



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN MALAYSIAN
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

RAMESH NAIR A/L S.RAMAN NAIR

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA
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RAMESH NAIR A/L S.RAMAN NAIR

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2008

Dedicated to my parents for their love, support and sacrifices

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment
of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN MALAYSIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

By

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July 2008

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The present study explores the construction of gender in a selection of Malaysian children's literature texts in the English language. An examination of the ways in which male and female social actors are constructed in these texts uncovers the subtle gender-based messages that they inherently contain. This is important to know because young Malaysian children reading these stories are also building sociocognitive schemas about their gender identity and roles in society.

The content analytic method of liberal feminist researchers has been a popular method of evaluating the representation of male and female characters in children's stories. Such research has served to reveal, among others, imbalances in the number of male and female characters found in lead roles and in illustrations. The present study adds another dimension to the reading of gender in children's literature. In addition to looking at gender through a content analysis of surface level features, the way in which the various characters are linguistically and visually constructed is also examined. It is for these reasons that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is adopted as an approach to reading gender construction in children's literature. CDA is an

approach that looks at how power imbalances are played out through choices made in language use and related semiotic resources. Four methods of analysis are relied upon and they are content analysis, lexical analysis, transitivity analysis and visual analysis. It is the researcher's contention that each method contributes to a comprehensive framework for reading gender in children's literature.

The findings of the content analysis revealed significant imbalances in the distribution of female and male social actors, both in the roles that they played and their appearances in the accompanying illustrations. In both cases, males outnumbered females. Practices of stereotyping were found in the distribution of the characters in the various settings. While the home setting appeared established as a feminised space, the workplace and outdoor settings were dominated by males. The content analysis also pointed towards stereotyping practices in the way female and male characters were ascribed behavioural traits and status in society. The association between gender and behavioural trait appeared to firmly establish power in the hands of the male characters. In the next stage of analysis that focused on both written and visual language, strong nuances of sexism were identified in apparently neutral texts, revealing a weaker construction of females. The analysis of lexical units and clauses revealed deeply embedded linguistic structures that positioned males as predominantly more powerful than the female characters. The visual analysis focused on the roles the female and male characters took on in the illustrations and it was again found that male characters were accorded the more important roles of active doer while females took on the role of passive observer.

An analysis of language, both written and visual, which is grounded in CDA, offers researchers and decision-makers in the selection of texts for children greater insights into the way gender is subtly constructed. As such, the present study proposes that language should be accorded greater attention in the evaluation of gender construction in children's literature or in literary texts produced for children.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMBINAAN GENDER DALAM KESUSASTERAAN KANAK-KANAK
MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Penyelidikan ini tertumpu kepada pembinaan gender dalam teks kesusasteraan kanak-kanak Malaysia yang ditulis dalam bahasa Inggeris. Penelitian cara watak lelaki dan perempuan dibina dalam teks-teks ini membolehkan pendedahan terhadap mesej tersirat yang berasaskan gender yang terkandung dalamnya. Pengetahuan tentang perkara ini penting kerana kanak-kanak Malaysia yang membaca teks kesusasteraan ini sedang membina skema mental mereka sendiri mengenai identiti gender mereka dan peranan mereka dalam masyarakat.

Sebelum ini, kaedah analisis kandungan oleh kumpulan penyelidik feminis liberal telah menjadi pilihan popular dalam menilai perlambangan watak lelaki dan perempuan di dalam cerita kanak-kanak. Penyelidikan berdasarkan kaedah ini telah mendedahkan pelbagai perkara, contohnya, ketidakseimbangan dalam bilangan lelaki dan perempuan yang memegang watak utama dan yang terdapat dalam ilustrasi. Penyelidikan ini menambah dimensi baharu kepada pembacaan gender dalam kesusasteraan kanak-kanak. Selain menilai gender melalui kaedah analisis

kandungan, tumpuan juga diberi kepada cara watak-watak dalam cerita dibina secara linguistik dan visual. Untuk tujuan ini, Analisis Wacana Kritikal (CDA) diadaptasikan sebagai pendekatan untuk membaca gender dalam kesusasteraan kanak-kanak. CDA merupakan pendekatan yang melihat cara ketidakseimbangan dalam kuasa direalisasikan melalui penggunaan bahasa. Empat kaedah analisis digunakan iaitu analisis kandungan, analisis leksis, analisis transitiviti dan analisis visual. Penyelidik berpendirian bahawa setiap kaedah ini menyumbang kepada rangka kerja komprehensif untuk membaca gender dalam cerita kanak-kanak.

Hasil penyelidikan melalui analisis kandungan mendedahkan ketidakseimbangan yang ketara dalam pengagihan pelakon sosial lelaki dan perempuan dari segi watak yang dipegang dan juga dari segi kehadiran mereka dalam ilustrasi. Dalam kedua-dua kes ini, lelaki melebihi perempuan. Amalan stereotaip dikesan dalam pengagihan watak-watak mengikut persekitaran. Persekitaran rumah didapati menjadi ruang kawasan yang didominasi perempuan manakala ruang tempat kerja dan ruang luar pula didominasi kaum lelaki. Analisis kandungan juga mendedahkan amalan stereotaip watak-watak lelaki dan perempuan berdasarkan perilaku peribadi dan status dalam masyarakat. Pertalian antara gender dan perilaku peribadi menunjukkan bahawa kuasa terletak dalam tangan watak-watak lelaki. Pada peringkat analisis kedua yang tertumpu kepada bahasa tertulis dan bahasa visual, unsur seksis yang menyumbang kepada pembinaan perempuan yang lemah dikesan dalam teks yang pada asasnya kelihatan neutral. Analisis unit leksis dan klausa mendedahkan struktur linguistik yang meletakkan kaum lelaki sebagai lebih berkuasa secara menyeluruh berbanding watak-watak perempuan. Analisis visual tertumpu kepada peranan yang dimainkan oleh watak-watak perempuan dan lelaki dalam ilustrasi dan didapati

sekali lagi bahawa watak lelaki diberi peranan yang lebih utama sebagai pelaku aktif manakala watak perempuan mengambil watak pemerhati yang pasif.

