



Stereotyping Gender in Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT: *The persistent imbalance of gender representation in children's literature has become an issue. The stereotypes and worldview embedded in children's books have become accepted knowledge, and such deep-seated socialized thinking has created barriers that prevent authors from implementing their egalitarian beliefs. This paper contends that a huge imbalance exist in the presentation of gender in children's literature and therefore states that despite the positive attributes that typify children's literature in Nigeria, the literature is gender biased. Gender stereotypes in children's literature in Nigeria enhance gender inequality by imparting notions that privilege masculinity and downgrade femininity, gender bias exist in content, language, and pictures in a number of children's literatures and reinforces the building and maintaining of biases towards the female genders. This paper analyses imbalance in gender relations in selected children's books in Nigeria. The study found out that children's literature in Nigeria is gender bias and displays imbalances in the representation of textual characters and as a result there exist the absence of dynamic and positive female characters in the literature produced for the younger ones.*

Key words: *Gender, Children, Stereotypes, Bias.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The richness and diversity of children's literature transcends regions and continents of the world. In spite of this however, this paper explores the biased nature of this literature as observed in children's books. In addition to being one of the favourite choices for reading among children, children's literature is central to childhood development beyond the traditional notions of literacy and learning. In this regard, children engage with stories in the form of books, films and media, and from these they learn ways to interpret their world and develop models for participating in their culture, in addition to navigating the complexities of the contemporary world. Furthermore, children's literature like all cultural productions for children is a parallel educational universe in which one can see glimpses of the future. It constructs and impacts children's developments, sense of identity, and visions of the world, studying children's literature means, studying one's heritage (www.kidyounotpodcast.com, www.deakin.edu.au/art). Lending credence to this, Ernest Emenyonu(1998:6) states that: "Carefully crafted and programmed children's literature would teach morals, satisfy inherent curiosity and excite imagination in children culminating in properly adjusted, well-socialized adulthood. In other words, the study of children's literature in Nigeria is tantamount to a commitment to a socio-cultural crusade, to a literature that is relevant to the environment of the children, containing messages of didacticism and morality which are for the mental and psychological well-being of children in their unique circumstance. This is viewed in the themes of folktales, fantasy, reality and other varieties of the literature. In addition, the educational development of children is significant at preparing them for the challenges of the future. To this end, literature for children aims at developing and promoting techniques and attitudes that will lead to creativity, originality, divergent and convergent thinking. Besides all the aforementioned, however, children's literature in Nigeria is gender biased and displays imbalances in the representation of its characters. In essence, such messages can stunt the growth of children's dreams and manipulate their minds to believe that they must act in an 'appropriate' way in the society, the consequence of this lies in limiting their choices in life. The biased views of themselves and those around them prevent them from doing activities that suit their personalities and capabilities. Thus because today's girl and boy will become tomorrow's woman and man, their nurture, upbringing and education are very vital to the society in which they are born. It is therefore essential that the

society concerns itself with the kinds of messages that it throws at them through literary materials as well as the effect of such on their perception and judgment.

In conceptual terms, and according to Amanda C. (1991:1), there has been debates on what constitutes children's literature; these debates are in the areas of books written by children, for children, and books chosen for children which are partly responsible for the various definitions of children's literature. The definition by Ikhigbonoareme E.B. (1992:62), is encompassing as it accommodates the recurring themes of pleasure and instruction. "Children's literature is a genre that caters for the educational and entertainment needs of the child. It includes books for children containing short stories- folktales etc.,... they are books that children read to satisfy their spiritual, emotional and intellectual needs;... such books should provide pleasurable and instructional values to children. This kind of literature has to fill the vacuum of curiosity in their lives by being specially designed to motivate the vital task of acculturation at their impressionable age. Thus it has to be aesthetically appealing while projecting a didactic stimulus of the children's environment". This definition demonstrates the role of children's literature as holistically affecting the development of the child.

