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# UNVEILING MARGINALIZED VOICES: A MULTIMODAL EXPLORATION OF MINORITY REPRESENTATION IN IRANIAN EFL TEXTBOOKS (THE CASE OF PROSPECT SERIES)

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## ABSTRACT

Despite Iran's rich tapestry of ethnic, religious, and gender diversity including Kurds, Arabs, Balochis, Turkmen, Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Sunnis, as well as women and girls in their full societal roles educational materials in the country have often been criticized for their homogenized portrayal of national identity. This study critically examined the representation of marginalized voices in Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks, specifically focusing on the Prospect series (Prospect 3), which are widely used in Iranian secondary schools. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in Van Dijk's (2001) multimodal critical discourse analysis framework, this study investigates how ethnic, religious, and gender minorities are represented or systematically excluded across textual, visual, and discursive dimensions of these textbooks. Data were collected through comprehensive content analysis of all six lessons, review sections, photo dictionaries, and supplementary materials within Prospect 3, utilizing a seven-code coding scheme. Findings revealed a complex pattern: while girls and women appear frequently in visual materials (as students, mothers, tourists, and patients), their narrative roles remain largely confined to domestic, supportive, or caregiving positions, with few representations in professional or leadership capacities. In contrast, ethnic and religious minorities are almost entirely invisible, with all character names being exclusively Persian and no representation of minority cultural or religious practices. Foreign nationals (German, Turkish) appear in travel dialogues, yet Iranian internal ethnic and religious diversity remains completely erased. The study discussed the implications of these representational patterns for students' identity formation, sense of belonging, and understanding of diversity. Recommendations for inclusive curriculum reform were provided.

**Keywords:** Educational equity, ethnic minorities, marginalized voices, multimodal discourse analysis, Prospect series, Van Dijk framework.

## INTRODUCTION

Textbooks are often seen as authoritative sources for teaching cultural and linguistic knowledge and skills necessary for effective communication in English-speaking environments (Keles et al., 2021), and evaluating them is essential for any judgment and decision-making. Textbooks in English language teaching play a multifaceted role in shaping students' learning experiences and outcomes. The content within these resources serves multiple functions, ranging from providing language instruction and practice to offering cultural insights and real-world application. As Gheitasi et al. (2022) put it, textbooks in English language teaching have various functions as their content can serve different purposes. The content of textbooks can have a significant impact on learners' perspectives, progress, achievement, and security (Razmjoo, 2007). Additionally, it is commonly noted that school textbooks convey cultural knowledge within societies (Gillborn, 1990). Gillborn's observation highlights that textbooks typically reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and perspectives of a society, shaping students' understanding of various topics and disciplines based on the prevailing societal norms. Therefore, designing ELT textbooks can lead to considerable disagreement among users, trainers and authorities, highlighting the importance of critically evaluating their content from different angles and one of the angles is the minorities, their language, and their culture and how it is taken into account or overlooked (Roby, 2024).

Iran is home to various ethnic minorities, including Kurds, Arabs, Balochis, Turkmen, religious minorities such as Sunnis, Zoroastrians, Christians (Armenians and Assyrians), Baha'i and Jews, as well as other minority groups such as gender. These groups often face inequalities, discrimination and marginalization in society, and their representation in educational materials can either reinforce or challenge existing power dynamics (Elling & Saleh, 2016). Numerous individuals in Iran, including academics, exhibit reluctance in recognizing or discussing the existence of the ethnonational variety within the country, let alone considering them in educational materials, often due to lack of knowledge, bias, or ethnocentrism, or stemming from concerns about the emergence of separatist attitudes and movements (Tohidi, 2001). Researchers emphasize that instructional materials are regarded as essential resources that enhance students' academic performance in examinations and contribute to modern teaching methods and the overall quality of education (Shiundu and Omulando, 2012 cited in Evermeld and Andala, 2023). According to a study by Becares and Priest (2015), the lack of representation of minority groups in educational materials can have detrimental effects on students' self-esteem and sense of belonging. This is particularly relevant in the context of Iran, where there is a rich cultural diversity and minority communities. Razmjoo (2007) suggests that students using a textbook should experience feelings of advancement, assurance, and accomplishment. Additionally, their representation or underrepresentation surely affects all these.

