

GENDER DISPARITY IN JUVENILE LITERATURE

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Original Article

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Abstract

Female under-representation has been under scrutiny since the start of feminist movement. Women have been suppressed in all domains of human life, be it real or reel, they have been shown as having no significance. In literature, patriarchal prejudice is prevalent there both in direct and indirect forms. It is also observed that a tendency towards equal representation of genders has also come to work to counter that oppressive patriarchal discourses. In the study, we have selected CBT publication entitled as Short Stories for Children published in India. The collection consists of 17 stories for kids written by different writers for the entertainment of children. This paper discusses gender stereotypes, i.e. how females and males have been portrayed, their representation in titles, as central and side characters, their roles and activities, gender segregation, and some counter tendencies such as equal gender roles have been analysed. Such deconstruction helps Asian educationists understand the penetrating pervasive gender biased representation with its different forms and discursive levels which is impinging on the juvenile minds by normalizing this phenomenon.

Keywords: juvenile literature, gender stereo-types, patriarchal prejudice, gender roles

Introduction

Children are the most innocent human creature on the planet, their mind is synonymous to a blank slate which is fresh to be engraved with conceptual patterns layering in societal structure. Upon exposure, child develops specific mental constructs to guide his behavioural twists and turns in future. Among that mental constructs, perhaps, gender inequality is one of the most significant ones. Since the days of yore, gender inequality is shaping patterns of human life. After the blast of feminism, significant and profound efforts are made to discourage this harmful social construct, with many studies confirming improvement towards gender paucity, still it is prevalent in society in multiple modes which call for further relentless efforts as steps orchestrating its ouster. After primary caregivers, books are considered as one of the foremost sources children are exposed to. These juvenile books have been around since 1500s (Gooden & Gooden, 2001), but are under the close scrutiny since 20th century to determine the measure to which they exhibit gender bias. As cited in Gooden and Gooden (2001), psychologists and leaders of liberation groups assert that children's exposure to texts locking gender bias negatively affects their perception of women gender roles. This accounts for scores of studies that have been conducted to unravel gendered patterns threaded in children's literature in the West, yet no such significant study has been

conducted on children literature produced in Pakistan, in particular. The present paper aims to highlight gender discrepancies involved in children literature, more specifically gender roles assigned to characters, portrayal of central character, common themes and pictures illustrated in the story books.

Generally speaking, juvenile literature is prepared for ground level language speakers like younger kids who have yet to develop basic literacy skills. Therefore, stories are designed with simple plots, basic language with plane concepts belonging to everyday life. To maintain their interest, colourful illustrations share the major place. Often, those pictures and the imprinted text maintain one-on-one correspondence. Sometimes, the entire story is conveyed through orderly arranged pictorial scenes to evoke their curiosity and imaginative skills. Here, parents as well as teachers as child's primary caregivers play a significant role in making child aware of the concepts portrayed in those pictures. If one considers author's involvement in building child's intellectual outlook, those interpreters as parents, teachers or other adults aiding child while making sense of that printed world, are equally responsible for permeating child's perception. Taylor (2003) also affirms that portrayal of two different sexes in the books of children may be of lesser importance than the ways in which both teachers and parents attempt to read those books with children, for "representation" and "interpretation" are two different things.

In gender context, the books of children can be categorized in two ways: sexist and non-sexist literature. Non-sexist books aim to avoid gender inequality, with language quite clear, themes preferably unorthodox, character roles confronting gendered activities with unbiased portrayal of auxiliary as well as main characters in an attempt to bring harmony between sexes. There involves equal level of foregrounding and backgrounding for both sex poles. To the contrary, sexist literature exhibits gendered language, with pictures portraying gendered choices, themes referring to gender biasness with inferior roles assigned to one gender and culturally superior to other one. Masculinity and femininity are under spotlight in sexist literature. Both kinds of narratives are believed to affect children's perception in the opposite way. According to Danowski and Robinson (2012), Karniol and Gal-Disegni (2009), Knell and Winer (1979), Scott (1986), the exposure to different narratives contains a stereotypical character that enhances the bias of children, narrows down the acceptable behaviour, and naturalizes the already existing inequalities in them, while exposure to non-stereotypical modelling of males and females discourages gender stereotyping in young children.

