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A Content Analysis of Gender Representation in Malaysian Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature serves as a powerful medium through which children construct messages about their roles in society and gender identity is often central to this construction. Although possessing mental schemas about gender differences is helpful when children organize their ideas of the world around them, problems occur when children are exposed to a constant barrage of uncompromising, gender-schematic sources that lead to stereotyping which in turn represses the full development of the child. This paper focuses on how gender is represented in a selection of Malaysian children's books published in the English language. Relying on the type of content analysis employed by previous feminist social science researchers, I explore this selection of Malaysian children's books for young children and highlight some areas of concern with regard to the construction of maleness and femaleness in these texts. The results reveal imbalances at various levels including the distribution of main, supporting and minor characters along gendered lines and the positioning of male and female characters in the visual illustrations. The stereotyping of these characters in terms of their behavioural traits will be discussed with the aim of drawing attention to the need for us to take concerted measures to provide our children with books that will help them realize their potential to the fullest.

Keywords: *Malaysian children's literature, schema theory, gender representation, visual language*

Introduction

When experiencing literary work, children are able to "both bring meaning to and take meaning from that work" (Stott, 1984: 299). It is therefore important that adults, who play a significant role in helping children experience literature, have a clear understanding of how children's books impact young children. It is well documented that stories for children are often used for the "transmission of cultures" among literate cultures and the transmission of gender-related behaviour commonly makes up a part of the transmission of any culture (Poarch and Monk-Turner, 2001:70). This paper reports on a study undertaken to investigate the types of gendered messages that are transmitted through a selection of texts representative of Malaysian children's literature written in the English language. Specifically, this paper reports on differences in the representation of female and male characters, and practices of stereotyping characters along gendered lines.

Literature Review

Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001: 810) describe children's literature as a "powerful medium through which children construct messages about their cultures and roles in society". Often, such construction is determined along gendered lines. Children identify themselves with the characters in the books and learn about gender-appropriate behaviour. When children interact with literature, they are in fact "finding support for the process of defining themselves as individuals and understanding their developing roles within their families and communities" (Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd, 2001: 810).

Knowledge Construction in Children

Children's literature is well regarded as an important source of knowledge for children. Taylor (2003: 301) submits that children's literature presents "a microcosm of ideologies, values, and beliefs, including gender ideologies and scripts". Hunt (1999: 1) describes as "inconceivable" the notion that ideologies circulating in children's books have no influence on the development of children. In more specific terms, Sullivan and Yandell (1990: 12) opine that children's literature serves as "a vehicle for instilling basic religious and spiritual values". It is highly probable that it is for such reasons those children's literature features prominently in the school curriculum. Young children are constantly engaged in a continuous process of learning and a part of this process involves learning about their self-identity, specifically ways in which they are like as well as different from others. The construction of knowledge related to one's self-

identity is explained through two related theories, namely the Schema Theory and the Gender Schema Theory.

The Schema Theory attempts to explain the learning process in children. The theory is grounded in the idea that humans possess schemas or scripts to structure "their experience in such a way that they can use and adapt their knowledge of previous events to make sense of similar, but novel events" (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2003: 440). Clark and Van Der Wege (2003: 781) contend that these schemas "guide our expectations about the presence and order of everyday events". When children learn, when they build new knowledge about the world around them, they are either creating new schemas, or linking together pre-existing schemas in new ways and this helps them to effectively "make inferences and predictions about the world" (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2003: 441). Knowledge in children therefore is constantly constructed and reconstructed as new knowledge is acquired. Ainsworth-Vaughn (2003: 255) suggests that among the various aspects of our lives for which we have schemas, we also construct schemas about "our and others' social identities". It is the construction of this social identity, specifically, that of maleness and femaleness, that the present study focuses on.

The contention in this theory that knowledge is constructed implies that close attention must be paid to the messages transmitted in the various forms of texts and talk that children are exposed to. Parents and teachers alike need to be aware that reading materials such as children's books containing elements of gender-bias, may contribute to the creation of schemas in children that help form sexist attitudes which in turn will affect their future behaviour. The gender schema theory as propounded by Bem (1981) is an extension of the schema theory and centre-stages the social construction of gendered identity.

The process children go through when constructing their gender roles is an essential part of their knowledge construction. In fact, gender is most likely "the basic dimension" through which children "perceive the social world and their place in it" (Taylor, 2003: 310). Bem (1981) extends upon the Schema theory by proposing that children develop schemas that define their understanding of what it means to be male or female.