By analyzing the portrayal of minority groups in EFL textbooks, this study seeks to shed light on the ways in which these groups are represented and the implications of such representations on students' understanding of diversity and social justice, since the materials that are responsive and inclusive can boost student participation and enhance academic success and aid in language development and reading comprehension. Despite Iran's cultural diversity, there is the lack of adequate representation of minority voices in Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks (Behnam & Mozaheb, 2013; Gheitasi, 2022; Ghorbani, 2009; Tohidi, 2011). This issue may hinder the promotion of diversity, inclusivity, and cultural understanding in educational materials, potentially perpetuating stereotypes and marginalization of minority groups. By examining this problem through a multimodal lens, the study aims to uncover the extent of underrepresentation and explore ways to enhance the visibility and authenticity of marginalized voices in EFL textbooks in Iran.

The study's significance lies in its potential to enhance diversity and inclusivity in English as Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks by focusing on the representation of minority voices (mainly ethnic, religious, and gender) in Iranian EFL textbooks. By using a multimodal approach, the study aims to emphasize the importance of diverse perspectives in shaping students' worldviews. By critically analyzing how marginalized groups are depicted in educational materials, the study seeks to address gaps in representation, challenge stereotypes, and promote inclusivity in the learning environment. Ultimately, the findings of this study could inform curriculum development, teacher training, and policy-making efforts to promote cultural sensitivity, empathy, and social justice in EFL education and as some researchers in the field have suggested, the objective is to offer solutions for effectively managing ethnic diversity in Iran and formulating appropriate policies that respect the components and culture of the population to enhance national solidarity (Salehi & Jafarinezhad, 2019).

This research is guided by the following question: How are the voices of marginalized groups, including ethnic, religious, and gender minorities, represented in Iranian EFL textbooks, specifically Prospect 3 in terms of language, imagery, and narratives?

This study aims to illuminate the current portrayals of these groups within educational materials, addressing the potential consequences of inadequate representation on students' identities and educational experiences. By critically evaluating how minority communities are depicted, we can better understand the necessity of inclusive curricula that not only acknowledge but celebrate cultural diversity. Such inclusivity is essential for promoting social justice, enhancing student engagement, and nurturing a sense of belonging among all learners. Ultimately, the findings of this research will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of educational resources in shaping perceptions and fostering a more equitable society, thereby encouraging educators, policymakers, and textbook designers to prioritize diversity and representation in language instruction.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Textbooks are essential in school education, providing information, guidance, and structure for teachers to effectively teach a prescribed curriculum (Subramanian & Anagha, 2023). Furthermore, language learning textbooks can influence how we see and understand different voices and beliefs by presenting some as valid and others as less important through the way they are written and presented (Gulliver, 2010). In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of diversity and representation in educational materials, particularly in the field of English as Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks. The exploration of minority voices and perspectives within these materials has become a focal point for researchers seeking to understand and address issues of marginalization and underrepresentation. This literature review aims to delve into the intricate world of EFL textbooks, specifically focusing on the multimodal aspects that shape the representation of minority groups. By unveiling these marginalized voices, we hope to shed light on the complexities of cultural and linguistic diversity within the educational context in general and the EFL prospect textbooks in specific, ultimately paving the way for more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Numerous studies have examined the portrayal of marginalized voices in materials and its impact on students' perceptions of diversity and inclusivity. In the Iranian context, where a diverse range of ethnic groups and marginalized communities coexist, it is crucial to investigate how these groups are represented in EFL textbooks. Fairclough (1992) argued that texts, whether they be written, spoken, or visual, are never neutral forms of communication. Instead, they are always created with a purpose and reflect the beliefs, values, and biases of the individuals or groups that produce them. Accordingly, bias and inequality in representing minorities is not something which can be limited to a special country. It can be recognized across the world and in different issues especially in educational materials since these materials are the

cornerstone of forming the individual's mind. Previous research has highlighted the importance of inclusive representations in educational materials. For instance, Purnelle (1996) delves into a detailed analysis of American education, pointing out an ethnocentric bias that manifests in the way certain studies are conducted and presented in the curriculum. This bias, according to Purnelle, leads to the teaching of negative attitudes such as cursing and hatred towards certain groups or cultures within the educational system.

The implications of this ethnocentric bias, as highlighted by Purnelle, can have serious and harmful consequences on students, perpetuating stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice within the educational environments and society as a whole. Purnelle's argument underscores the importance of critically examining the content and methods used in education to ensure a more inclusive, diverse, and unbiased learning experience for all students. Regarding gender Esen (2007) examined both older and more recent textbooks released in Turkey and found that, despite the curriculum emphasizing gender equality, the newer textbooks continue to exhibit bias towards a particular gender. The textbooks often depict men and gender in stereotypical roles. For example, men are frequently shown in professional and leadership positions, while gender are depicted in domestic roles such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. This difference raises concerns about the persistence of gender inequality in educational materials, highlighting the need for further efforts to address and rectify this issue in the development and selection of textbooks for students. Morgan's research on American high school textbooks validates that despite progress over time, textbooks still contain biases and inaccuracies in the representation of minorities. Furthermore, Morgan found that several textbook authors showed individuals from the Middle East as primitive and lacking intelligence, instead of highlighting their cultural achievements and capabilities. This portrayal of individuals as primitive or unintelligent diminishes their credibility and implies that their progress and strengths are deemed insignificant for mention (Morgan, 2008).