Roles assigned to females in sexist literature are more cultural in nature, such as mothers as females are often shown as nurturant, polite, submissive, caring, emotional, powerless, irrational, confused, dependent, indecisive, preoccupied with tying knots, domestic chores, lacking critical thinking and playing girlish games etc. On the other hand, males are presented as more decisive, powerful, independent, influential, logical, indifferent, dominant, impolite, objective in nature, educated and the only finance master of the house. Moreover, jobs assigned to females are usually less desirable and are associated to low status, whereas jobs related to males are generally deemed as associated to higher status and more influential. Diekman and Murnen (2004) hold similar views as according to them, in children's literature, typically, males are also presented as more competent and capable of making achievement in life with high value, status and prominence. While the females are imaged as limited in ways, competence, ability (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993) nurturant, dependent, and submissive, i.e. females show different traits that are considered of least value and less desirable (Spence & Helmreich, 1980; Dino, Barnett & Howard, 1984). In the same way, mothers are portrayed ineffectual and overwhelmed by

problems always in need to rely on fathers, whereas fathers are capable, decisive, and seldom consulting the mothers about their decisions (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993).

Literature Review

In past few decades, gender inequality in children literature has attracted many scholars, namely La Dow, 1976; Scott, 1986; Filipović, 2018. In a linguistic corpus research study carried by Baker & Freebody (1987) in Australia, an analysis of 13 reading schemes encompassing 163 books was made. This found an unequal gender representation, and a frequency count of the words boy(s) and girl(s) reported more boys than girls, and more occurrences of boy than boys, but not for girl/girls. The slight difference suggests that boys were portrayed as individual with prominent character as compared to girls. The representation of mothers as compared to fathers, was quite high, while grandmothers were portrayed more as compared to grandfathers, that conforms the traditional female role in the domestic affairs. It was also found that in a collective portrayal of both males and females, there was a predominance of male first-ness. In the analysis of transitivity, it was revealed that boys were more active in answering, shouting, thinking, hurting, or worked. They were also reported as also come up, to jump with, and played with, while on the other hand, girls were the objects of hold on to and kiss. In other words, males are more commonly associated with energetic interaction with others, while females are treated as the “cuddle factor” in their action (Baker & Freebody, 1989, p. 54).

Johnson (2014) reviewing juvenile literature, elaborated that males predominate in situations which requires active mastery themes such as cleverness, adventure, and earning money while females predominated in situations with "second-sex" themes such as passivity, victimization, and goal constriction. Johnson (2014) concluded that the trend in children's books is dependent on the premise that "boys do, girls are and usually female characters are concerned in few such activities and characteristics or goals that are accorded prestige and esteem in our society. In another study, Weitzman, et al. (1972) reviewing the books of published during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, indicated a significant underrepresentation of females in titles, central roles, also through the illustrations in picture books. Most of the activity was done by males, and males centring the story in majority of the cases. Surprisingly, the stories examined were selected from books that had won the Caldecott Medal.

Multiple studies proclaim that children' books with embedded gender stereotypes affected child perception (Scott, 1986; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Danowski & Robinson, 2012; Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009). In particular, Diekman & Murnen (2004) suggests that association of men with higher status possibly perpetuates gender inequality in such a way that perceivers lead to believe that men are competent and superior while women are incompetent and inferior. He also notes that sexist books reinforce the importance of gender categories by portraying boys and girls playing separately, also by emphasizing the strict boundaries between the objects associated with boys and girls. Noticing such detrimental impacts of stereotypic literature on children's perception in the late 20th century, many scholars began to raise questions about passive, docile and helpless portrayal of girls in books for children (Lieberman, 1972; Trousdale, 2005).

As already mentioned, teachers and parents play an important role in “interpretation” of those stereotypic storylines as has been reported by Taylor (2003). Fried (1982) asserted that reducing sexism in children's reading material is one way to improve equity for women. Another approach to alleviate biased images is “fairy tale fracturing” as suggested by Crew (1997). This approach asks for changing the gender for well-known fairy tales. Considering the negative effects of such stereotypical stories, McGraw-Hill and Scott Foresman and Company extended a set of

guidelines for eradicating sex roles in children's books. McArthur and Eisen (1976) are of the view that girls must identify with the male characters in these stories if they have to acquire any sense of competence or achievement from the literary role models. But Gooden & Gooden (2001) conform to the idea saying that it is inaccurate to conclude that positive images of women in children's books are the only way to eliminate the negative images of them. Whereas Diekman and Murnen (2004) infers that limiting children's reading diet solely to gender-egalitarian models might not be the best way to work against sexism.