Frable and Bem (1985: 459) posit that although knowing about differences in their gender roles is helpful in aiding children adjust to living in a society, a problem occurs when schemas cause stereotyping that represses "the full development of the child". To counter this, Frable and Bem (1985: 459) opine that children should be exposed to "gender-aschematic behaviour" through which boys and girls see themselves in the types of roles and possessing the types of behaviours that they would not typically see themselves in.

Gender Construction Through Children's Literature

Guided by the feminist view that gender is a social construct, the present study contends that children's literature is an effective tool that reaffirms and constructs for young children gender roles through repeatedly providing them with "notions of feminity and masculinity" (Dutro, 2001: 376). Hunt (1999: 1) goes as far as describing children's book as "the province of that culturally marginalized species, the female". Taylor (2003: 310) submits that such, it is reasonable "to ask how gender is coded in children's book" as children "learn gender code" through such books and this turn guides them in applying "gendered standards to themselves".

Researchers have concluded that gender-stereotyped behaviour in children's literature from the west have been "effectively transmitted" through both the written text, as well as through the visual language manifest through illustrations in children's literature (Poarch and Monk-Turner, 2001: 70). Stereotyping has a "reductive tendency" through which certain traits are "obsessively" focused upon and exaggerated (Talbot, 2003: 468). Desai (2001) carried out a research on gender stereotyping in children's literature that dealt with themes of war and peace and observed that the construction of gender stereotypes by children are acquired as young as age three or four. Gooden and Gooden (2001: 92) contend that children learn to stereotype by gender and develop "their own self-identity around the age of five". Therefore, children's literature, especially those targeted at young children, clearly play a crucial role in imparting to children, values and beliefs of a particular culture and closely linked to this system of values and beliefs are the gender-specific behaviours that children should take on in society.

Methodology

As the research questions in this study are designed to evaluate the selection of books by adults for young children, the researcher decided to narrow the corpus to books that are selected by adults for young children possibly in pre-school, or in their early primary years (Years 1 and 2). The researcher set a target of 100 books to make up the corpus of the present study. Eighty books were from a personal collection of the researcher. These were books purchased at local bookstores in the Klang Valley between February 2002 and November 2004. In addition, the researcher sought the assistance of two school teachers who have had experience (though not necessarily formal training) in selecting children's books for either their young pupils at school (children in Years 1 and 2) or in their capacity as parents with children in the same age group. They were asked to select a further 20 books to make up the corpus of 100 books. This

practice would reflect as closely as possible, actual practices in which teachers and parents of young children are left to select books for children.

Once the 100 books were collected, the researcher sat with the teachers to go through each text. After careful consideration, only 74 were deemed suitable for analysis in the present study. The 26 books that were rejected did not meet certain conditions including the fact that they did not have a story structure as defined by Graesser, Golding and Long (1996) or that there were not enough illustrations to reflect that the text was meant for young children.

Of the 74 texts that remained, five were randomly selected for the pilot study while the remaining 69 texts made up the corpus for the present study. The analysis of the 69 texts for a content analysis is justified when compared to the corpus size of other studies that involved a content analysis of children's literature. As locally written English language children's books are still at the infancy stage in Malaysia, it is not possible to expect a larger corpus.

Two coding instruments were used for the present study. The first coding instrument was a checklist adapted from two different instruments that were used in previous studies to analyze children's literature. The second was the Oxford Wordsmith Tools 4.0, an integrated suite of programs for looking at how words behave in texts.

Results and Discussions

This section reports on the findings of the first stage of analysis that is the content analysis. Adopting the content-analytic method of 'liberal feminist researchers' for reading gender in children's literature, the 69 texts that make up the corpus of the present study were evaluated and coded by two independent coders. The data from their observations were processed through the SPSS and the results are reported here using descriptive statistics. These results answer the first three research questions.

Character Role Distribution by Gender

The content analysis revealed that there was a significant imbalance in the distribution of female and male social actors in the roles of main, supporting and minor characters. As table 1 reveals, this imbalance was in favour of male characters that outnumbered the female characters in every role. Only 12 of the 69 texts had female characters in the role of main character. The conclusion gleaned from this analysis is that children are less likely to see females in the more powerful and active role of main character.