In the context of Iran Peivandi (2008) assessed 95 different compulsory school textbooks (published in school year 2006-2007) covering the sciences, humanities, and religious subjects from Grades 1 to 11. He mentioned that textbooks in Iran are saturated with gender discrimination, where gender are granted minimal significance as individuals, with their societal contributions beyond the household being largely disregarded. In a statistical examination of 3,115 images from various textbooks, it was found that gender is represented in only 21% of images portraying professional settings. However, in images depicting family, maternal roles, and household tasks, gender are present in 77% of the visuals. Too, the textbooks in question do not address minority cultures (ethnicities), traditions, languages, or concerns to a significant extent. Although there is no overt animosity towards officially recognized religious and ethnic groups in Iran, the treatment of religious minorities raises concerns. Peivandi adds that the recognized religious minorities in Iran include Sunnis, Zoroastrians, Christians (Armenians and Assyrians), and Jews. While these religions and their prophets are mentioned respectfully, the textbooks fail to adequately highlight the country's religious diversity, often overlooking the broader spectrum of beliefs present within the society.

Similarly, in the context of Iran, Kheiltash and Rust (2009) studied the inequalities in Iranian Education mainly the representations of gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic diversity, and religious diversity in school textbooks and curricula. Men are predominantly depicted in high-status and high-paying occupations such as doctors, engineers, and scientists. On the contrary, gender is often shown in traditional, supportive roles like teachers, nurses, and secretaries, reinforcing gender stereotypes. They confirm the inequity and argue that educational inequity in Iran stems from a lack of consideration for demographic realities and the diversity that exists in the country, leading to skewed representations and absence of certain minority groups in educational materials. Behnam and Mozaheb (2012) in a study on reviewing the dialogue transcripts of EFL textbooks in Iran, revealed that same-sex participants dominated the conversations. Out of the handful of dialogues that featured both male and female characters, a pattern emerged - they all involved family relationships such as father-daughter or brother-sister. This means that

conversations were predominantly between either two male characters or two female characters. Among the few dialogues that included both male and female characters, the interactions were primarily centered around family relationships. Examples include conversations between a father and daughter or a brother and sister. This suggests that the interactions between opposite sexes were primarily centered around family bonds in the dialogue exchanges. In the same way, in the updated series of EFL textbooks (Prospect Series) studied by Sadri and Tahririan (2013), a noticeable transformation in depiction is evident when contrasted with the previous editions. Men in the new series are illustrated across a diverse range of professions, indicating a broader spectrum of career paths.

In contrast, the depiction of gender in these textbooks remains confined to conventional feminine roles, reflecting societal stereotypes and gender norms prevalent in many cultures. This shift in representation highlights the importance of reevaluating and challenging gender biases in educational materials to promote inclusivity and diversity in learning environments. Melliti's analysis of the Headway Intermediate textbook revealed a bias towards White individuals, with North Africans being inadequately represented (Melliti, 2013). This highlights how language learning textbooks have the power to shape our perceptions and understanding of various voices and beliefs by portraying certain groups as significant while marginalizing others in the way they are depicted and discussed. This shows that the content and presentation of educational materials can have a significant impact on how we view different races, ethnicities and cultures.

Bahman (2020) in a recent study explores how men and gender are portrayed in English textbooks used in Iranian high schools. The findings show that the textbooks predominantly assign men to high-status jobs and gender to low-status jobs, with men having a wider variety of occupations. In other words, the findings of Bahman's study highlight a concerning trend in how gender roles are depicted in educational materials. The unequal representation of men and gender in occupational roles can maintain stereotypes and limit opportunities for individuals to pursue diverse career paths. She maintains that it is essential for educational content to be inclusive and reflective of a diverse society, promoting equality and empowering individuals regardless of gender.

Goodarzi and Weisi (2020), analyzing three Iranian English text books argue that these series (Vision) had biased inserted ideologies in terms of presenting cultures, races, and genders. In one point they acknowledge that there are unequal cultural representations with the dominance of white and male characters. This means that the textbooks portray certain cultures, races, and genders in a negative or stereotypical light, while glorifying others. This kind of bias can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to societal prejudices.

