

Gender in Children's Literature

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Abstract

Children's literature always helps to shape the blooming minds in an interesting way. Here I will discuss how gender roles are portrayed in the children's literature down the ages. We can notice stereotypical gender roles in the eighteenth century fairy tales. The Grimm's Brothers deliberately changed the original texts with additions, deletions and alterations to teach the children of their gender roles in favour of the then patriarchal system. Defoe and Swift emphasise the superiority of man to woman. Sex and gender became matters of discussion in children's literature of 1960s and 1970s. When scholars realized that theories related to feminism help empower women, popular texts were discussed in new ways and help the young ones to understand the gender equality in a better way.

Keywords: children's literature, gender, Grimm's Brothers, patriarchy, feminism

Books and visual literature help children to understand their society and their culture. When children go through stories in books or visual literature and discuss them, they develop their intellect, become more pragmatic and expand the horizon of their mind. Children are made aware of the dominant ideologies through books or visual literature. According to Peter Hunt, we study children's literature "... because it is important, and because it is fun – children's books have, and have had, great social and educational influence; they are important both politically and commercially. From historical point of view, children's books are valuable contribution to social, literary and bibliographical history; from contemporary point of view, they are vital to literacy and culture and are at the leading edge of the trend towards image-

and-word, rather than simply written words” (*Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature* 17).

Children’s literature begins with oral stories, poems and songs and *Aesop’s Fables* was the first printed book in Europe. In the seventeenth century the Puritans produced children’s literature focussing on education. Children’s literature got its distinguished identity in the second half of eighteenth century. Newbery, an important figure in publishing children’s books, published about thirty books including *A Little Pretty Pocket- Book* (1744), *Mother Goose Rhymes* (1765) and others. During bedtime children used to listen to the lullabies found in *Mother Goose Rhymes*. Newbery included stories like *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* in *Newbery Mother Goose Stories*. In fairy tales we notice how writers try to inculcate the idea of gender roles among children. They can effectively develop children’s sex-role identity through their adept use of literature. From time to time fairy tales changed noticeably with the ever changing spirit of society. Fairy tales were part of oral tradition and originally belonged to the matriarchal system. Writers shape fairy tales according to their own need and that can be noticed in seventeenth century. Zipes said, “... the institutionalizing of the literary fairy tale, begun in the salons during the seventeenth century, was for adults arose out of a need by aristocratic women to elaborate and conceive other alternatives in society than those prescribed for them by men” (*Fairy Tale* 23).

During the first half of the eighteenth century the writers of children’s literature had two objectives: to amuse children and instil good manners and morals in them. In this process they were directly or indirectly taught their gender roles. It was really very tough for women to contribute to children’s literature and even if they wrote, support for patriarchy was deep rooted in their writings. Everywhere good looks, devoutness, submissiveness, meekness, subordination and passivity of women were praised.

In Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published the first volume of *Kinder—und Hausmärchen* (meaning ‘Children’s and Household Stories’) in 1812 in order to collect and preserve popular German folklores. It was among the first and notable collection of folklores and fairy tales and a noticeable attempt to popularize traditional oral tale types such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Frog Prince*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*. These tales were translated by Edgar Taylor who published a book named *German Popular Stories* (1823-26) and also modified according to the taste of the children. The Grimm’s Brothers deliberately added many things and altered the original texts according to what they wanted children to learn. They “emphasized specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time” (Zipes, *When Dreams Came True* 74). In most cases gender is intentionally stereotyped in children’s literature to make children cautious about the cultural standards of gender. While discussing gender in nursery rhymes from *Mother Goose’s Melody* Coltrane in his *Gender and Families* (1998) says that gender stereotyping is done in these rhymes “teach young people the cultural standards for masculinity and femininity. Many are cautionary tales about what happens when one violates those cultural standards” (110). For the girls he says:

Polly, Dolly, Kate, and Molly,
All are filled with pride and folly,
Polly tattles, Dolly wriggles,
Katty rattles, Molly giggles;
Whoever knew such constant rattling,
Wriggling, giggling, noise, and tattling (109)

And for the boys he adds:

When I was a little boy

My mama kept me in:
Now I am a great big boy
I'm fit to serve the king;
I can handle a musket;
And I can smoke a pipe;
And I can kiss a bonny girl,
At twelve o'clock at night (109)

Reading Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) were always a source of pleasure to both adults and children. Misogynistic attitudes are found in the writings of the most eighteenth century male writers. In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* female role is not given importance. The early part of the novel covers Crusoe's adventures on the island, which are generally looked upon as male acts but no female character becomes the part of his narrative. Absence of women or a little scope for them in the writing reveals Defoe's attitudes towards women. His intentions become more clear in the preface to the novel when he offers his writings about 'man' to a readership of "wise and good Men" (1972 01). Here, gender roles are portrayed stereotypically.

Swift portrays women as inferior, insignificant and secondary having excess of emotion, lacking rationality and guided by impulse. In the novel he expresses his distaste to female body which actually exposes his misogynistic nature. The expressions like "the caprices of womankind" and "lament their confinement" in Swift's *Gulliver's Travel* hint at the narrative of patriarchal culture.

"The wives and daughters lament their confinement to the island, although I think it the most delicious spot of ground in the world; and although they live here in the greatest plenty and magnificence" (Part 03 Chapter 02 Page 20).

“This may perhaps pass with the reader rather for a European or English story, than for one of a country so remote. But he may please to consider, that the caprices of womankind are not limited by any climate or nation, and that they are much more uniform, than can be easily imagined” (Part 03 Chapter 02 Page 20).