Table 1: Cross-tabulation of Character Role by Gender

Character Role	Gender			
	Male	Female	Gender Neutral	Total
Main	54	12	3	69
% within character role	78.3	17.4	4.3	100
% within gender	36.0	20.7	16.7	30.5
Supporting	62	26	8	96
% within character role	64.6	27.1	8.3	100
% within gender	41.3	44.8	44.4	42.5
Minor	34	20	7	61
% within character role	55.7	32.8	11.5	100
% within gender	22.7	34.5	38.9	27.0
Total	150	58	18	226
% within character role	66.4	25.7	8.0	100
% within gender	100	100	100	100

The inequitable distribution of male and female characters is also observed in the visual language that accompanies the written text (Figure 1 below).
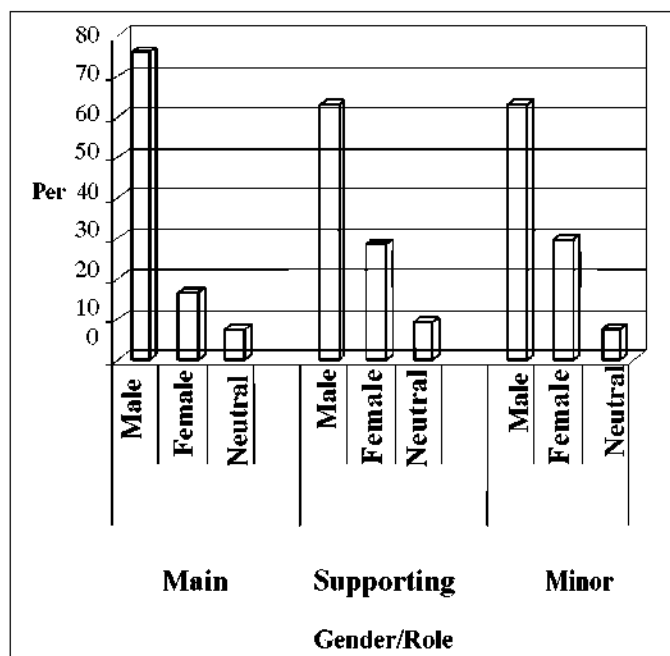

Figure 1: Character Distribution in Illustrations by Gender and Role

The analysis revealed that almost 70% of all characters in the accompanying illustration were male, in contrast to female characters that made up 23.4% of all characters in the illustrations. It was also observed that 31 of the 69 texts in the corpus had no female representation at all in the accompanying illustrations. In contrast, only 2 texts did not have any male representation. This means that as children read or have the stories read to them, they are visually bombarded with male images and starved of female images. For young girls, the invisibility of their gender may transmit the notion of their secondary, even insignificant role in a male dominated world.

Gender Positioning in Clause Structures

The researcher was also interested in identifying equitable representation from a linguistic perspective. For this purpose, the Oxford Wordsmith 4.0 computer based tool of analysis was utilised. The occurrences of pronouns, specifically those that reflect the position of male and female characters in the more powerful subject position (he, she) in contrast to the less powerful object position (him, her) were identified for the frequency with which they were used.

The analysis (Table 2) revealed that the pronoun "he" was the fifth most frequently occurring word from the full list of 3,363 words in the corpus and it appeared in 66 of the 69 texts. In contrast, the pronoun "she" was only the 27th most frequently occurring word in the corpus, finding itself even behind the less powerful male pronoun "him".

Table 2: Occurrences of Pronouns in all Texts

N	Word	Freq.	%	Texts	%
5	HE	878	2.1877	66	95.652
22	HIM	228	0.5681	59	85.507
27	SHE	190	0.4734	36	52.174
28	HER	188	0.4684	33	47.826

(n = 3363 words)

All 54 texts which had male characters as its main character were then analysed for the distribution of pronouns. The powerful "he" was the third most frequently occurring word out of a total of 2,905 words. The pronoun "she" was ranked only 49, occurring only 85 times in contrast to "he" which had 765 occurrences. In contrast, an analysis of the 12 texts with female main characters revealed some interesting findings. It is interesting to note that one of these texts did not have even one instance of referring to the main character in subject position using the pronoun "she". It is also interesting to note that there were more instances of positioning the female character in object position

(with the pronoun "her") than in subject position. In fact, these texts had an equal number of instances in which male and female characters were found in subject position being referred to with pronouns. In contrast, there were far more instances of the female characters being positioned as a object or possessive form (104 times) compared to male characters in these texts (40 times).

Stereotyping by Setting and Behavioural Traits

The content analysis revealed that male and female characters were stereotyped in terms of the settings in which they were found in the illustrations. While female characters made up the majority of all characters found in the home setting, male characters dominated the workplace and outdoor settings. This result indicates that of the relatively few times female characters appeared in these texts, they were largely confined to the home setting in accompanying illustrations. Children looking at the illustrations therefore are likely to associate a woman's place as being the home setting, with little to do outdoors or at the workplace.

Like observations made by Tognoli, Pullen and Liber (1994: 273), the home setting in the texts under investigation was essentially constructed as a "feminized space". If we commit ourselves to the belief that children's books play an important role as a socialising agent, then it would be preferable for these books to show children that both males and females have important roles to play in all settings. Children's literature must allow children to explore their potential in all realms. Considering the fact that women are found to participate in every facet of the Malaysian workforce, young girls should be able to see themselves in increasing numbers in settings other than the home.