Reviewing five English textbooks, Bowen and Hopper (2022) found that despite requests for more diversity in English Language Teaching textbooks, the majority of the images still primarily feature White or European people. Additionally, it was observed that East Asians, a significant audience for these materials, are underrepresented, along with other groups such as Southeast Asians and individuals from the Middle East and North Africa. In a research Alston et al (2023) focused on how under-represented minorities, including Black, Hispanic/Latin X, and Native Americans, are represented in images within introductory accounting textbooks. There is a widespread recognition that these groups are not adequately represented in the accounting textbooks. They are included in images less frequently than their proportionate share of the U.S. population. The study highlights the importance of visual representation in educational materials, particularly in fostering a sense of belonging among under-represented minorities students during their introductory courses. While previous studies have offered valuable insights, they have predominantly focused on gender. This current study aims to broaden the scope of investigation to encompass not only gender but also religious and ethnic representation. There is a pressing need for a more thorough examination of how minority groups are portrayed in (ELT) textbooks used in Iranian state schools, particularly in the Prospect series, which has not been analyzed from this perspective. This

investigation will include a qualitative analysis to provide a deeper understanding of the diverse voices and perspectives present in educational materials.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The research methodology adopted for this study was qualitative, utilizing content analysis to explore the representation of minority groups within textbooks. The study examined the representation of marginalized voices using the Van Dijk framework (Van Dijk, 2001), with a multimodal approach analyzing both textual and visual elements. As Budiastono and Noverino (2024) outline, Van Dijk (2011) presents three key dimensions:

a) Textual Dimension: Examining linguistic components, including structure and content of written or spoken communication.
b) Discursive Dimension: Exploring broader discourse patterns and structures, and how language usage is influenced by societal frameworks and power dynamics.
c) Social Cognitive Dimension: Investigating how individuals perceive, process, and react to discourse based on their social and cultural backgrounds.

### Sampling

The study analyzed the Prospect 3 textbook (3) انگلیسی, published in 1404 (2025-2026), containing 6 lessons, 3 review sections, and a photo dictionary. The textbook is used in Grade 9 of Iranian secondary schools.

### Data Collection Method

Data collection involved a systematic analysis of both textual and visual elements using a coding scheme based on the Van Dijk framework: textual analysis examines all written texts including dialogues, narratives, and exercises for instances of marginalized voices, while visual analysis scrutinizes all images, illustrations, and visual representations for the representation of minority groups.

### Data Analysis Method

The following coding procedures were used:

1. Visibility Code (V) - How often minority groups are mentioned or depicted.
2. Stereotype Code (S) - Instances where minority groups are portrayed using stereotypes.
3. Positive Representation Code (PR) - Instances where minority groups are depicted in a positive light.
4. Negative Representation Code (NR) - Instances where minority groups are depicted negatively.
5. Diversity Code (D) - How diverse representation is within minority groups.
6. Absence Code (A) - Instances where minority groups are completely absent.
7. Contextualization Code (C) - How well minority groups are contextualized within broader societal frameworks.

## RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the multimodal analysis conducted on the Prospect 3 textbook (English 3, Grade 9) using the Van Dijk framework. The analysis examined both textual and visual content across the six lessons, three review sections, and the photo dictionary, comprising a total of over 287 individual items including images, dialogues, narratives, and exercises. The coding scheme employed seven distinct codes, Visibility (V), Stereotype (S), Positive Representation (PR), Negative Representation (NR), Diversity (D), Absence (A), and Contextualization (C), to systematically evaluate the representation of marginalized groups, specifically ethnic minorities, religious minorities, and gender minorities. The findings reveal a significant and pervasive pattern of underrepresentation and exclusion. The most striking observation is the complete absence of ethnic and religious minority groups throughout the entire textbook. Despite Iran's rich cultural and ethnic diversity, no visual or textual references to Kurds, Arabs, Balochis, Turkmen, or any religious minorities such as Sunnis, Zoroastrians, Christians, or Jews were identified in the analyzed materials. This absence constitutes a form of symbolic marginalization; wherein entire communities are rendered invisible within the official educational discourse. In contrast, gender representation particularly regarding girls and women was more visible, though the nature of this representation raises important concerns. While female characters appeared in approximately 16% of the total visual and textual content, their roles were predominantly confined to traditional and domestic spheres. Only a negligible fraction of female representations depicted women in professional or leadership roles, suggesting a limited and potentially stereotypical portrayal of gender.

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of visibility for marginalized groups within the dataset. The analysis reveals a stark absence of ethnic and religious minorities, who account for 0% of the visual and textual samples (n=287+). While women and girls appear in approximately 16% of the content, their representation in professional roles is negligible, comprising less than 1% of the total media analyzed.

