Gender Sensitization in Children's Classic Literature

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Abstract: *Most policies pertaining to women now recognize empowering female gender as a valid objective. The term "empowerment" refers to a broad idea that encompasses more than only the supply of economic, social, and educational resources. The overarching goal is to help the female gender recognize and embrace their own inherent power. When used as a means of internal and outward empowerment, literature is a potent weapon for self-expression and self-identification. This study examines how and why discussions of women's empowerment in ancient literature might be included into literary studies. The paper highlights the positive effects of introducing female gender to classical literature for the goal of fostering their personal and communal growth and development. When compared to other fields, the obstacles women face in the arts and culture are not unique. Even in the modern era, it is difficult for women to find accessible environments where she may hone her analytical and creative skills. Because of this, she is unable to fully express herself, stifling both her natural creativity and her fundamental human right to do so.*
Keywords*: empowerment, female, literature, gender*

I.   Introduction:

Gender is a social and cultural issue that affects how we see the world. In the late 1960s, 'gender' became a separate word from 'sex' (Simmonds, 2012). Gender is "the social and cultural layer that builds on and emphasises what people think are biological differences between men and women" (Kennelly, Merz & Lorber, 2001, p.598). Gender, unlike sex, is thought to be made by social and cultural forces that decide what it means to be a man or a woman in society (Bartkey, 1990; Bordo, 2020; Butler, 1999). Since gender is a "cultural construction," gender stereotypes are general ideas about what women and men are like and how they should be (Halpem, 1992).

Keavy Lynch in *Gender Equality in the Classics* remarks that:

The term "women's stories" is also limiting; referring to all work that includes the perspectives and experiences of women as "women's stories" suggests that plays with female characters are a niche market. Furthermore, the term implies that stories about women are separate from stories about men, which actually re-ingrains the gender binary. The general branding of "women's stories" is what leads to seasons with one all-female show and five more shows that hardly involve women. (Lynch)

Gender justice and women's empowerment have emerged as central themes in contemporary scholarship across disciplines as a result of many campaigns for women's equality and rights and the widespread dissemination of information about issues pertaining to women. As a result of discussions and debates sparked by women's movements across the world, the notion of women's empowerment has arisen. The goal is to advocate for the development of conditions and access to resources that will empower women to make their own decisions and take part in shaping public policy. By gaining information, strength, and experience, one's intrinsic abilities are bolstered. Increasingly, governmental programmes involving women and social justice or welfare are considered as having empowerment as their ultimate goal. As Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* admits: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." (Beauvoir) Many children's books have gender prejudice in their text, vocabulary, and artwork (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993). This favoritism is observed in how and to what extent a certain gender is portrayed as the primary character in children's literature. Numerous analyses of children's literature have revealed that male characters predominate

in the majority of the stories. For instance, Ernst (1995) examined the names of children's books and discovered that male names were used almost two times as frequently as female names. She also discovered that male characters are typically the focus of books, even those having feminine or gender-neutral names in the title. The stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles are frequently reflected in many classic and popular stories that feature females. Not just in popular children's literature but also in works that have won the Newbery and Caldecott medals, these gender stereotypes are pervasive. Girls are frequently portrayed as docile rather than active in children's literature (Fox, 1993). Girls are often portrayed as sweet, innocent, conforming, and dependent, whereas boys are typically portrayed as powerful, courageous, independent, and capable (Ernst, 1995; Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993). Males often are explorers, warriors, and rescues, while girls typically play the passive roles of mothers, caregivers, princesses in need of rescue, and characters that assist the masculine form (Temple, 1993). Boys typically succeed because they show inventiveness and/or tenacity, but girls frequently do so because others assist them. If women are originally shown as forceful and energetic, they are frequently portrayed in a passive manner at the story's conclusion. It's obvious that active female characters are the exception (Rudman, 1995). Therefore, research show that both genders are regularly stereotyped in children's books, in addition to females being featured less frequently than boys are.

Many authors and researchers have argued that readers are more likely to identify with characters of the same gender while reading fiction. This suggests that girls' capacity to establish their gender and place in society may be hindered by the paucity of strong female literary characters. The way genders are portrayed in children's books affects kids' views and ideas of what constitutes socially acceptable conduct. Sexism in literature may be so subtle that it subtly trains readers of all genders to accept how they 'see and read the world,' so perpetuating gender stereotypes (Fox, 1993). Children are more likely to accept established social interactions as true because of this reinforcement. But at the same time, books with illustrations that defy gender norms provide kids a chance to reconsider their gender preconceptions and assumptions. Thus, books may provide kids diverse role models and encourage them to have more egalitarian ideas toward gender. Both genders are limited by gender stereotyped roles. Boys and men are seldom depicted as persons who exhibit sad and fearful feelings, have hobbies or vocations that are not stereotypically masculine, or who play roles in which they are not competing or fulfilling high standards, much as females are confined to passive and whining ones. According to Fox (1993) and Rudman (1995), these stereotypes restrict boys' and girls' ability to express themselves and put pressure on children to act in ways that are more "gender proper" than those that are most in line with their personalities.