The concept of gender stereotype according to the *Gender Dictionary* (1996:3) refers to "the constant portrayal of women and men occupying social roles according to traditional division of labour in a particular society. Such gender stereotype works to support and reinforce the traditional gender division of labour, by stereotyping it as "normal" and "natural". The authors of the children's books such as Nzekwu and Crowder and Iroh Eddie, have perpetuated this in their works as reflected in *Eze goes to School* and *Without a Silver Spoon* by creating a huge imbalance between the male and female gender in different areas of activities. Some scholars have however, refuted the idea of "normal" and "natural" based on their definitions of the concept of gender. For example the Gender Dictionary, states that: "Gender as a concept goes beyond the biological sexual characteristics and also encompasses the socially defined sex roles, attitudes and values which communities ascribe as appropriate for one sex or the other. What defines gender therefore, is not only what one sees in front of one, the sex one was born with, but it is also how one thinks, feels, acts, and reacts in some situations. It is how one was raised to be, and how one shaped oneself to become, as one grew up, it is a fascinating blend of biological, psychological, and sociological features". The argument above in other words opines that gender is rather a social construction of the society one lives in rather than a natural creation. Hassan K. (2006:152) in the article 'Patriarchy and Sexism in African literary and Cultural Thought' affirms to the various submissions that gender is stereotyped among children while finding its roots in the culture of a people. He states that it is in the process of socialization that the female creation is thought as inferior who is practically translated in cultural praxis. He also adds that young boys and girls are brought up gradually to understand and imbibe the meaning of "masculinity" and "femininity" and to appreciate that the concept of sexuality actually connotes more than merely the physical or biological differences the two sexes bear to each other; adding that no one who grows up in a typical patriarchal society in Africa for instance, will fail to remember some of the heavily-loaded value assumptions his culture has fed him with as menu of his cultural growth. These value-assumptions are represented in a rigidly Manichean division in which men and women are differently ascribed qualities, allegedly "natural" to their sexes. Kurfi illustrates that as a young boy growing up in Hausa society, he still remembers how apt and monstrously sexist is the rendition of his assured difference between the 'masculine' and 'feminine' in society: 'Namiji Dutse, Mace Sakaina'. The male literally is a hard rock; woman a piece of fragile or breakable calabash. According to Kurfi, culture is responsible for gender stereotypes in the society, having instilled in its young such bizarre and fallacious ideas, the consequence is making them relate to each other with either fear or contempt. It can be deduced from Kurfi's observation that, gender stereotypes is practiced under the influence of cultural and societal experiences. Because of the above and other related attitudes. Ellen Showalter, a proponent of gynocriticism, a strand of feminism, comes up with the strand of feminism which she tags gynocriticism. Until the Twentieth century, the female literary tradition was constructed in a way that images and values of the ideal feminine was done from the patriarchal oppression that identified the woman as the 'other'. During the twentieth century, there was a reaction to the patriarchy of previous times which protested the ideology of the feminine. The most recent development is the female criticism, where a female identity is sought free from the masculine definitions and oppositions. The recognition of a distinct female canon and the development of the female 'reader' are fundamental aspects of gynocriticism. In her attempt to free women from the male dominated literary tradition Showalter proposed a separate model of feminist literary theory rejecting male models of writing and interpreting a text, insisting that a text must be written and read using a feminist model. She divides her model into feminist critique, which exposes woman as a reader, and gynocritics which presents the woman as a writer. As a reader the feminist traces out the images and stereotypes of the women exposed in the male texts. As a writer on the other hand the woman is a producer of textual meaning with themes, genres, history and structure of literature. This in essence is the female model of writing being independent of male values and norms.

