The Contours of Minority Discourse in English Language Textbooks

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Abstract

This study examines the integration of Minority Discourses in the common course paper of English for undergraduate students in the sixth semester of their BA programme (2017) at Calicut University, by attempting a Critical Discourse Analysis of the module 'The Marginalised and Their Rights' from the English Language textbook: *Spectrum.* The article employs Critical Discourse Analysis as an approach to study how minority discourses operate in English language textbooks. The article attempts to analyse the module to interrogate whether and how Minority Discourses in undergraduate syllabi limits or expands the understanding of the rights of minorities in the English language classroom. The article demonstrates how epistemological ideologies are normalised through the hegemonic spaces established by the prescribed textbooks over time and are accepted as the academic canon. The article engages with discourses of the minority through a close analysis of the language with which minority identities are represented and reaffirmed by the textbook as a mode. Language thereby becomes a political act and moves beyond the curricular, the literary and the textual to the epistemological and experiential fabric of identity politics. The article, however, will be limited in its approach as it is delimited to the study of the textbook alone as a pedagogical tool.

Keywords

Minority studies, critical discourse analysis, English language, textbooks, curriculum studies

Background

Since the implementation of the Choice-Based Credit and Semester System (CBCSS), the English language is offered by the Calicut University to the undergraduate students of all streams through six common courses over three years. These textbooks have, over the years, covered three domains of language literacy: operational literacy, cultural literacy, and critical literacy (Jayendran, 2021). The English language textbook discussed in this article, *Spectrum*, was one of the six prescribed textbooks for the common course in English language for the undergraduate students of the arts, humanities and commerce disciplines across the colleges under Calicut University from 2017 to 2022. The article argues that the textbook cannot be regarded as a mere English language textbook; rather it has played a significant role in shaping the narratives on minorities within the academic fraternity in the largest university of the state of Kerala. In the process, it defines minority discourses for the emergent bilingual student population across five districts of the state: Kozhikode, Malappuram, Wayanad, Palakkad, and Thrissur.

Roots of Thinking Around Minority Discourse

Since the publication of Pinar's article, 'Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text' (1995), it has been argued that curriculum can no longer be seen as a political text alone, but rather it must also be studied as a text through which race operates, and pervades us. Extending the argument, the textbooks also become contact zones in which understandings of race and identity are constructed. Hence, it is essential that one understands the influences of the English language textbooks on the academic community of the state. Textbooks generate the epistemic spaces where definitions of minority are scripted, morphed, and enacted through classroom practices.

There have been studies that examine gender and power (Faheem, 2023) in the school curricula in Kerala, but there is hardly any study that examines the curricula of higher education. As P. Anvar, a member of the Kerala State Higher Education Council, notes, "higher education is one of the most discussed but less researched topics" (2015). Further, William F. Pinar in his book, *Curriculum Studies and the Politics of Educational Reform* argued that "the academic field of the curriculum is embedded in the national culture" (Pinar, 2005). If it is so, then it follows that the educational system of each place impinges on the social,

historical, and institutional settings of the place. Hence, while studying the enactment of the curriculum in the Higher Education system in Kerala, it is imperative that one understands the educational culture of the state. Due to the dearth of such studies in the context of Kerala, the article will extend the arguments on the nation to the state, albeit with limitations.

In his essay, 'Curriculum Studies in India', Manish Jain argues that, following Robert Dottrens (Jain, 2015), India can be classified as a "syllabus society", one that embraces the "textbook culture". This means that India emerges as a nation placing undue emphasis on the syllabus and according centrality to the textbook, leaving minimal to no room for involvement or negotiation by teachers and students. A testimony to the argument is evidenced by how the universities in Kerala have devised English language textbooks for undergraduate courses; the devising of a textbook thus enables academia to place the reading of each text in a specific context. Such a practice is, however, uncommon in other universities of the nation, say for instance in Delhi University or Mysore University. And in such a society, a study of the curriculum necessitates a study of the textbook. Arguably, even a study of the English Language textbook alone reveals how English Studies textbooks have mediated the higher education process, whether through epistemological questions of what constitutes knowledge or through debates on what knowledge is most valued in universities. Such a study alone will signal the future directions for English Language education in Kerala by demonstrating how Critical Discourse Analysis can be used to expose the implicit racism in the academic discourse of English Language textbooks.

Textbook's Definition of Minority

Minority Studies is often observed to be limited to the study of select identities that are universally acknowledged by legal and institutional processes and bodies. The focus of academia is also not very distinct from this pattern; the textbooks and curricula work in tandem to reinforce the prevailing understandings of the discourse in minorities. The common course offered by Calicut University for the UG students in Kerala is more or less in adherence to the said pattern. The category of "minority" is also understood in terms of canonical formulations. And the prescribed textbook, *Spectrum,* as well, follows the same pattern. The fact that the textbook *Spectrum* is subtitled "Literature and Contemporary Issues" is no deterrent to that.

