

Representations of Gender Roles in University Textbooks on Iranian Medieval History based on Van Dijk's Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Ideology is the essential belief of a group with special political, social and religious opinions. This study follows Van Dijk's discourse analysis approach which introduces the distancing strategy to explain the ways in which writers promote the positive characteristics of "us" by marginalizing the positive characteristics of "them". Historical accounts in educational textbooks are, likewise, a place for the representation of such ideological constructs which are hidden in the accounts and narratives of the realities of the past. The present paper studies Persian and translated history textbooks (on the Samanid, Ghaznavid, Saljuqid, and Qarakhanid periods) in which the gender differences between men as "us" and women as "them" can be detected. The findings of the paper indicate that, firstly, both Iranian and foreign authors have mentioned few names of or roles for women, and, secondly, both groups of writers only emphasize the role of women in connection to marriage, and, thus, ignore the important part women played in Iranian history. This biased representation of women in history textbooks, which, ultimately, favours men, affects the students' perception of gender roles.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideology, Gender Roles, University History Textbooks, Iranian Medieval History

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Van Dijk (2004) believes that ideologies, as a system of the ideas of social movements and groups, not only reflect different groups' understanding of the world but are also a basis for the social action of all members of the group. Jaan Mikk (2000) holds that textbooks shape the destiny of a nation. They reflect ideological, gender and social policies of a country. The present study adopts Van Dijk's approach to comparing gender representations in four textbooks written by the Iranian historian Abolqasem Forouzani on Iranian history and two other history books in *The Cambridge History of Iran* series on the same period translated by Hassan Anousheh.

2. Theoretical Framework

Van Dijk's approach is adopted in the present article to study the representations of gender in some Iranian history textbooks written by Iranian and Western historians. In this study men are referred to as "us" and women as "them" and the ideology of gender is investigated in both groups of textbooks.

3. Methodology

All the words used in both groups of books were counted and the ones related to men and women were identified in order to be compared in both groups. The t-test was conducted to see whether the differences were significant or not.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Compared to non-Iranian historians, Iranian historians, influenced by the scholars of Iranian medieval period, have used men's names more than the women's in their accounts of historical events. According to Van Dijk, power and dominion can be expressed by marginalizing some members of the group, which is usually carried out by ignoring them or not accepting them. In the textbooks by Iranian historians, women are depicted as submissive and unimportant, resulting in underestimating their role throughout history.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicate that the ideology of gender inequality in university history textbooks in Iran underestimates the role of women in the history of the country by non-critical reconstruction of gender roles in Iranian medieval history. Moreover, it plays a great part in shaping the worldview of university students toward gender roles. Given the significant role of school and university textbooks in institutionalizing different ideologies in students at schools and in universities, the findings of this study can help us understand the ways in which ideologies are reproduced in the history books by Iranian authors and the translated history books written by non-Iranian historians and scholars.

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