**Table 1**

*Visibility Code (V)*

| Minority category | Frequency | Total images/Texts | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ethnic minorities | 0 | 287+ | 0% |
| Religious minorities | 0 | 287+ | 0% |
| Gender (girls/women in images) | 45+ | 287+ | ~16% |
| Gender (girls/women in professional roles) | 2 | 287+ | <1% |

Table 2 presents the findings on gender visibility across three lessons using the Van Dijk framework. In Lesson 1, three female characters Zahra (mentioned), Farzaneh (as a clever student), and Samira appeared in student and friend contexts. Besides that, a classroom passage remained neutral with no gender specified. In Lesson 2, three female characters Kate, Sara, and Brenda appeared as tourists, a traveler, and a computer user - Kiana and Sara appeared as dialogue participants. In Lesson 3, Elham, Nasrin, and a grandmother appeared in family and domestic contexts and Yalda Night remained neutral with no gender indicator. Despite their visual presence, the narrative roles assigned to girls and women remain limited:

a) Female characters were primarily depicted as: students, friends, mothers, grandmothers, tourists (often lost or needing help), patients, and caregivers.
b) Professional roles for women: Almost entirely absent. The receptionist in Lesson 2 is not gender-specified. The police officer in Lesson 4 is male. The firefighter in Lesson 4 is male. The doctor/medical professionals are predominantly male.
c) Leadership/active roles: Women were not shown as decision-makers, leaders, or professionals in high-status occupations.

The data indicated a complete absence of ethnic (e.g., Kurdish, Arab, Balochi, Turkmen, Armenian, and Assyrian) and religious (e.g., Sunni, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Baha'i) minority groups, reflecting a pattern of systematic erasure within the textbook narrative.

**Table 3**

*Stereotype (S)*

| Location | Content | Stereotype |
|---|---|---|
| L1:18-19 | angry, cruel, rude, selfish, nervous | General |
| L3:50 | "Does grandmother cook New Year meal?" | Gender (cooking) |
| L3:50 | "My mother makes it" | Gender (cooking) |
| L4:68 | Clara lost → needs male police officer | Gender (helpless woman/helper man) |
| L6:99 | Image: "She cares for her mother" | Gender (caregiver) |
| L6:99 | Image: "She cut her finger" | Gender (domestic accident) |
| L6:104-105 | Omid (male) injured | Gender (male risk-taking) |

Table 3 presents the findings on stereotype codes identified across the textbook lessons using the Van Dijk framework. In Lesson 1, vocabulary words including angry, cruel, rude, selfish, and nervous appear as general stereotypes with no specific minority targeting. In Lesson 3, two instances of gender stereotypes emerge: a question asking whether the grandmother cooks the New Year meal, and a statement saying "My mother makes it," both placing women in domestic cooking roles. In Lesson 4, Clara is lost and needs help from a male police officer, reinforcing the gender stereotype of women as helpless and men as helpers. In Lesson 6, two images present gender stereotypes: one showing "She takes care of her mother" portraying women as caregivers, and another showing "She cut her finger" portraying women in domestic accidents. Finally, in Lesson 6, Omid (male) is injured, reinforcing the gender stereotype of males as active and risk-taking. As you see, women are consistently shown in domestic, caregiving, or passive roles (cooking, caring for family, being lost, being injured). Men are shown in professional, active, and decision-making roles.

**Table 4**

*Positive Representation Code (PR)*

| Location | Content | Group |
|---|---|---|
| L1:16-17 | Reza: clever, kind, hard-working, helpful | Male student (Persian) |
| L1:20 | "Farzaneh is a clever student. Everybody likes her." | Female student (positive, limited role) |
| L3:50 | Girls/women in Nowruz discussions | Female characters (domestic context) |
| L6:96 | "Helal-e-Ahmar first aid classes" | State institution (gender-neutral) |

Table 4 presents the positive representation codes identified using the Van Dijk framework. In Lesson 1, a male Persian student named Reza is positively represented as clever, kind, hard-working, and helpful. In the same lesson, a female student named Farzaneh is positively described as "a clever student" whom everybody likes, though her positive representation remains limited to the student role. In Lesson 3, girls and women appear positively through participation in Nowruz discussions, but this occurs within a domestic context. Finally, in Lesson 6, the state institution Helal-e-Ahmar is positively represented through

its first aid classes in a gender-neutral manner. While women appear, their positive representations are confined to student, family member, or patient roles not professional or leadership roles.

