



GENDER AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: SOME OBSERVATIONS

ADITI KUMAR

Research Scholar,
Department of English
and Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow,
(UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Gender, as an issue in children's literature and how gender roles stereotype men and women in society, also an attempt to solve the problem of gender bias in the domain of children's literature ensuring equality between men and women concerning children's books. Books that convey the message of gender bias or sexism may have damaging effects on both boys and girls. For instance, Stereotypical representations might engrain females with the idea of selecting more traditional areas of employment. As childhood is defined as the most impressionable age, it should be taken care of what type of content is being exposed to the child. Sexism is based on the idea that women are less efficient than men and functions to oppress women in society. It should be the sole aim of the writer to offer content that talks about equality and a patriarchy-free community giving an image of an Egalitarian society.

Keywords: Gender bias, Stereotype, Sexism, Patriarchy, Egalitarian society.

INTRODUCTION

Children's books are a dominant source of knowledge for children they offer a plethora of ideas and consciousness to young aspiring minds. Children learn their part in society through books specifically, gender roles are particularly learned by them through the medium of books, how the representation of male and female characters in books influences the thinking of these young children which will eventually shape the understanding of a child about the

ADITI KUMAR

1P a g e



concept of gender roles. It should be noted that the books written, back in the 90s might not be relevant to the children of today's era.

As society evolves gender also changes over time. For instance, many classic and well-loved children's stories unintentionally fortify the damaging stereotypical views that girls are delicate and subaltern to men who are strong and superior, showing girls as beautiful, charming, quiet, and well-mannered while boys as strong, powerful, assertive, and rarely expressive about their feelings. Gender roles have become more complex in, the recent era, and it can be recognized through how media including books constitute the role of men and women. Children's books can be a great source of social learning and for the development of an individual. The children can learn their roles in society as boys and girls through the medium of books.

Gender is one of the most common issues in children's literature or young adult literature. Patriarchal views are commonly shown in the works for centuries. From the feminist point of view, men are endowed with attributes of power, strength, force, intelligence, and dominance while women are always shown playing minor roles like pleasing the masculine. When children are exposed to such written material in the form of books, their mind is instilled with this notion that they are better than the other sex which gives them a sense of superiority complex which is ingrained in their mind forever. The male dominating society has always treated women as subalterns for ages. As we know that children's experiences of society and culture are not exposed much, but they can learn a lot with the help of books.

Traditional gender roles are still seen in children's books and in the recent trends, we still see the same gender bias i.e., assigning more important roles to the males while males are passive. Research in children's literature from the 1930s to the 1960s shows that boys are active, passionate, clever, and adventurous on the other hand girls are passive and often victimized and shown as inferior. This applies to both English and American literature. (Key 1971; Kortenhaus and Demarest, 1993)

Books prepared for children should describe men and women dealing with non-traditional gender roles. (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006.)

1. **Stereotyping gender:** Books with gendered language were centered around the protagonist in the story. Female-associated words focused on affection, school-related words, and communication verbs like 'Explained' and 'Listened'. Meanwhile, Male-associated words focused more on professions, transportation, and tools, said Molly Lewis, special faculty in the Social and Decision Sciences at Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Books influence children's minds and personalities, therefore it is important to expose them to the right books which do not talk about stereotypical stories about gender roles as children

ADITI KUMAR

2Page

develop beliefs about everything at a fragile age, it might solidify their minds accordingly.

“There is kind of a cycle of learning about gender stereotypes at a young age then perpetuating them as they get older”, Said Lewis. “These books may be a vehicle for communicating information about gender. We may need to pay some attention to what those messages may be and whether they are the messages you want to even bring to children. I would agree to what she has said, as children's perceptions about their position and role in society as girls and boys will be shaped through their interaction with the right books. Gender is a major medium to inculcate equal and egalitarian understanding of gender. Also I believe that stereotyping can affect how children feel about themselves and how they relate to others. It is crucial that children learn to understand and recognize gender stereotypes in different books or media. Images of men and women are often based on stereotypical roles of males and females in our society.

2. **Male characters over females:** There is a wide gap in the number in children's books which means that the male characters far outnumber females. As we can see that from Caterpillar to Cat in the hat, Peter Rabbit to Babar, the books are mostly dominated by male characters, a new research found which sends the message that women and girls do not occupy an important role in society as men or boys.
3. Almost 6000 children's books were published between 1900 and 2000s, a Study led by Janice McCabe, a Professor of Sociology at Florida State University found that males occupy the space of central character in 57% of children's books published each year while females only in 31% female characters. Male animal characters are 23% of booker year while female animal characters star in only 7.5%
4. This gender disparity strengthens the fact that men are an integral part of society while women hold less importance. Therefore efforts should be made to bridge the gap between both male and female characters.

