Interpretation of Gender Roles Projected In Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT
Books being an important medium in shaping people's understanding of the world should be without any biases or a negative message that may influence the reader's mind especially when it comes to children's literature. This paper reflects upon the importance of literature for children to understand the prevailing gender roles in society. Books play a vital role to teach humans how to develop their personality and to make their identity in the world. Children's literature includes everything which is read by or is read to children. When wandering in this bookish world, children will shape themselves as their favorite characters and the roles that they play can become integral to the child's personality development. Children from a very early age begin to call themselves as a boy or a girl and defend themselves on their gender when mocked or called by someone of the opposite gender. It is very important to find if gender is projected in the children's books as stereotypical or as neutral.. The roles of characters influenced by gender stereotypes and the number of characters according to gender they acquire may affect children when they see themselves as well as the real world when they see their father, mother, siblings, teachers and friends. This paper reflects on the handful of classic fairy tales apropos gender roles portrayed in them.

I.   INTRODUCTION
Humans learn the process of socialization from a very early age. With that, in his early years, he develops his personality including roles, responsibilities and reactions with the socialization process. Gender in today's society is a social concept itself. A term which not only sets the responsibility and roles of humans in the society, but also decides the dress code, occupations, choices, rights, and even the dreams of that person (Kamala Bhasin: 2020). Out of major mediums to learn social roles and responsibilities, one known is literature.It has the power to influence a child's identity by making inferences about gender (Taylor, 2003).   Children not only read or listen passively, but observe what is being read or told to them and reflect it on their own personality which often influences their identities. For example, a favorite movie which children or even adults like, some of them may behave like few characters from that movie for a short period of time. But long term observation of the similar characters or different characters having the similar features may leave long term effects on a human's mind. Therefore, it is possible that gender representation in children's books will shape children's understanding about gender roles.

Gender bias is present in the content, language, and illustrations of many children's books (Brower, 2016; Heinsz, 2013). Gender bias exists in the content, language, and illustrations of a large number of children's books (Jett- Simpson and Masland, 1993). Most books from Cinderella to Robinhood present gender stereotypes as decided within the society. In fact, it has been determined that most children are able to identify themselves as either a boy or a girl by the age of three (Joshua Heinsz). Therefore, it's important to reflect on books and do bias-free reading to them to rectify any gender roles projected in children's books.

Influence Of Children's Literature On Children's Intellect
To learn adjustments in society, humans primarily start understanding the socialization process from childhood with many components. Education plays an important role in a child's intellectual development and growth. The literature which they see gets captured and imprinted in their brains. A child interacts with the books in two ways: as a reader and as an observer. When they read the book, they observe and understand the plots and pictures of liked stories and poems. Hence, books are an important resource for understanding the world for children.

In addition to this, Humans are audio-visual learners. In early years of age, literature is not much about reading, but about what pictures

are printed for explaining the texts and how the reader, who can probably be the teacher or the parent, is reading the text to the child. The child will listen not what is written in the books, but what is being told to them as per thoughts of the reader, so it's important to check whether the reader is hereby gender neutral or not. They should use the tone that this story is presenting this girl character as a weak character but that doesn't mean that all girls are weak, rectifications are important to undo any negative message which is learnt by a child while listening to the story. Afterwards, the pictures which are printed also affect the child as most of the attention gets captured on these images of the books.

Moreover, the idea of race, gender, equity, equality, diversity and inclusion amidst differences are some of the very important social aspects that need to be triggered in a child's mind in its initial developmental stages. Children's literature helps understand children about these aspects of society. Hence, children's literature plays a very crucial role in developing the unpolished minds of humans in childhood.

WHAT IS GENDER TODAY?

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed (W.H.O.). Gender is a social term. To understand it, let's distinguish it from the related term sex to which people often get confused and use these two terms in substitution. Sex is a biological concept which differs male and female as well as intersex. It is decided from birth of the human and it can not be changed without surgery. It doesn't vary and is a static concept.