Table 5 examines the Diversity Code (D), which assesses the extent to which varied identities and backgrounds are represented within the textbook. The findings indicate a near-total absence of ethnic and religious diversity, as all character names are exclusively Persian with the exception of a few foreign names (e.g., Paul, Brenda, Mehmet), while no references to religious minority groups are made whatsoever. Gender diversity in roles remains limited, with female characters appearing primarily in conventional or domestic capacities rather than professional or authoritative positions. Socio-economic diversity is also minimal, as all depicted characters appear to belong to a middle-class demographic, offering no representation of working-class or lower-income backgrounds. Collectively, these findings suggest that the textbook presents a homogenized and narrow portrayal of Iranian society, failing to reflect the country's actual demographic and cultural diversity.

**Table 5**

*Diversity Code (D)*

| Aspect | Finding |
|---|---|
| Ethnic diversity | Absent - All names are Persian: Ehsan, Parham, Reza, Zahra, Mohsen, Vahid, Nasrin, Elham, Sam, Mina, Mahsa, Amir, Omid, Pedram, (foreign), Paul (foreign), Mehmet (foreign), Kiana, Sara, Brenda (foreign), Ali, Hamid, Parsa, Farzaneh, Samira, Nadia, Behnam |
| Religious diversity | Absent - No mention of Sunnis, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians |
| Gender diversity in roles | Limited - Women appear but in limited role types |
| Socio-economic diversity | Minimal - All characters appear middle-class |

**Table 6**

*Absence Code (A)*

| Minority group | Evidence |
|---|---|
| Kurds | No Kurdish names, clothing, cultural references, or geographical mentions |
| Arabs | No Arab-Iranian names, Ahwaz references |
| Balochis | No representation from Sistan and Baluchestan province |
| Turkmen | No Turkmen cultural elements |
| Azeri/Turkish | No Azeri cultural references despite large population |
| Sunnis | No mention of Sunni religious practices |
| Christians | No Armenian or Assyrian communities |
| Jews | No Jewish Persian representation |
| Zoroastrians | No representation despite indigenous status |
| Baha'i | Entirely absent |
| Women in professional leadership | No female doctors, engineers, police chiefs, firefighters, managers, or political figures |

Table 6 presents the findings from the Absence Code (A), documenting the complete exclusion of various minority groups from the dataset. The analysis reveals a systematic erasure across ethnic, religious, and gendered lines: Kurds, Arabs, Balochis, Turkmen, Azeris, Sunnis, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is are all entirely absent, with no identifiable names, cultural markers, or geographical references.

Similarly, women in professional leadership roles such as doctors, engineers, police chiefs, and political figures are wholly invisible, reflecting a comprehensive pattern of symbolic annihilation.

Table 7 presents the findings from the Contextualization Code (C), which assessed how deeply cultural elements and social groups were embedded within their broader societal contexts. The analysis reveals a stark bifurcation: certain cultural traditions such as Persian Nowruz, Yalda Night, and the Fajr Film Festival are richly and positively contextualized. In contrast, women's societal roles are under-contextualized, largely confined to domestic spheres with little connection to public life. Most significantly, entire contexts are missing entirely: Iran's ethnic and religious diversity receives no discussion, and women are absent from any professional or leadership contexts, reinforcing a narrow, homogenized national narrative.

**Table 7**

*Contextualization Code (C)*

| Type | Finding |
|---|---|
| Well-contextualized | Persian Nowruz (Lesson 3), Yalda Night (p. 58), Fajr Film Festival (p. 57) |
| Under-contextualized | Women's roles in society (confined to domestic contexts) |
| Missing contexts | No discussion of Iran's ethnic/religious diversity; no representation of women in professional spheres |

In the following lines, a detailed textual and visual analysis lesson by lesson reveals how the curriculum systematically privileges certain cultural narratives while marginalizing others across both written texts and visual materials.

**Lesson 1: Personality**

Names: Ehsan, Parham, Reza, Zahra, Farzaneh, Samira, Mohsen, Vahid, Ali, Nadia
Gender Analysis: Zahra (female) mentioned as talkative. Farzaneh (female) described as "a clever student. Everybody likes her." Samira (female) responded positively about Farzaneh
Visual Analysis: Images included both male and female students. No ethnic markers on any characters was identified.
Findings: Women/girls appeared visually but in student/friend roles only.

**Lesson 2: Travel**

Characters: Paul Kress (German male tourist), Kate (female, implied wife), Kiana (female), Sara (female), Brenda (female on website), Mehmet (Turkish male)
Gender Analysis: Kate: "Where is she now? I need to check her passport" - passive role. Kiana and Sara: dialogue about searching for a hotel. Brenda: "What's Brenda doing? She is checking the website"
Visual Analysis: Images showed both male and female travelers. (1) The female was checking a map and (2) Female and male checking passport together.
Findings: Women appeared as travelers and computer users, but their roles were passive or supportive (wife, person needing passport check).