Gender Stereotypes in *Eze Goes to School and Without a Silver Spoon*

According to Jean K. (2007:3), the problem of gender stereotypes lies with our society's thinking that it is normal. People who create children's books are adults who are part of this society that revolves around stereotypes. One can easily assume that their cemented ideas about the world are in one way or another, transferred into the books they write for children. Kilbourne further shows how society's attitude can affect children. She reasoned that children's developing concepts of themselves as individuals are bound up in their need to understand and fulfil the expectations of the society in which they are a part of. With the narrative heavily anchored from a male-centred perspective, the authors of *Eze Goes to School* from the onset advance the primordial sexual prejudice which tends to limit women's intellectual acumen. On his first day at school, Eze learns a few new things which he eagerly relates to his father as soon as he gets home. Among them includes the instructions giving to them by their teacher. Okonkwo is happy to realize that his desire for his son to gain western education is beginning to unfold. From Eze's story, Okonkwo picks out one; that there is a girl in his class called ChinweNdu. He instructs Eze never to allow anybody in class beat him academically much less the girl called Chinwe. For him it would be stupid to let that happen: "You must beat all the boys in any examination you take, you must take first place always, and if you are stupid enough to let a boy beat you, never my son, let the girl, Chinwe, beat you" (EGS p.19). Okonkwo's advice is filled with snippets of male-assumed superiority against women as demonstrated in the statement "never my son let the girl Chinwe beat you". He desires his son to excel above all the pupils in his class so as to be the proud father of an excellent child. For a girl to do better than his son would amount to a taboo. Okonkwo's attitude shows that attaining western education and socialization is positive as the phrase "you must take first place always" illustrates, however, his caution about the girl in class beating him is negative which is exemplified in the phrase "and if you are stupid". This is a further illustration of the patriarchal assumptions that seek to portray women as intellectually inferior and with limited mental capabilities compared to men. This corroborates Monica Ekpong's (1994:22) assertion that 'male domination obtains as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of human culture'. Furthermore, the position of widowhood in an African community is portrayed in the book. A widow in a patriarchal society such as Ohiais almost an object of ridicule. She is humiliated and dejected by the late husband's family. She loses her respect and is treated with utmost disdain. As soon as Eze's father dies, his mother faces the wrath of a patriarchal community with beliefs and values detrimental to the progress of women. Agu, in a fit of anger and male bravado tells Eze's mother: "If you realize that they are our children too, why not shut up, you stupid woman? But if you mean to exert your influence, you should do so in your father's house and not here in a village to which you do not belong" (EGS p.25). The outburst from Agu in the words "why not shut up you stupid woman?" and "you should do so in your father's house" supports the cultural belief that a woman has neither voice nor right in her husband's house. The words "shut up, you stupid woman" ridicules the widow and equates her with a nonentity. It also suggests that cultural institutions like marriage have been designed to favour the man unlike the woman. Debbie T. (1985:1) writing about women's patriarchal position of subservience argues that:

Discrimination against women is such a profound and subtle sickness that it has lodged deep in the sub consciousness of both men and women as well as in the structure of our societies. This makes it one of the hardest sources of inequality to fight because it grips women both from within and without.

As part of the gender stereotypes portrayed in the book, a male child in Ohia community is taught through the process of socialization at an early age to appreciate the demarcation between the male and female gender. He is to feel superior over the female. In addition, he is to abide strictly by the prescribed cultural standards. This is captured by Kurfi H. (2006:152) who states that: "It is in the process of socialization that the female creation is thought as inferior who is practically translated in cultural praxis. Young boys and girls are brought up gradually to understand and imbibe the meaning of "masculinity" and "femininity"". Again boys are nurtured by their fathers not to display emotions in public. The omniscient narrator tells us that conscious of this, Eze journeys with his mother to the market from the village and as the weight of his load begins to tell on him, he does not make a fuss because he remembers that his father: Taught him that, he must learn to bear his burdens without complain and that he must never let any woman know when he was suffering. So Eze apart from fearing that the women and more especially the girls would laugh at him if he complained was trying to be as grown up as a young boy... (EGS P.89).