In terms of the behavioural traits that the characters were accorded, the results (in Table 3) revealed that of the seven traits, it was the male characters who were found significantly more times exhibiting traits of aggressiveness, of constructing and planning ideas, of being physically exertive, of directing, of avoiding and of providing information.

Despite the relatively small number of female characters in the corpus, females were found in significantly higher numbers exhibiting behaviour associated to being a nurturer. This finding has strong parallelisms to the findings of previous studies involving children's texts (Oskamp et al., 1996; Williams et al., 1987). In those studies as well, patterns of stereotyping were identified in the characterisation of male and female characters in children's texts. The implication of this pattern of stereotyping is that while young boys are able to see masculinity associated with a variety of traits, young girls are again limited.

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of Character Trait by Gender

Character TraitsTraits	Gender			
	Male	Female	Gender Neutral	Total
Nurturing	37	55	3	95
% within trait	38.9	57.9	3.2	100
% within gender	5.3	26.3	5.2	9.9
Aggressive	153	21	12	186
% within trait	82.3	11.3	6.5	100
% within gender	22.0	10.0	20.7	19.3
Constructive-Productive	156	29	11	196
% within trait	79.6	14.8	5.6	100
% within gender	22.4	13.9	19.0	20.4
Physically Exertive	101	14	13	128
% within trait	78.9	10.9	10.2	100
% within gender	14.5	6.7	22.4	13.3
Directive	83	29	0	112
% within trait	74.1	25.9	0	100
% within gender	11.9	13.9	0	11.6
Avoidance	62	12	3	77
% within trait	80.5	15.6	3.9	100
% within gender	8.9	5.7	5.2	8.0
Providing Information	104	49	16	169
% within trait	61.5	29.0	9.5	7.7
% within gender	14.9	23.4	27.6	17.5
Total	696	209	58	963
% within trait	72.3	21.7	6.0	100
% within gender	100	100	100	100

Construction of Image, Intelligence and Socioeconomic Status

Coders were asked to identify, where evident, the perceived image, level of intelligence and socio-economic status of each character in the text. The analysis revealed that the female characters were portrayed in higher numbers with possessing an overall positive image compared to males. In a sense, this reveals an almost one-dimensional portrayal of females. It was the male characters who were accorded the greater opportunity of holding roles that portrayed them as being both good and bad. This type of range serves young boys reading these texts well. They have the opportunity of seeing and accepting the association of masculinity with a wider range of behaviour patterns that comes closer to portraying real-life people with imperfections. In contrast, girls reading these

texts, see female bestowed with "cardinal virtues" including being passive and self-sacrificing only to prepare them for such conforming roles (Ivy and Backlund, 1994: 372).

In terms of intelligence, the majority of both the male and female characters were found to exhibit high intelligence. However, coders were unable to identify the level of intelligence for almost 20% of all female characters and just 14% of all male characters. The reason for this is that these characters were not developed to any extent that allowed the coders to evaluate their level of intelligence. Given the far smaller number of female characters in the texts (n = 58), the 20% figure is a strong indication of the comparatively insignificant role that the female characters played in the development of the stories. Their roles were not even developed to a point by which a reader is able to ascertain something as basic as their level of intelligence.

The coders were also asked to determine the socioeconomic status of each character. The reason for doing so is because the ability to hold power and authority has to do with one's position in society. The analysis revealed that with the exception of animal characters in the texts, male characters were more likely to be portrayed as belonging to positions associated with upper class society. In contrast, female characters were more likely to be portrayed as belonging to lower class society. The findings of the content analysis served to create a consciousness about the portrayal of male and female characters in Malaysian children's literature. When these texts are looked at individually in isolation, it would be unlikely that the issue of imbalances in the portrayal of female and male characters would be thought about at all. However, children read or are read multiple texts during their childhood and the collective impact that these texts can have on the construction of their gendered identity must be investigated.

Conclusions

The findings of the content analysis all point towards a general conclusion - which males are more frequently, appropriated prominent positions of authority and power than female characters. The results serves as a guide for what needs to be done to strike a balance in a way that allows children to see an 'equitable representation' of males and females. By taking even the most simple steps such as ensuring that there is a balance in the number of male and female characters appearing as main characters, writers, illustrators and publishers are already allowing young boys and girls to see themselves as equally important in society. By further ensuring that both male and female characters are portrayed in similar settings and with similar traits, young boys and girls are able to see that they have equal roles to play in society and they both have 'permission' to feel the same range of emotions and react in a similar fashion.

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