Gender on the other hand is a social term which differs from society to society and country to country. Though it essentially teaches males and females how to act like men and women respectively. It decides their roles, responsibilities and behavior. Gender can be defined as learnt roles, norms and expectations on the basis of human's gender. In today's society, gender isn't just a passive term, it not only decides roles and responsibilities in the society as per the gender, but also the norm/values they will follow, dress codes they will wear, attitudes they will carry, opportunities they can grab, rights they acquire, mobility and freedom they acquire, expressions they carry, priorities they will choose and even their dreams are determined by the it (Kamala Bhasin). It can be changed, hence, it's a dynamic concept.

WHAT ARE GENDER STEREOTYPES?

Gender stereotypes are roles of the human which are determined by the concept of gender. The concept of gender stereotypes are fed into the minds of humans from a very young age. This not only forces them to adopt gender identity which society emphasizes upon but also to lose their own human identity which they want to shape. Gender, being a social concept, gives rise to its stereotypes in social situations substantially. For example, pressurizing girls to wear a smile to look decent and calm, asking a boy not to cry even when hurt to show himself strong and cold. Gender stereotypes often disregard psychological principles of humans. They are harmful as they limit human's personal and professional choices.

Gender stereotypes which are used for men highlights masculinity which define them as protector, provider and pro- creater (Kamala Bhasin), whereas, females are forced to highlight femininity by putting themselves in the world of motherhood, wifehood and caretaker.

Gender stereotypes are very common in children's literature as they portray boys and girls to promote masculine and feminine stereotypes specifically designed by the society itself.

GENDER PORTRAYAL IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's literature not only describe the identity of the characters as per the norms of gender stereotypes as designed by the society, but also the plot, the events, titles of the books and even the message given from the story too provide the evidence of projecting stereotypes. Traditionally, children's books have often featured male characters as the heroes, and female characters as passive, victimized or in the position of support. This division establishes gender roles and limits children's imagination on what could be. On average, 36.5 percent of books in each year studied include a male in the title, compared to 17.5 percent that include a female. (McGrabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Tope 2011). Gender bias is present in the content, language, and illustrations of many children's books (Brower, 2016; Heinsz, 2013). These not only allow children to rethink themselves in the society but the opposite gender's place in the society thus reimagining the behavior they should have with them.

No doubt children observe the qualities of their favorite character who is majorly the protagonist i.e. the main character of the story. Wherein, not only human characters, but also the

animal/bird characters have a greater ratio of males than that of females.

Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross (1972) were among the first researchers to note a greater emphasis on male characters in children's literature. Others like Janice McCabe in his study (2001) of almost 6,000 children books found that:

1. In human characters, males are protagonists in 57% of children's books published each year, with just 31% having female protagonists.
2. In animal characters, male animals are protagonists in 23% of books per year, the study found, while female animals are protagonists in only 7.5%.

This unequal distribution of the gender ratio in central characters may reinforce children to think deeply about gender roles and misunderstand that boys and men are more important in the world than girls and women. It'll again allow the upcoming generations to adopt the rules of gender stereotypes. For example, stereotypical representations of behavior along gender lines will gaslight the girls to begin amending their behavior towards being calm, careful, peaceful and quiet; and boys to adopt manipulative and dominant characteristics in them.

Tsao (2008) also mentions about characters and their roles presented through the gender lines and says that even the types of animals used to represent characters also vary according to gender, like, mice are most often used to represent female characters and bears are most often used to represent male characters.

In teaching, there is a principle of repetition to teach foreign language or second language to the learner, this reflects on repeating the words/sentences as the learner will observe and learn what is being repeated a lot of times to him. Ernst (1995) researched that the male's names appeared about twice as often as girl's names in most children's literature. The most repeated names of boys may lead children to think boys are the main characters universally.