The remark and the phrase "learn to bear his burden without complain" and "never let any woman know when he was suffering" shows that the male nature has been used to connote strength, courage and resilience while the female nature in opposite to the male's has been used to symbolize weakness, inferiority and docility. Thus, based on the culture of the people, boys and girls are psychologically prepared through stereotype to internalize gender attributes which is to later define their social status in the larger society. Eze imbibes the teaching of his father and so for fear of being embarrassed by the women and especially the girls, he tries hard to bear his burden so that he does not belittle himself before the females. This is further displayed when Eze was beaten into second place by Chinwe in the promotion examination:...He cried all the way home

and refused to eat anything that evening. It was not that he was in second place that upset him most. It was that a girl was the one who had beaten him (EGS p.32). Eze's reaction, "cried all the way home" and "refused to eat anything that evening" is a demonstration of the idea that, Eze has imbibed the teachings of his society. Because of this, Eze and the other boys in Ohia grow up to see themselves as better and superior to the girls. This is a way of building and maintaining the patriarchal social order which indoctrinates women into believing and accepting their complacent subjugated position. Furthermore, to give insight into gender relations as well as expose the stereotyped perception which the males have of the women, it is observed that in Ohia community, it is considered denigrating for boys to talk to girls. This shows that the cultural practice teaches the boys right from early age to segregate themselves from girls and to regard associating with them as a taboo. Here is how the narrator captures Eze's acquiescence to this cultural practice. "Eze apart from being naturally a quiet boy would never talk to strangers. He closed his lips even tighter when first he noticed there were no other boys in their group. He would never talk to girls". (EGS P.8).

To expose the gravity of the scenario are the words "he closed his lips even tighter" "he would never talk to girls" and "Eze kept his distance from them". In apparent reaction to the above, Cahill J. (1986:59) argues that "children learn from their community to categorize themselves by gender very early in life, a part of this is learning how to display and perform gendered identities as masculine and feminine". Santrock R. (1994:5) affirms this by observing that "children learn at a very early age what it means to be a boy or girl in our society, through a myriad of activities, opportunities, encouragements, discouragements, over behaviour, covert suggestions, and various forms of guidance, children experience the process of gender role socialization". Apart from this superior feeling that boys are groomed to exhibit, patriarchal culture has also helped to create a huge imbalance in attitudes and traditional roles of both genders. There is a huge gender stereotype in occupations. Boys spontaneously sort attributes and behaviours into masculine category, especially in the performance of home chores. Therefore, they regulate their behaviour based on the definition of masculinity which their culture has provided. Domestic chores in Ohia are divided along gender lines. The boys regard certain chores as belonging to girls. A boy participating in domestic work evokes loud jeering. Eze grudgingly partakes in sweeping the class thereby exposing this gender stereotype. It is in reaction to such that Bravo B. (2000:2) states: In a society which is rife with gender stereotypes and biases, children regularly learn to adopt gender roles which are not always fair to both sexes. As children move through childhood and into adolescence they are exposed to many factors which influence their attitudes and behaviours regarding gender roles. These attitudes and behaviours are generally learned first in the home and reinforced by the child's peers, school experience and books. (The Free Encyclopedia, 2000).

This shows that writers, including those of children's literature, reflect their society's culture which embraces values, behavioural standards and patterns in their works. This, as cognitive theorists of culture holds, implies that individual social categories can be premised on gender. Iroh's main female character, Ugadia, in *Without a Silver Spoon*, is passive, docile and without a voice. Chukuwma H. (1990:131) bemoans this in these words:

Docility and complete summation of will is demanded and enacted from the female. This traditional image of women as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless, stuck especially, in the background of patrilineage which marked most African societies.