This wide criticism of stereotypic children's literature resulted in relatively less-sexist literature as compared to earlier books (Kortenhaus and Demarest, 1993; Lee, 2009; Lee & Collins, 2010; Sunderland, 2011) while a few other studies of children's books do not share this conclusion indicating that most books are still sexist, although a body of non-sexist children's literature has been found e.g., Davis, 1984.

Similar studies of children's literature over the period point to a hopeful trend towards more equitable representation and a possible decrease in gender role. Spunky, resourceful and independent female protagonists began to appear in other genres of literature such as fantasy, historical fiction, contemporary realistic fiction, biography and even in poetry Trousdale (2005). In a review of recent elementary textbooks, Evans and Davies (2000) noticed that though girls were portrayed to exhibit masculine traits, boys were never shown to possess feminine traits. Gooden and Gooden's (2001) content analysis of recent picture books documented the similar belief that although male characters were assigned greater range of roles than were female characters, they were seldom shown performing female-stereotypic roles.

However, later studies seem to assert that although representation has moved closer to parity, the trend of decreased gender-role-stereotyping in portrayal of character and activity has slowed down (Fried, 1982). Given the relatively small change in men's adoption of feminine characteristics, Diekman & Murnen (2004) expected that both sexist and non-sexist books would portray similar levels of sexism in feminine personality characteristics. Reviewing the above mentioned literature, authors of this study sense a greater need to further scrutinize the children's literature as sexism is still present in children's books but in different forms which are still left to be detected. No such studies have been recorded in Pakistani context, though children's books are widely read to pre-schoolers in many families. The present research aims to study gender disparities prevalent in different books published for pre-schoolers in order to determine the extent to which those books are contributing to discursive practices of gender inequality in society.

Methodology and Analysis

The current research is a descriptive study analysing a collection *Short Stories for Children*, a publication of Children Book Trust (CBT), Dehli. The data to be analysed is selected through purposive sampling technique. From the previous studies, it has been noticed that because of intensive feminist critical analysis, some tendencies of gender equality are also set to work in literature. The data is analysed to check the extent of gender parity and disparity in given collection of story books. Researchers have scrutinized these stories on the basis of male gender representation, female gender representation, social activities of male and female characters, their played social roles, illustrations in the books and the instances of gender segregation which are discursively preparing the younger minds of Asian kids for gender divide through their life. The short stories include are, *Man Overboard*, *When Papa Scolded Me*, *To the Memory of A Lion*, *The Triumphant Smile*, *The Turkish Cap*, *The Goose Thieves*, *Christmas Bells*, *In a Guava Orchard*, *All Because of My Hair*, *The Pink Card*, *The Unforgettable Journey*, *Varunkaka's Lemonade Pals*,

Hanuman And I, At the Party, Outwitted, That Sunday Morning, The Boy From Standard III, and Discussion and Analysis.

Stereotypical gender representations have become so normal today, that we cannot even realise how deliberately they are shaping our mind-sets and behaviours and of course the very world around us. The same kind of gender biased representation has been so naturally made part of children literature, by representing stereotypes as a cultural norm, which takes a keen person to analyse and put that stereotypical norms into separate position. Data consists of 17 short stories for kids, and has been written for kid's entertainment and for their cultural enlightenment. These short stories are scrutinized on the basis of female and male gender stereotypes, female representation against male representation, their personalities, activities and the social roles they play in their community circles.

Female under-representation in the Titles

Man Over-board discusses the plight of a man who unfortunately is drawn into a sea storm. When Papa Scolded Me apparently represents a father who is harsh and fiery in his attitude and the pronoun 'I' represents the receiving end that is a girl. In *To the Memory of a Lion*, the lion represents a soldier who is brave and daring and who loses his life while fighting against Moghals. In *The Goose Thieves*, thieves represent the four girls who are empathetic to four geese, and to prevent their slaughter, they plan to kidnap them from their school and were caught red-handed. *Hanuman and I*, where I indicates the girl who loses her confidence while participating in a skit on the school stage and Hanuman is a historical male figure who is being celebrated in a skit she was performing. *The boy from Standard 3* points to a boy who was very loving towards her sister whom he missed when they came from Tibet.