Following the argument, one of the objectives of the course, as stated in the syllabus, reads as follows: "To disseminate knowledge about the rights of minorities such as children, animals, and the disabled and thus create a positive change in the societal perception of them." Such an objective invariably reduces the spectrum of minority issues in India in the module "The Marginalised and Their Rights" to the understanding of three labelled communities: that of children, animals and the disabled. The contemporaneity of the minorities in India is not given due diligence in the textbook. The preface of the textbook proclaims that the exercise section "persuades the students to ponder over the social and cultural significance of the prescribed texts". However, such an attempt is made invisible in the exercise section where the questions are limited to comprehension questions such as " What did Bet buy at the train station?"; "How, according to Malala, are the terrorists misusing the name of Islam and Pashtun for their personal beliefs?" etc.

The module begins with the lesson, which presents Malala Yousufzai's UN speech. Malala is presented as the victim of a generation of women who have been denied education by the Taliban. The textbook frames women's and girls' education in third-world countries as a minority issue. Such a framing cannot be negated, for it is an issue that the world battles with even today. However, the tendency to limit the issue of women's and girls' education to places under the reign of the Taliban alone as a minority issue is rather frightening. Throughout the chapter in the textbook, there is absolutely no reference to the status of women's and girls' education elsewhere, nor is there a reference to other children who are denied access to education, such as the refugees or the disabled. While the issue presented is relevant, it restricts children's rights to the case of Malala—a girl denied education under fundamentalist rule in Pakistan. Such an inclusion happened at a time when there were other child activists such as Greta Thunberg vouching for the earth and Marley Dias advocating for children's literature that includes children like hers. While it is impossible to include all of these as texts, the practice of confining the introduction, the text and the comprehension to a single story alone has a danger that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) forecast as she argues that the problem with the single story is that they create stereotypes; and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.

The second lesson in the module, the poem 'Caring for Animals' by

Jon Silkin, is presented as a poem that, according to the textbook, is to acquaint the students with the necessity to blur the borders of human and non-human and inculcate the understanding of an inseparable bond of life between them. As in the previous lesson, this one also limits its discussion, recognising only animals as the marginalised. Such a nomenclature becomes especially dangerous when one reads this selection against Giorgio Agamben's (2003) idea of the anthropological machine: one in which the human is at the highest position, animals are beneath that and plants occupy an even lower position. Thus, such a text selection with no references whatsoever in the framing of the textbook or the exercises creates the precarity of students limiting their ecological view to that of the *zoe* as suggested by Agamben. The comprehension questions included in the textbook read as follows: "Explain the structure of the poem 'Caring for Animals'"; "In what condition does the poet see the horses and dogs in the street?" etc. Such questions do not create consciousness among students on the need to develop a human and non-human bond. And thus, these questions do not create an awareness of animal rights. The only questions that address the issues of animals as a minority are the ones on "environmental justice" and the one on caring for animals as a "social issue".

The third and fourth chapters in the module include 'Average Waves in Unprotected Waters' by Anne Tyler and selections from *The Cry of the Gull* by Emmanuel Laborit. Disability studies in the module address disabilities broadly rather than focusing on a single defined type of disability. Thus, by dealing with disability studies, the textbook demonstrates how it can suggest new possibilities.

In 'Average Waves in Unprotected Waters,' Tyler maps the struggle of a single mother in raising an autistic 9-year-old. The introduction places the textbook as one that "deals with the pangs of an ordinary working-class woman," and the textbook elaborates the text as one that deals with themes such as "parenting, absent fathers, identity and self-discovery." However, apart from the introduction, the exercise and glossary contradict such objectives. The sections do not contain a single question that urges the students to read the text from such a frame; rather, all the textbook does is assess students' comprehension through questions such as "What was the reason for Bet's early marriage?"; "How did Parkins state hospital look?" etc.

The fourth chapter deserves recognition, as it is the only chapter in the textbook that makes an attempt to create a "positive change about minorities in societal perceptions". The chapter draws from the *Disability Studies Reader* by Lenard J. N. Davis and states, "For centuries people with disabilities have been isolated, incarcerated, observed, written about, operated on, instructed, implanted, treated, institutionalised and controlled probably to a degree unequal to that experienced by any other minority group". However, this chapter also follows the pattern of neglecting deeper questions, the questions that go beyond mere comprehension.

Conclusion

As Michael W. Apple rightly argued in his work *Ideology and Curriculum* (2019), the stipulation of a discourse, including minority discourse,

> …requires not the stipulation of lists and concepts that make us all 'culturally literate' but the creation of the conditions necessary for all people to participate in the creation and recreation of meanings and values. It requires a democratic process in which all people—not simply those who are the intellectual guardians…can be involved in the deliberations over what is important. (Apple, 2019, p. 25)

The article thus demonstrates how ideology dictates the framing of syllabi and the design of textbooks. In doing so, the objectives of the syllabus create an episteme by defining three groups as the minorities of the world, namely, children, animals and persons with disabilities. This proposition demonstrates a power politics. Furthermore, the design of the textbook, particularly the selection of chapters for the module "The Marginalised and Their Rights" demonstrates a politics that risks perpetuating the danger of a single story, as children's rights and animal rights are both framed within narrow, singular narratives. However, in the conclusion, the textbook addresses multiple forms of disability rather than focusing on a single type. Nonetheless, in these chapters as well, the textbook confines itself to comprehension alone. Also, the textbook fails in its attempt to draw any trans-disciplinary connections and remains stagnant at the level of stating and establishing. In addition, though the lessons are situated within a module, the textbook does not initiate discussions on double-marginalisation.

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