Role of Gender in Classical Literature: Originating in contrasts, comparative literature promotes understanding of others and helps readers grow in compassion, empathy, and acceptance (Cuma, 2019; Kefeli, 2000). In this way, fairy tales and comparative literature may be used to increase gender awareness among future educators. Henry Remak remarks "is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief".(3)

Cinderella's story has been retold by many different cultures so many times that she has different traits in each one (Tatar, 1999: 102). Even though there are many versions of the story, Grimms and Perrault's version is the most well-known because it shows Cinderella as a passive and incompetent woman. But when the women's liberation movement started in the 1960s, modern feminists started to look at the stories in a different way. The sociopolitical and sociopsychological readings of the stories from a feminist point of view (Haase, 2004; Joosen, 2011; Lieberman, 1972; Rowe, 1979; Schanoes, 2016; Tatar, 2003; Zipes, 1987) showed how the language used in the stories was meant to put women down (Haase, 2004; Joosen, 2011; Lieberman, 1972; Rowe, 1979; Schanoes When women realised that "all men are not princes," the romantic ideals in the stories lost their power (Rowe, 1979: 222). Modern interpretations of the stories changed the Cinderellas from weak and helpless to strong and smart.

Cinderella's literary analysis in the classroom is a great way to help students grasp the significance of the patriarchal canon's subliminal messages. *Ashputtel* by the Grimm Brothers, better known as *Cinderella*, is chosen to illustrate the potential of fairy tales to influence the knowledge of gender problems among future English instructors. Comparisons are drawn between this work and Giuseppe Pitré's *The Magical Little Date Tree,* which presents a counterargument. Pitré's heroine, Ninetta, is the embodiment of freedom, independence, inventiveness, and self-reliance, while Cinderella is the emblem of captivity, dependency, lack of self-confidence, and submission. By depicting the female body as a location of power and resistance in the 19th century, and by using a corporeal language of resistance, Pitré's retelling of the Cinderella story is very important.

No other fairy tale enchants us as much as the tale of Cinderella. Fairy tales may be seen as historical documents (Darnton, 1999), which have the ability to serve as cultural barometers (Paul, 1998) and cultural relics (Gilbert, 1992). We still share a home with her glass-slippers, pumpkin, stepsisters, and nasty stepmother.

There are several variations of Cinderella. J. Gould in *Spinning straw into gold. What fairy tales reveal about the transformations in a woman's*
Life remarks that, "the best-known fairy tale in the Western world, and the one woman most often name as their favorite because all of us, male and female, have known despair and several times in a lifetime seen ourselves as unwanted, looked down on by others" (Gould, 2006: 39). As A. Lieberman believes that, "the child who dreams of being a Cinderella dreams perforce not only of being chosen and elevated by a prince, but also of being a glamorous sufferer or victim".
As the origin narrative of social gender norms that have been enforced on both men and women for ages, Cinderella might be viewed as the mother of fairy tales.
The dependent, helpless, and subservient girl in the ashes was so potent that Dowling would later use the phrase "the Cinderella complex" to describe her in psychology (1981). Dowling underlines the neurotic reliance, acquired helplessness, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence of the dependent female character in her work.

Evolution of gender equality in Children's writing: There's a lovely story about a young girl named Mary who comes up with the brilliant notion of just wearing anything she wants. In a society where ladies are expected to wear dresses but guys are expected to wear pants, she decides to break the norm by dressing in trousers. Mary's unconventionality, as well as her introduction of the concept of personal agency, poses a threat to traditional gender roles. Mary Edward Walker, a pioneer surgeon in the 1800s, was the inspiration for the novel because she opted to wear "bloomer" trousers rather than corsets and skirts.

The book *Think Big, Little One* by Vashti Harrison is perfect for the little dreamers in your life. This board book features 18 great women from different fields to show young readers that they can achieve anything they set their minds to. The Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, who in 2004 became the first woman to receive the Pritzker Architecture Prize, is one of the many women whose achievements are highlighted in the book. Mary Blair, the modernist painter and animator who worked on classic Disney films like *Cinderella, Peter Pan*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, is described in the book, as is Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan environmental activist and the first African woman to earn a Nobel Peace Prize.

In an ideal world, books used in the classroom that feature both male and female characters would have equal amounts of development. Teachers usually don't have much say over the children's books they use since they must make due with what is available, cheap, or provided by well-wishers and parents. Despite these obstacles, it is possible to make concerted efforts to ensure that books that promote gender equality are used in classrooms. Seeking out books with positive portrayals of women and strong female protagonists is one recommendation. Another piece of advice is to read or watch media that avoids portraying characters in terms of gender stereotypes. Rudman (1995) recommends including a gender-neutral criterion for accomplishments in your work. Understanding and explaining one's own opinions is crucial before employing tactics to uncover gender stereotypes and develop gender-equal attitudes in pupils (Rudman 1995).

II.   Conclusion:

At the end, women have not contributed as much to literature as one might anticipate from making up almost half of the world's population. For millennia, the term "human experience" has been synonymous with "male experience, "a definition that is both inadequate and biased. Neither the female gender nor her existence as a separate topic was ever established. To put this into the context of Virginia Woolf's statements, the obvious explanation for this was that women did not have the financial independence and private space that men enjoyed. A lack of respect for women as unique and self-determining individuals contributed to this. Many women had to overcome psychological, literary, and cultural barriers. Inequality in intellectual opportunity is exacerbated when women are denied equal access to school.

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