Most researchers (Singh 1998; Temple 1993; Rudman 1995; Kramer 2001) found that:
1. Girls portrayed the qualities of being sweet, dependent, weak, unbalanced, confirming, incomplete, naive, polite, frightened, worthless and nurturing.
2. Boys portrayed qualities of being dominant, perfect, strong, successful, clear minded, aggressive, ambitious, independent, horrible, big and fierce.
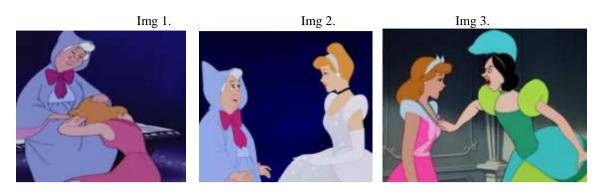
CLASSIC FAIRY TALES: GENDER ROLES PORTRAYAL

A fairy tale as a literary genre presenting in a simple and compact form the universal experiences of mankind, including existential problems and their desired outcomes (Bettelheim:1996), is an important part of most societies' culture. Fairy tales have long been a part of literary cultural heritage, but they are not without controversies. One of the most equivocal issues surrounding fairy tales is gender projection in them. Many argue that traditional fairy tales reinforce traditional gender roles. For instance, in many classic fairy tales, women are portrayed as passive and helpless while men are strong and heroic. Picking a few tales, which are popular and well marketable. 1. Cinderella, 2. Snow White, 3. Rapunzel

CINDERELLA

Cinderella is a classic fairy tale that has been told from generation to generation. It tells the story of a young girl who is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters but ultimately finds happiness with the help of a fairy godmother. However, the story also perpetuates gender roles for her. Cinderella is portrayed as a passive character who relies on others to rescue her from all the situations (IMG 1). She is seen as weak and helpless, waiting for a man to come and save her. This reinforces the stereotype that women are dependent on men and cannot do anything on her own without the aid. Furthermore, the story promotes the idea that physical appearance is more important than intelligence or personality. Cinderella's beauty is what attracts Prince Charming, rather than any of her other qualities of being kind, polite and compassionate. In order for Cinderella to be noticed by the prince at all, she must undergo a metamorphosis, which is a literal metamorphosis, because it is only a physical, bodily transformation (Slany:2011) (IMG 2). The protagonist "dressed in her gender" by fairytale stylists, symbolized by high heels, dress or makeup, comes down to the role of a "mysterious seductress" sending, during the ball, signs perceived by society as a lure to be "acquired" and "owned" (Slany:2011). The tale also represents how much women can hate each other in competition (IMG 3). The female protagonist is portrayed as passive and in need of a male rescuer. The book teaches the gender divide from early childhood, and this type of literature damages the self-esteem of young girls and serves to normalize a certain dynamic in relationships.

Img 1.

Img 2.

Img 3.

SNOW WHITE

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is another classic fairy tale that has been enjoyed by ages. However, it is also a story that reinforces gender stereotypes. Snow White is portrayed as a passive, innocent princess who needs to be saved by a prince. This reinforces the idea that women are weak and need men to protect them. Furthermore, Snow White's beauty is emphasized throughout the story, which perpetuates the idea that women should be judged primarily on women should be judged primarily on their appearance. The evil queen's jealousy of Snow White's beauty also reinforces the idea that women are in competition with each other for male attention. Since the figure of a man is obliterated in Snow White, beauty becomes the battlefield, as evidenced by the well-known phrase "Mirror mirror tell me, who is the most beautiful in the world?" (Śmiałowicz:2013). Ultimately, the girl wins this competition as a young and good person, in contrast to her jealous, older stepmother, who is even ready to go so far as to kill her younger rival (Śmiałowicz:2013) (IMG 4).

Img 4.

RAPUNZEL

The classic fairy tale of Rapunzel has been retold and adapted numerous times, but the underlying gender roles have remained largely unchanged. The story positively reinforces traditional gender stereotypes by portraying the male hero as strong and capable, while the female protagonist is helpless and in need of rescue . As far as the characterization of the antagonists is concerned, they are witches known as Dame Gothel in Grimm's Rapunzel, and Mother Gothel in Tangled respectively. Dame Gothel is very evil, cruel, selfish, possessive and violent (Mubeen:2015). She was so unmerciful that after knowing about the prince, she cut off Rapunzel's long hair and "banished" her to a "desert where she had to live in great grief and misery" (Grimm:2004, 106).

