and examines its aspects. The novel is a reflection of the long and deep rooted sexism in the English language and gives a clear image of the position and the status of women in the Victorian age. Sexism is not a product of a short period of time, in fact, it is part of the culture of the people who are the users of the language and it is an inseparable part of their history and organization.

The sexist linguist seeks to make language a neutral tool that is used to serve both sexes equally. It also seeks to make the users of language conscious and aware of the dangers of the sexist language which can lead to negative results.

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