Female Gender Representation

Females have been categorically portrayed as someone who is highly emotional and gets always teary-eyed when encounters something challenging to her wits. In *Man Overboard*, the old lady when hears about sea storm, starts praying loudly and a gentleman consoles her. Another lady also becomes quite-ill when she hears about the storm. Contrary to it, a little boy Vasantha is seen quite adventurous and courageous enough ready to experience that sea storm. Women are considered only good to submit to their husbands' decisions and to do the domestic chores as in *To the Memory of a Lion*, Tanaji's wife accepts her husband's decision of postponing their son's marriage and his decision to go to the battle right away. She gets teary eyed, but does not raise any question. She is only there to support him. Little girls are represented so naive that they only care about their doll, and animals etc. In *When Papa Scolded Me*, the little girl has her doll in her hands and she is anxious for getting her doll a medicine for her fever. Also, she does silly things to get her father's attention. In *The Goose Thieves*, the girls are so much empathetic to geese in their school, that when they hear that they are going to be slaughtered, they immediately make a plan to kidnap them from their school. But the next day their plan backfires when they are caught by mother superior. Incompetence and anxiousness has been shown as girl's innate characteristic. Whenever there is something challenging, they give up. As reflected in *Hanuman and I* and *That Sunday Evening*. In *Hanuman and I*, the girl is given a task to pose as Hanuman in a skit, but coming in front of the audience, she loses her confidences and get afraid and ends up ruining the whole play. While in *That Sunday Morning*, the girl insists to beat her brother in a cycling race this time. During the race, she accidentally encounters a cow, and loses her capacities, thus driven into that cow. Later her brother saves her from the investigating crowd. In social roles, females are seen to have limited choices such as to be a housewife (most of the time), a student, a doctor (not

often), a nurse, and as a nun. Money is generally considered as a weakness for girls and women. In *The Pink Card*, the pink card symbolizes the money and girls are eager to pay fortune teller who is a male, to get that pink card which conceals their expected future fortune tidings. As Sheela affords it, she gets a chance to get that pink card, but Ponni who belongs to poor family, regularly pleads her mother to give her money so she could also get that pink card. In the end, she is able to receive that fortunate tiding written in the card. This pink colour represents feminine characteristics.

Male Representation

Men in these stories are generally represented as great, confident, indifferent, decisive and competent. In *Man Overboard*, the captain is seen to handle all accidents competently and he commands his rescue team, who bravely rescues that drowning man from the sea storm. The captain is also kind to little boy in the ship and gifts him a small ship toy. In *To the Memory of a Lion*, Tanaji is manifested as a decisive and daring person, who without caring about his family and son's marriage, decides to participate in a battle, and makes a daring plan to enter enemy's territory. In the same battle, he loses his life as a "lion". In *The Triumphant Smile*, King Babar is ready to sacrifice his life in exchange of his son's. His wife forbids him from doing so, and offers to give hers, but he, considering himself a hero, offers his life to God for the recovery of his son. Men are generally described as someone who does not turn his ears to vocal stereotypes of society, they only follow their own mind without caring about the consequences they'll have to face in the end. In the same way, in *In a Guava Orchard*, three school friends sneakily and stealthily enter someone's garden, guarded by a guard. But this time, they are caught by him. *The Unforgettable Journey* is about the journey of four friends, who every time, board on the train without buying any ticket and every time, they make a fool of the conductor, but this time, the conductor does not let them go. This shows that they confidently take steps without fearing its consequences. Boys are seen as participating in outdoor activities and games such as plucking fruits, challenging others (*All because of My Hair*), playing with ball (*Christmas Bells*), and 'gulli danda' (*The Turkish Cap*). Men are mostly manifested as occupying influencing roles and positions which are active in nature and have some social status such as doctor, head-master, principle, guard, landowner, captain, cavalry officers, rescue officers, fortune teller, police, soldiers etc.

Gender Segregation

Through portrayal of gender segregation, the gender-divide is being imprinted in the young's minds. There are 5 stories, in which girls only make friends with girls, and boys' only friends are boys. *The Turkish Cap* reveals the story of a group of boys from the same school, who are enthusiastic to play their cultural game 'gulli danda' in the compound outside their school. In *The Goose Thieves*, the little thieves are all girls who are studying in girls' school, and they are all friends forming a small friendly empathetic group with the same inclinations. In *Christmas Bells*, a boy Raman playing with the ball, accidentally makes friends with another boy George, so this interfaith friendship reveals same gender compatibility. In *A Guava Orchard*, the three boys from the same school, always plan together to trespass an unknown's guava orchard to take delight in guava plucking and tasting. In *The Pink Card*, Sheela studies in a girls' school and outside it, a vendor Ponni sits to sell different things. Both the girls make friends with each other, and begins to study in the same school.