Writing about character portrayal in children's books Rudman M. (1995:4) argues that "females in children's books are the nurturers and often depicted as mothers, nurses and kitchen helpers". Thus, both in African and Western cultures, the female gender are often cast in stereotypes. In the picture illustration on page 12 of the text, Ure's mother, Ugadia is shown in the kitchen, and on page 38, she is shown nurturing Ure's little sister (Nnenna). When her voice is heard at all, she is either telling little Nnenna a fable: "Once upon a time, Mbe the Tortoise gave a feast for all the animals..." (WSS p.16) or talking in relation to food: Nnam! Mama called from the kitchen. That meant that supper was ready to be served...come quickly your father must be starving by now (WSS p.15). The implication is that child rearing, moulding, nurturing and domestic chores have been structured and solidified by patriarchy to marginalize women; which is occasioned by gender relations. Lending credence to this assertion, Aliyu A. (1997:149) submits that: "Women's art of oral story telling is as ancient as the people themselves..." The presentation of the female is stereotypically done based on culture, she is ascribed the roles of kitchen helper and story teller; the two of which patriarchy has carved out as the exclusive reserve for the female. In the text, Iroh demonstrates that culturally, women hardly partake in 'serious' matters in the home. The cultural influence here comes along with a social behaviour that energizes the man into being active and restricts the woman from being anything but passive. We see this when Chokwe exercises his powers as vested on him by culture and tradition. Advising his son before he leaves home to live with his teacher, Steven, he said:

Let wisdom and obedience always be with you. Let every word that comes out of your mouth be a word of truth. Let no lies come out of your mouth. Let your change of abode not mean a change in your mode of

life. Let truth always be with you, let bad company avoid your way. Always remember where you come from, let the spirit of my ancestors be with you (WSS p.45).

Ironically, all through the exercise, Ugadia is silent and says nothing to him. Indicating that in patriarchal societies, the laws that govern and pattern human behaviour render women silent passive followers as it is brought to the fore by the words "let my ancestors be with you", the word 'my' is a way of edging the woman out of such an exercise which the tradition of the people only recognizes the male to be a partaker of. This validates Nawal El Saadawi's (1980:77) contention that... "masculinity is not real, not an essential truth, but only an external shell built up and imposed on women by societies based on class and sexual discrimination". In addition, Iroh casts women as being conditioned by a patriarchal society, whose values they must internalize. They do not speak on issues when the male are present. This cultural influence brings about a certain self-awareness that forces the woman into thinking about herself within a given gender role; this is revealed through Ugadia's statement: "I have nothing to say, Dim. You are here. I cannot speak on matters while you are here. Whatever you decide is all right" (WSS p.41).

Here, Iroh seeks to validate the cultural stereotype that women are subhuman compared with men as seen in the words "I have nothing to say...I cannot speak on matters while you are here". Silence in the midst of men is a socially ascribed feminine role; the male has the final say on all matters. Similarly, Chokwe's statement: 'woman! Leave me alone, you women do not know when not to talk about food' (p.81), is derogatory as it suggests that Ugadia is unintelligent. This is a stereotype informed by the culture of the people.

II. Conclusion

Apparently, culture as found in the various texts perpetuates gender stereotypes. In content, language as well as image illustrations, authors are products of their societies and they have been influenced by their cultural beliefs. Comparatively, one notices that character portrayal in *Without a Silver Spoon* and *Eze Goes to School* are typical of what obtains in the cultural milieu of the communities in which the stories are set. It is possible to submit therefore that culture embodies all the activities that give a people their identity, thus, gender is a creation of cultural attitudes that are responsible for the different kinds of stereotypes found in children's books and which promote gender imbalance in the society.

Finally, people's notions of what it means to be female or male are socially constructed. Children's books which take part in such stereotypes automatically transfer our society's stereotypes onto them without giving them a choice to interpret the world as they grow. Although common sense tells us that there are obvious differences between males and females, culture and cultural myths shape gender relations. We must learn to take caution in passing onto our children, the difference between one's biological identity and the conventional pattern of behaviour we learn to associate with each sex, or risk expanding gender inequality in the society.

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