**Lesson 3: Festivals and Ceremonies**

Characters: Elham (female), Nasrin (female), grandmother (female), mother (female)

Gender Analysis: (1) "Does your grandmother cook the New Year meal?" - domestic role; (2)"My mother makes it" - domestic role and (3) Female-dominated conversation about family traditions
Findings: Women are central to this lesson but exclusively in domestic/family roles (cooking, visiting relatives).

**Lesson 4: Services**

Characters: Pedram (male), Clara (female tourist), Amir (male), Phillip (male), Jack (male), Jill (female), Parsa (male), Hamid (male)
Gender Analysis: (1) Clara: "Excuse me sir! I'm lost" - helpless female needing male assistance; (2) Police officer: male; (3) Postman: male; (4) Firefighter: male and (5) Jill: appears only as part of "Jack and Jill" - no independent role
Findings: This lesson showed the strongest gender stereotyping - women as lost/helpless, men as professionals and helpers.

**Lesson 5: Media**

Characters: Mina (female), Mahsa (female), Behnam (male), Amir (male), Ali (male)
Gender Analysis: (1) Mina and Mahsa: conversation over the phone about film festival; (2) Both female characters are active media consumers (watching reports, surfing websites) and (3) Questions about Behnam (male) - "How was Behnam's summer?"
Findings: Women are depicted as competent media users (positive), but the focus shifts to a male character (Behnam) for the reading passage.

**Lesson 6: Health and Injuries**

Characters: Reza (male), Ehsan (male), Mina (female), Omid Abbasi (male), mother (female)
Gender Analysis: (1)"Mina had an accident;" (2) "She takes care of her mother"; (3) "She cut her finger;" (4) Mother responds to daughter's injury and (5) Omid Abbasi (male) injured in fire - active, risk-taking role.
Findings: Women appeared primarily as patients or caregivers; men appear in active/risk-taking injury scenarios (fire).

**Table 8**

*Visual Analysis – Photo Dictionary*

| Content | Gender representation |
|---|---|
| angry kid, brave soldier, careless man, cruel boy, funny story, neat person | Mixed (soldier male, boy male) |
| lazy person, shy girl, generous girl | Female images present |
| Travel: fill out form, book hotel, pack for trip, talk to receptionist, weigh baggage | Mixed (receptionist gender not specified) |
| Festivals: commemorate NE martyrs, Islamic-Iranian culture | Male-dominated imagery |
| help charity, bring to the ER, keep the city clean | Mixed |
| see war movie, change TV channels, install antivirus | Mixed |
| Multiple female images: she takes care of her child (p. 129), she cut her finger (p. 129), she had a heart attack (p. 130) | Female in domestic/patient roles |

As detailed in Table 8, a critical content analysis of the photo dictionary revealed significant gender bias in role allocation. Female figures were restricted entirely to domestic and caregiving duties (e.g., "she takes care of her child") or passive medical scenarios (e.g., "she cut her finger"). Conversely, professional, high-agency, and leadership occupations (e.g., soldier, firefighter) were assigned exclusively to male figures.

Table 9 provides a consolidated summary of the findings across all seven Van Dijk coding categories, comparing the representation of ethnic minorities, religious minorities, and gender (women/girls) within the Prospect 3 textbook. The data reveal a pattern of systematic exclusion and marginalization. Ethnic and religious minorities are entirely invisible across all codes, registering 0% visibility, zero instances of positive representation, and complete absence in both textual and visual content. For gender, while women and girls appear in approximately 16% of images, their representation is markedly limited: less than 1% occupy professional roles, they are frequently portrayed in stereotypical domestic or caregiving capacities, and their contextualization is confined to student, patient, or family-oriented settings. Although no explicit negative representations were identified, the pervasive stereotyping and absence from leadership or professional contexts function as implicit marginalization. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the textbook presents a homogenous and narrowly constructed image of Iranian society, effectively excluding ethnic and religious diversity while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender roles.