Gender Equality

Owing to rigorous feminist criticism on gender prejudiced literature, books focusing on gender equality are also been published. It is also seen that now, the books if contain prejudiced content, also contain some percentage of unbiased content, where girls are not submissive, weak, confused and are on the receiving end. In the same analysed collection of stories, there are references that are made towards female active participation in society, but still that representations are impregnated with prejudiced norms. In *That Sunday Morning*, the protagonist-girl is seen as energetic and confident to challenge her brother in a cycling race, as she gets able to defeat her brother on the way, a cow accidentally comes in her way, and she loses her balance and momentum enough to be drawn straight into the cow, ending up clinging onto her back and both the cow and the girl eventually fell into a ditch. Later, her brother saves her. In another story *Outwitted*, an old granny, saves her whole house members and her husband from the burglars. She intelligently lures the robbers and trap them in a room and calls the cops. The money she gets in reward, she submits it into a hospital where her husband's treatment is going on. Though, here the granny is represented as clever, but at the same time she is following her gendered and cultural norm to be supportive to her husband. In another story *The Boy from Standard III*, the little boy is revealed as weeping for her lost sister. A fleeting reference is made towards parents of a girl Vani in the story *Varunkaka's Lemonade Pals*. Both of her parents are doctors, but no more information is given about them.

Illustrations

Men are revealed either wearing their office uniforms such as of a guard, a policeman, a captain, etc or wearing their cultural clothes as 'shalwar qamees' with a sword. Their faces are serious and attitude is dominating. While boys are either in pants and shirts or wearing shorts and shirts. On the other hand, girls with long hair as norm are either in skirts or just covered with full clothes. While the elder women are wearing saree and in one illustration, there is dupatta on her head to be portrayed as submissive wife to daring Tanaji.

Findings

Most of the females are portrayed as sensitive beings, teary eyed when face something serious, only good at being submissive, polite, anxious, fearful, not occupying active status seats. While male representations are following the set gendered norms and portrayed as great, insensitive, indifferent, headstrong, decisive, confident, risk taking, energetic, brave, daring, fun loving, heroic, courageous, in the form of strangers as rude and egoistic, and as fathers, affectionate. The exceptions are also there but vague in kind. Woman is shown wise in her old age only (*Outwitted*), girl is insistent on beating her brother in cycling race but loses her confidence seeing a cow on her way (*That Sunday Morning*), little reference is given to Bani's doctor patients (*Varunkaka's Lemonade Pal*), a boy is revealed as crying for her sister (male in younger age, not as mature man). Culturally tailored gendered norms are emphasized in these stories, such as how a girl should be seen and how the boy be, as it is a sin for a boy to keep long hair (*All because of My Hair*), and boys' false shot hitting the Turkish cap of a stranger is appreciated by their head master is something worth achieving (*The Turkish Cap*). Therefore, it is highly suggested to censor such gender-biased literature to prevent younger minds from internalizing such norms. Also, more gender-equality based literature, story books should be encouraged.

Conclusion

Short Stories for Children compiled under Children's Book Trust (CBT), is a collection of seventeen different short stories written by different writers. Children books are important in providing the significant understanding regarding popular culture, socialization and stratification, children's world and last but not the least representation of gender (McCabe et al., 2011). Such stories are meant for kids' entertainment and they are more receptive towards learning when are involved in flexible activities such as reading and telling story books, thus, such stories if impregnated with traditional gender roles and stereotypes leave lasting constructive impacts on their blooming minds. The present paper explores the indicators of gender stereotypes as portrayed in the form of gendered roles, activities, personalities, inclinations, get ups, illustrations, general dealings in different occasions etc. it has been noted that, males are portrayed as mostly dominating, intimidating, rude, influencing, daring, energetic, confident, skilful, competent. They have active participation in daring activities such as racing, sneakily entering opponent's territory, playing cultural games such as 'gulli danda'. Men are mostly seen as captain, officer, guards, soldiers etc. While female characters are mostly represented as passive, submissive, highly emotional, incompetent in demanding activities etc. Considering the above discussed results, it is thereby suggested that, despite prevalent feminist analysis of literature, still traditional unequal gender roles are prevailing in children literature, and this literature is enough to permeate their receptive minds. Such kids' stories should be censored with their micro-scope study to purify them against all biases. The writers should be encouraged to write more stories representing female's active and equal participation to give a meaningful and revolutionary impression to inspire young readers.

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