

Gender Representations in Greek Children's Literature: Activities of Male and Female Characters

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Abstract: In recent decades, extensive research has examined gender depiction in children's literature as well as its impacts on young readers' minds and attitudes. Children's picture books are considered an important socializing factor as they provide their audience with a wide variety of information about life. Due to their young age, children have limited experience and knowledge of the world and therefore they depend on books in order to draw information about socially acceptable behaviours. As a cultural product, literature usually expresses the dominant ideology of the society in which it is produced and consumed. Therefore, intentionally or not, books frequently reproduce established attitudes, regardless of their validity, such as gender bias. This happens due to the fact that ideologies penetrate the language itself and by extension the way we think, speak or write. For this reason it is possible for books of the twenty-first century to still depict outdated gender portrayals. Naturally this is not a conscious, out loud statement of the writer or the illustrator, but it appears implicitly, usually as a given. Such gender portrayals can be outlined in a story by a character's interests and activities. Leisure activities, sports and other hobbies can provide hints about the character's personality, physical condition and talents. In the past, research has shown disparities in children's literature, with male characters monopolizing 'energetic' activities and female characters spending their free time more statically. Stereotyped gender representations in picture books reproduce gender biases by implanting them to the next generation's minds. Using content analysis methodology, this qualitative research examines if gender is depicted stereotypically in children's picture books published in Greece from 2009 to 2019. According to findings, both male and female characters of the sample engage in activities which are in agreement with traditional gender-stereotyped traits. Implicit gender categorization of interests and hobbies operates restrictively for young children. This new data can constitute a useful tool for science, publishers and the state, as gender inequalities are considered to be the source of various social problems globally.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, Gender roles, Children's literature, Picture books, Representation

1. Gender Bias in Children's Literature

During recent decades, a large number of studies has revealed stereotypical gender depiction in children's literature (e.g., Heintz, 1987; Albers, 1996; Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Paynter, 2011). Discriminatory portrayals of gender have been found in popular books which have won prestigious awards such as Caldecott and Newbery (Davis and McDaniel, 1999; Gooden and Gooden, 2001), as well as in non-award winning illustrated children's books (Engels, 1981; Poarch and Monk – Turner, 2001), indicating that gender bias is widespread. Over the past decades female characters have been repeatedly found to be under-represented in texts and illustrations of children's books (Gooden and Gooden, 2001). Also, women and girls are depicted in a stereotypical manner, usually presented as passive, less intelligent, dependent and emotional compared to men and boys who are portrayed in books more active and competent (Kramer, 2001). Ever since the 1970's where sexism in children's books was first researched and documented (Weitzman *et al*, 1972) public awareness of the issue has gradually risen. However, recent findings strongly suggest that gender bias is still present at twenty-first century's children's literature (Hamilton *et al*, 2006). This indication raises social concern, since stereotypes cultivate further discriminations.

Books play an important role in children's everyday life, as they are an integral part of primary education, while at the same time they can be found in almost every house. As of that, children interact with books in high frequency. Children's literature provides amusement, cultivates imagination and helps in the development of language skills. Additionally, it operates as a mean of socialization (Allen *et al*, 1993). Children depend on books, among others, to gather information about the world, at a time where they form self-images and identities (Singh, 1998). Therefore, the stimuli they are repeatedly exposed to, such as literature's explicit and implicit ideology in texts and illustrations, can affect their attitudes as well as their future development as adults (Schau and Scott, 1984). That includes the very important psycho-social process of gender identity formation.

Research has confirmed that picture books which reproduce gender stereotypes can affect children's attitudes about the world and themselves negatively, increasing their sexist beliefs (Scott, 1986). Children see themselves in stories they read or listen, and through this identification with the book's characters and what these characters are experiencing, they draw information about what is socially acceptable in various occasions. Therefore it is highly possible for them to imitate behavioural models they are exposed to through

books, including gender roles (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). It is evident from the above, that stereotypical portrayal of gender in children's books can be harmful for young readers, as it limits their aspirations and ignores their talents, cultivating subtle traditional expectations.

2. Male and Female Activities in Picture Books

Due to the fact that children's literature addresses to an audience with poor linguistic skills and limited attention span, children's books usually are defined by their short texts and simple vocabulary. In order to be appealing and understood by children, picture books narrate short stories, which avoid detailed descriptions and introspection, favouring action and dialog (McDowell, 1973). As of that, the reader can draw conclusions about a story's character depending more on its actions. Activities and hobbies that are attributed to each gender in children's books help children to outline female and male portrayals in their minds, as literature often sets for them feminine and masculine standards (Peterson and Lanch, 1990).

Previous research in gender representation has examined literature characters' activities in children's books as indicators of gender depiction. More specifically, Kolbe and la Voie (1981) categorized the activities identified in their sample in three groups: expressive or instrumental activities, important to the plot or not, gender stereotyped or not. According to their findings, gender discrimination was evident, as female characters were depicted in stereotyped activities, which were also of no great significance to the story. A similar approach was made by Heintz (1987), who examined as well activities in Caldecott award winning books. At this research, the activities of the sample were categorized in two main groups: energetic and passive. As energetic, were considered extrovert activities such as doing sports, socialising, or leading a group. As passive, were considered more mild activities such as tidying up or watching television. Findings showed that men monopolized the energetic activities in contrast with women, who once more were depicted in books less interesting and important.