**Table 9**

*Summary Table of Corrected Findings*

| Van Dijk code | Ethnic minorities | Religious minorities | Gender (Women/Girls) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Visibility (V) | 0% | 0% | ~16% of images; <1% in professional roles |
| Stereotype (S) | N/A | N/A | Women in domestic/caregiving/helpless roles |
| Positive (PR) | 0 instances | 0 instances | Female students positive; limited to student roles |
| Negative (NR) | None (absence) | None (absence) | None explicit; stereotypes function as marginalization |
| Diversity (D) | None | None | Limited to age variation (young girls, mothers, grandmothers) |
| Absence (A) | Complete | Complete | Women absent from professional/leadership roles |
| Context (C) | None | None | Women only in domestic/patient/student contexts |

## DISCUSSION

This study has demonstrated that Prospect 3, as a state-sanctioned EFL textbook, systematically marginalizes ethnic and religious minorities through complete erasure while simultaneously confining women to narrow, stereotypical roles despite their partial visual presence. The textbook constructs a homogenized, Persian-centric, Shia-dominated national identity that bears little resemblance to Iran's actual demographic and cultural diversity. The persistence of these patterns across nearly two decades of textbook production, despite multiple studies documenting similar findings, suggests that this is not an oversight but a reflection of deeper ideological commitments. The absence of Kurdish, Arab, Balochi, Turkmen, Armenian, Assyrian, Sunni, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Baha'i voices is not a neutral curricular choice. It is a political act of exclusion that denies the legitimacy of Iran's pluralistic identity. If education is to fulfill its transformative potential to foster understanding, empathy, and social cohesion then textbooks must reflect the diversity of the societies they serve. The findings of this study call for

urgent and comprehensive reform of Iranian EFL materials, not merely to add diversity as an afterthought, but to fundamentally reimagine whose stories are told, whose identities are affirmed, and whose futures are imagined in the classroom. Until that change occurs, Iranian EFL textbooks will continue to function as instruments of exclusion rather than inclusion, perpetuating marginalization rather than challenging it.

This study extends Van Dijk's (2001) critical discourse analysis framework to Iranian EFL textbooks, demonstrating its utility in uncovering patterns of symbolic annihilation across ethnic, religious, and gender dimensions. The findings corroborate earlier research by Peivandi (2008), Kheiltash and Rust (2009), Behnam and Mozaheb (2012), Goodarzi and Weisi (2020), and Bahman (2020), revealing that despite nearly two decades, minority representation in Iranian textbooks has not improved the Prospect series (2025–2026) perpetuates the same patterns of erasure documented in materials from 2006–2007, suggesting a systemic ideological orientation. The study further contributes to intersectional analysis by demonstrating how marginalization operates differently across identity dimensions: ethnic and religious minorities are completely erased, while women are visually present but role-constrained, revealing a layered pattern of marginalization beyond simple presence or absence. Finally, it contributes to the growing international literature on diversity in ELT materials, comparative studies from Turkey, the United States, Tunisia, and Cambodia document similar patterns, though the specific configuration of erasure in Iran appears particularly pronounced.

For textbook authors and curriculum developers, this study recommends including characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Kurdish, Arab, Balochi, Turkmen, Armenian, Assyrian) with authentic names and cultural references, acknowledging religious diversity (Sunnis, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians), depicting women in professional and leadership roles equivalent to men, showing men in domestic and caregiving roles to challenge stereotypes, and presenting female characters as agents and decision-makers rather than passive recipients. For policymakers and the Ministry of Education, the study calls for mandatory diversity audits, establishment of minimum representation standards, inclusion of minority stakeholders in textbook review processes, and required gender analysis of all materials, emphasizing that the continued absence of minorities in 2025–2026 textbooks represent a systemic failure requiring structural rather than piecemeal intervention. For teacher educators and classroom teachers, the study recommends developing critical pedagogical approaches that supplement textbook content, creating complementary materials representing Iran's actual diversity, facilitating classroom discussions about representation and inclusion, and encouraging students to critically analyze whose voices are present, absent, or marginalized.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that *Prospect 3* operates as an instrument of ideologically driven exclusion, systematically erasing Iran’s ethnic and religious minorities while confining women to restrictive, traditional roles. By extending Van Dijk’s critical discourse analysis framework across intersectional dimensions, the findings reveal a persistent, systemic failure: the textbook constructs a homogenized, Persian-centric, and Shia-dominated narrative that ignores the nation's true pluralism. Despite decades of critical academic literature documenting these disparities, contemporary materials continue to perpetuate symbolic annihilation, highlighting an underlying commitment to ideological conformity over genuine representation.

Addressing these deep-seated inequities requires comprehensive structural reform rather than superficial additions. Textbook developers and policymakers must institute mandatory diversity audits, establish equitable representation standards, and actively include minority stakeholders in curriculum design. Simultaneously, educators must adopt critical pedagogical strategies to challenge biased narratives and supplement missing perspectives in the classroom. Reimagining Iranian EFL education to reflect the

authentic tapestry of its society is crucial if language instruction is to serve as a bridge for social cohesion, empathy, and mutual respect rather than a tool for marginalization.

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