Learning gender equality through books: we are very well aware of the fact that from an early age, children start learning stereotypical notions of what it means to be a girl and what it means to be a boy. while this mentality can completely get etched in a child's mind, it should be necessary to break down rigid, inequitable gender stereotypes and should make an effort to promote diverse and positive expressions of gender identity. For that, it should be taken care of what kind of books are made available to the children. Books that intend to promote equality and an egalitarian approach should be read by both sexes so that they can understand the concept of gender from an early age.



If we talk about picture books such as Baby Feminists and My First book of Feminism, may inspire children from an early age.

The Baby Feminists by Libby Babbot Klein, talks about famous personalities like Frida Kahlo, Mae Jemison, Michelle Obama, and Malala Yusufzai what do these women have in common? They are all feminists who were once a baby, which gives the great message that any baby can grow up to make the world a better place for all genders.

My First Book of Feminism by Julie Merberg is specially written for boys and talks about the same message that boys and girls are equally important for society. The simplicity of this book will help boys to grow up without ever questioning women's equality.

Books namely Angus All Aglow by Heather Smith, promotes gender roles, individuality and self acceptance . It shows how Angus stops wearing a shiny necklace by his granny because he was teased by his classmates until he finds a friend who helps him remember why he loved shiny and sparkle in the first place helping him accept himself for who he was.

Other books including, A Boy like You by Frank Murphy, also affirms positive character traits for boys to strive for. It shows how masculinity is not about hiding emotions, physical strength and fears of daring , but rather talks about kindness, understanding, self management, and self awareness. Boys have been told from childhood that boys don't cry! But this book helps us understand that there is no such thing as boys cannot express their emotions. They can also get vulnerable at times and that is totally acceptable.

Therefore, children should read books and watch media that tell inclusive and positive stories about children in all their diversity that celebrate equality and provide positive portrayals of gender roles.

CONCLUSION

Gender has become one of the issues prevailing in the contemporary writing scenario of children's books, In order to curb this affair, valuable books and content promoting equal and egalitarian society should be communicated, As books are a great medium for early childhood education for both school level and home. In other words, books have the prospective to empower the young minds initial comprehension of the concept of gender.

Therefore, books which celebrate gender equality needs to be discussed among children so that it builds a strong foundation which will eventually make the children's understanding about gender clear and collectively will bring a change in the society breaking the traditional norms about gender. It has become the need of the hour to promote gender equality and the writers are responsible to provide quality learning resources , as well as they should be aware of the gender representation and it should give back the content of children's books with the

ADITI KUMAR

4P a g e



concept of gender equality. Through right books, the idea will be made clear that all girls and boys enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities, and protection. Reading non-traditional stories will also help them understand that they are all equal. To help reduce gender stereotyping, it is important to make sure that books written for children portray girls too as strong characters who are daring, and smart not just sweet naïve and beautiful, and are interested in science, technology, and politics. On the other hand, boys are also kind, caring, and compassionate, are respectful towards all genders, and should be encouraged to express their feelings. By breaking the traditional norms, we can achieve "Gender Equality."

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED:

Ruterana, Pierre. (2017). Using children's literature to promote gender equality in education: The case of the fairy tale of Ndabaga in Rwanda. *Rwanda Journal*. 2. 10RJ314/RJ.v2i2.4A.

MCCABE, JANICE, et al. "GENDER IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS: Patterns of Disparity in Titles and Central Characters." *Gender and Society*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2011, pp. 197–226. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23044136>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2022.

Grauerholz, Elizabeth, and Bernice A. Pescosolido. "Gender Representation in Children's Literature: 1900-1984." *Gender and Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1989, pp. 113–25. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/190043>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2022.

Heuring, Kristen. "Children's Solidify Gender under Stereotypes in Young Minds." *Psychological Science*, December 29, 2021.

Walker, Jessica. *Baby Feminists*. Libby, Babbot Klein, Penguin, 2018.

Merberg, Julie. *My First book Of Feminism*. Michele Brummer Everett, Downtown Book works, 2019.

Smith, Heather. *Angus All Aglow*. 2018.

Murphy, Frank. *A Boy like You*. Kayla Harren, Sleeping Bear Press, 2019.