Rapunzel is depicted as a beautiful young woman who is trapped in a tower by an evil witch who pretends to be her mother. She is completely dependent on her male savior, the prince, to rescue her from her captivity. This perpetuates the idea that women are weak and incapable of taking care of themselves. Also, Rapunzel's long hair serves as a symbol of her femininity and beauty. It reinforces the notion that women's worth lies solely in their physical appearance (IMG 5). To achieve her dreams, she required aid from a male character (IMG 6). Overall, while Rapunzel may be an entertaining story for children, it fails to challenge or subvert traditional gender roles.

Img 5.   Img 6.

Does Children's Literature Really Play An Important Role In Capturing Gender Roles? Does Gender Projection In Books Influence Children As Readers?

Children's literature is said to provide characters and events that learners can identify with and through which they can evaluate their own actions, beliefs, and emotions (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Children like when they see characters portraying features of themselves or when they find similarities with the characters, they find connections and empathize with the characters in the books. When they do not see themselves represented in the books, there is a sense of dissatisfaction in their hearts. In order to match their 'hero' or 'heroine' of the story in their books, they might try to adapt qualities of the character they like in themselves. This will reshape their already built up personalities. The characters representing masculinity and femininity with respect to gender will force the children to adapt themselves as gender identity. Sexism in literature can be so insidious that it quietly conditions boys and girls to accept the way they 'see and read the world, thus reinforcing gender images (Fox, 1993).

This will again influence the construction of ideas that boys should be dominant, strong and aggressive, while women tend to be calm, submissive and gentle. It will lead to the construction of a society full of gender specific roles again, which are then normalized and this whole concept created a vicious cycle. This normalized concept gaslights the young generation to adopt gender specific roles in their personal as well as professional choices. That is, girls will be encouraged to select occupations like nurses, assistants or homemakers which will end up in a subordinate position ultimately. Children's books frequently portray girls as acted upon rather than active (Fox, 1993); in contrast, the boys will be pressured to work on leading positions which again is a forceful thing. These stereotypes limit boys' and girls' freedom to express themselves (Fox, 1993; Rudman, 1995) and pressure them to behave in ways that are 'gender appropriate' rather than ways best suited to their personality.

II.   CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

Gender equality is in the global goals which are now known as Sustainable Development Goals as defined by United Nations, SDG 05. Gender equality is still an effort to be achieved. Nonetheless, if humans at such an early age will apply gender lines on their personalities, which will affect all upcoming generations with relation to the gender stereotypes. Thus, it is important to do more research on current children's books, reflect on them and rectify wherever is essential. As per the researchers, there is very little change or changing very slowly. In the mid part of 2005 the gender gaps in the protagonist characters were actually more unequal instead of diminishing. This means they crossed sparklines of gender stereotypes graphs (McGrabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Tope 2011). Thus it is important to justify if literature really influences children to capture the gender roles portrayed in it and what adults can do to rectify things. Fairy tales are still gender biased even in the twenty-first century. Most researchers from different points of time present their views on gender roles portrayed in the children's literature. There is an urgency to look after the books which project gender stereotypes on a major level. With that, readers should also keep in mind when doing the storytelling to children. In fact, as a teacher, it is very important to check what she/he is teaching to little minds, is the content gender bias free? Is the content that they capture is relevant enough to teach equal values for all? Is that content inculcating values and ethics or stereotypes?

In conclusion, the interpretation of gender roles projected in children's literature is a crucial issue that both society and the readers must acknowledge. Authors of children's literature must

use their platform to shape and challenge stereotypes that affect children's view of gender. Moreover, the literature provided to children must embrace diverse ethnicities, cultures, and abilities. Additionally, there needs to be a balanced representation of gender roles that are better reflective of our current society. This balanced representation of gender roles, achieved by greater diversity, encourages young people to embrace and accept themselves, others and the world, and to perhaps be the change they want to see in the world.

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