After the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution condition of children and women got better which gives children’s literature a good opportunity to thrive. Women who understood children’s psychology and their need more than men and more importantly are capable of raising children became more interested to contribute to the writing for children. Maria Edgeworth’s household tales help children to develop their moral character. Gender roles were still limited to stereotypes in the literature. In *Little Women* (1868) Louis May Alcott portrays woman as a weak, passive and docile wife and could not come out of convention.

In the modern world scholars, critics and theorists or researchers seem to be interested in the issues of subversions and gender roles in the field of children’s literature. Whenever anyone or any group is empowered, it is done at the expense of the other. In Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* books (1932 onwards) and Enid Blyton’s *The Famous Five* (novel series, 1942 onwards) two sets of woman characters are found- some want to play the role of conventional women and the others challenge stereotyped roles of a woman but ultimately give in to the norms of the society. Since then feminist and Marxist critics realized the need to empower the marginalized people and so took up the field of children’s literature. Consequently popular texts of children’s literature were read and reread differently in new ways.

Sex and gender in children’s literature were much talked about in nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies. John Stephen illustrated masculinities and femininities in a schema in. He places two sets of characteristics – male and female in binary opposition. He includes traits

like strong, violent, unemotional, aggressive, competitive, rapacious, protective, player, independent, active, ‘hunter’, etc. for a man and traits like beautiful, non-violent, emotional, submissive, sharing, caring, vulnerable, prize, dependent, passive, ‘victim’, etc. for a woman (“Gender, Genre and Children’s Literature” 18). According to him a “socially desirable man” will follow male stereotypes and a woman who challenges the female stereotypes will be “undesirable” (19).

According to Simone de Beauvoir, “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex* 301). She believes that sex is natural but gender is constructed. Contemporary writers of children’s literature like J. K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer and others have adeptly incorporated the gender issues in their works. In J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels (1997-2007) traditional roles of gender are challenged and conventions are broken. Here Hermione Granger is portrayed as superior to Harry and Ron when it comes to knowledge of magic. In the earlier novels of the series she looks confident in herself, and is clever, helpful and capable. Traditionally violence is associated with a man. When Voldemort, after killing Cedric, tries to kill Harry Potter, Harry does not show any violence and uses his magic only to disarm him. Draco Malfoy, Voldemort and Peter Pettigrew are portrayed as violent. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry wants to cast a spell on Bellatrix Lestrange because she is the killer of Harry’s godfather, Sirius. But it does not work and she says: “You need to *mean* them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain—to enjoy it—righteous anger won’t hurt me for long—I’ll show you how it is done, shall I?” (891). The statement shows Bellatrix’s violence. It is very clear that violence is associated with evil and in this process traditional gender roles are subverted at some places.

Harry gets emotional whenever he remembers his parents and friends. Harry, earlier shy and insecure, is competitive and protective. In the Triwizard Tournament he saves his fellow champions at the cost of his rank in the tournament. He also helps Fleur and Krum and

saves Cedric from a giant spider. So he is first protective then competitive. Harry's friend Ron becomes more aware of his outer beauty before the Yule Ball at Hogwarts. Ron breaks the norms. Hermione also concentrates on her physical beauty to satisfy the male gaze. She succumbs to the social norms. Here, gender of the characters is based on performance. According to Judith Butler gender is not ascertained by one's body but it is repetition of "discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex" (*Gender Trouble* xxxi). Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman in their article "Doing Gender" says, "[G]ender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort"(129).

In Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008) characters do not much deviate from gender stereotypes. Here we find gender inequality in the novels. Bella is weak, submissive, obedient and docile. She wants to be tan, sporty and blond. She desperately needs Edward, who has extraordinary power for being vampire, to care and protect her. Bella is very close to the image in Brannon's "True Woman" (*Gender: Psychological Perspective* 162). On the other hand Edward belongs to a wealthy family, is extremely powerful and domineering. In the field of jobs male characters dominate. Carlisle is a doctor, Charlie the chief of Police, Mr. Mason, Mr. Banner, Mr. Varner- all are teachers whereas most of the woman characters either stay at home or are engaged in ordinary jobs like working as nurse, as receptionist, as waitress or as restaurant host.

In Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen was a hunter for her and her family's survival. She has lost her father and her mother is in deep shock and grief. When she looks at her mother, she finds femininity as weak and dependent. Realizing this she chooses to adopt masculine gender roles and it was necessary for their survival in this cruel and hopeless world. She plays the role of a tomboy because she loves freedom. After her father's death she acts like a man to support her family. Katniss is adorned in the opening

ceremony of the hunger games and also at other places to attract the male desire. She manipulates the gaze by pretending to be in love with Peeta and she purposefully does all this to get lucrative sponsorship. Laura Mulvey says, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly” (*Visual and Other Pleasures* 19). In the epilogue of *Mockingjay* we find Katniss and Peeta have two children and there are no more hunger games for well-being of humanity. Tomboy Katniss could experiment with femininity and masculinity in her childhood but this transgression is acceptable to society only in childhood. With puberty she comes close to a man. So it ends up with heteronormativity and ultimately she learns and conforms to the female gender roles of the patriarchal system by becoming a wife and mother.

In *Disturbing the Universe* Roberta Trites says, “But in the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including [...] social constructions of sexuality and gender” (3). As children grow up, they come across different books or other forms of literature and try to relate themselves with characters there and also with various social institutions. Books as well as visual literature equip them to clarify their ideas about the social hierarchy and gender roles and help in shaping their identity. In the contemporary children’s literature, change in attitudes towards gender is noticeable. Females are being depicted as ambitious, strong, independent and witty.

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