Analisis bahasa bertulis dan visual yang berasaskan CDA boleh memberi penjelasan yang lebih mendalam mengenai cara gender dibina secara tersirat kepada para penyelidik dan pihak berkuasa yang menilai cerita kanak-kanak. Oleh yang demikian, penyelidikan ini mengesyorkan bahasa harus diberi tumpuan yang lebih apabila menilai pembinaan gender dalam kesusasteraan kanak-kanak atau bentuk teks lain untuk kanak-kanak.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 15 July 2008 to conduct the final examination of Ramesh Nair a/l S.Raman Nair on his Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “Gender Construction in Malaysian Children’s Literature” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

RAMESH NAIR A/L S.RAMAN NAIR

Date: 15 August 2008

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AWAM	All Women's Association of Malaysia
CD analysts	Critical Discourse analysts
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CDC	Curriculum Development Centre
CLAWS4	Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System (version 4)
ESL	English as a Second Language
IBBY	International Board of Books for Young People
ISBN	International Standard Book Number
MBBY	Malaysian Board of Books for Young People
MR	Members' Resources
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NILAM	Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UCREL	University's Centre for Computer Corpus Research on Language, Lancaster University

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Research into the area of sexism in the English language and its impact on society can be traced back to the early 1900s (Jenkins and Kramarae, 1981). Since then, studies on language and gender have been carried out extensively, holding out the promise of “advancing linguistic and social theory” and also “providing a social critique and a programme of political action aimed at reducing sexual inequality” (Graddol and Swann, 1989:3).

Within the larger spectrum of studies on gender biasness and practices of stereotyping, children’s literature has drawn particular interest among numerous researchers over the past decades (Dutro, 2002; Desai, 2001; Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Poarch and Monk-Turner, 2001; Oskamp, Kaufman and Wolterbeck, 1996; Turner-Bowker, 1996; Crabb and Bielawski, 1994; Dellmann-Jenkins, Florjancic and Swadener, 1993; Kortenhuis and Demarest, 1993; Paterson and Lach, 1990; Collins, Ingoldsby and Dellman, 1984; Weitzman et al., 1972).

A reason for this interest has been the view that gender is viewed as “a central tension in children’s reading of literature” (Dutro, 2002:383). Gender is one of “a microcosm of ideologies, values, and beliefs” that is found in children’s literature (Taylor, 2003:301). Therefore, messages about gender roles and gender identity that are transmitted through these texts are thought to affect the future behaviour of the children who consume them as they formulate their own roles in society (Eisenberg, 2002; Desai, 2001; Drees and Phye, 2001; Singh, 1998). This is a point which is

further stressed by Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996:63) who contend that stories for young children have the ability to both “promote certain beliefs and certain forms of behaviour while discouraging others”.

Research on gender construction in children’s literature can serve children well. A heightened sense of awareness about gender disparities could lead to conscious steps being taken by writers, illustrators and publishers to provide children with access to children’s books that avoid sexist practices. Clark (2002:288), for example, observes that in recent decades, the extensively analysed ‘Caldecott Award’ winning books in the United States “have been much more likely to feature female characters” and in less stereotyped ways compared to children’s books from the 1960s. Therefore, in more recent publications, children, both girls and boys, have the opportunity to see themselves in a greater range of roles, activities and settings. This is a significant step in reducing the social stereotyping of gender identity.

Another reason why gender construction in children’s literature has continued to hold the attention of researchers is the fact that literature-based instruction has featured prominently in the school curriculum, and therefore, it is felt that “such literature had to be reviewed for bias” (Rosa, 1999:5). In Malaysia, literature has re-emerged in English language classrooms as the language continues to be regarded as crucial for the country’s growth. Among the reasons why mastery of the English language remains prominently on Malaysia’s national agenda is the firm belief that the language is a key ingredient in creating knowledge workers, a necessary prerequisite to compete in a knowledge-based economy (Awang Had Salleh, 2003). The teaching of English has obviously been the focus of attention because the supply of a

Malaysian workforce competent in the English language is very much dependent on the emphasis placed on the language within the primary and secondary school curricula.

The reintroduction of literature in the primary and secondary English language syllabus has perhaps brought about the most significant change in the teaching of English in Malaysia in recent years. Initiated in 1989, the Class Reader Programme brought back literature into the mainstream with one English lesson a week being allocated for the reading of the recommended literary texts (Rosli Talif and Mukundan, 1994). Since then, a more structured literature programme has been reintroduced in phases into Malaysian schools (Ganakumaran, 2003). It was first introduced to secondary schools but has now reached children in upper primary classes with recommended literary texts for children in Primary 4, 5 and 6. In addition to the introduction of the literature component, children are also required to read through the NILAM class readers programme in which students have to keep a record of the books that they have read throughout their schooling years. At the present time, the NILAM class readers programme would be one way through which young Malaysian children may come into contact with the types of texts that make up the corpus of the present study.

Considering the potential of children's texts in transmitting messages about gender identity, there is a need to evaluate gender construction in Malaysian children's literature.