Sexism in children's literature is a serious issue which has emerged in the 1970's. Great efforts have been made ever since for literature to provide more egalitarian gender- role models to children. Although important steps have been made in recent decades, the question still remains: Has gender stereotyping in children's literature been shifted?

3. The Current Study

This study examines the way female and male characters are portrayed in Greek children's literature. More specifically, it explores gender depiction in children's books of Greek writers, which have been published from 2009 to 2019. This period was chosen as it was deemed necessary to establish the current situation in Greece. Although extensive research has been conducted in the subject area in many European countries, Greece has not collected similar data in the last decades. The current research attempts to fill in that gap of information in order to shed light in attitudes and ideologies concerning gender.

Main purpose of the study was to investigate Greek dominant ideology about gender, as it appears in children's literature. For this purpose all books that were published in the decade 2009-2019 in Greece, and fell into the category of children's literature or picture books, were listed and coded. More specifically, all books published for children in the decade 2009-2019 were gathered from *biblionet*, a data base which includes all editorial production in Greece and operates under the auspices of Hellenic Institution of Culture. According to *biblionet* 5.375 titles fell into the category of children's books. These books were examined one by one in order to collect only picture-books and literature for preschool children (ages 4-6). As of that activity books (e.g. colouring exercises), educational books (e.g. teaching the farm animals) and books for older children were excluded, leaving a total of 925 titles. These titles were coded, and from them a random sample of 45 books was chosen, as this was considered to be more representative of the average book's ideology. Since the current study aimed to reveal implicit messages concerning gender in books' texts and illustrations, qualitative content analyses was applied to the sample. This methodology is considered to be the most affective for searching hidden messages in texts and other means of communication (Huckin, 2004). The sample of 45 books was considered to be adequate for the purposes of the study since qualitative research is an analytical and thorough methodology and therefore is usually applied in smaller samples.

It is very common for children's books to depict a character performing an activity of some sort. The way a person chooses to spend their free time is suggestive of their personality. Hence, this research examines leisure activities and interests of literary characters according to gender. The activities performed in the sample were categorized in two main groups according to characters who perform them: adults of each

gender and minors of each gender. Through this categorization, gender role depictions of every age group can become visible.

4. Findings

Prior to examining the ways that gender is portrayed in children's literature, all the main characters of the sample were categorised and counted according to gender, in order to establish the quantitative male and female representation in literature nowadays. As main characters, were considered those who appeared in the book's title or those who monopolized illustrations and narration, whether they were human, animals or humanised objects. The categorization showed that 63% of the sample's main characters were male (male:29, female:17), which indicates an underrepresentation of female characters in Greek children's literature. This finding is compatible with ample international research precedents, according to which male characters still outnumber female in children's books, reinforcing gender inequality (McCabe *et al*, 2011). However this research mainly focuses on the ways male and female characters are depicted in books, as through the examination of narrations' implicit messages, further discriminations considering gender can be revealed.

Many of the sample's books feature adults, either as main or secondary characters. Several of them are depicted engaging in activities other than everyday obligations such as work or child rearing. Women of the sample appear more energetic than men on their leisure time, whether they are animals or humans. More specifically, some adult female characters have artistic interests such as singing and dancing. Additionally, a mother enjoys painting and another loves ballet. In a few occasions women choose to read a book. Other women spend their time productively, while remaining in the house area. Some of them cook or bake while others appear to knit or weave. A young princess spends a lot of time with her tablet and a giraffe shops constantly online cookware. Also, many adult female characters appear to be concerned with their appearance. This applies to people, animals and rarely even vegetables. Female of all sorts, are depicted either trying dresses and shoes, spending their money on fashion houses in order to purchase impressive outfits, go to the hair salon or to the pool for sunbathing. Although most of the adult female characters seem to prefer one activity on their free time, the giant's wife has many interests (Rousaki, 2014). This woman is bored because she spends a lot of time alone in the house, as her husband, the giant, is always outside. One day, after finishing the chores at home, she finds a cooking book and learns to cook delicious dishes for her husband. In a similar manner she learns gardening and later on domestic constructions. Her interest and dexterity in constructions make her the only adult female character of the sample who chooses a non-stereotypical activity. However, she makes good use of her new skill constructing a bicycle for her husband. This, in conjunction with the above, suggests that her primary concern is to please her absent spouse. Additionally, the only woman of the sample appearing to have a more contemporary attitude is a mother who leaves the house to have dinner with her friends. It is important though to mention that in the rest of the book she appears to cook and take care of the house and her son (Plisi, 2017).

Adult male characters don't seem to spend their free time as energetically as female, since they engage in a smaller variety of activities. Several of them appear lazy as they choose to relax. Those who are people snore on their house's sofa, while others who are animals sleep under a tree's shadow or at the branch of an arbour. Some of them prefer reading, although in one occasion, this is related to their profession. Rarely they appear to surf on the internet or listen to sports and the news on the radio. Also a prince enjoys painting when he is in a good mood. The most eccentric interest of the sample is that of a king who loves to throw extravagant theme parties, obliging his nationals to donate personal items and dress accordingly to the theme of the occasion (Iliopoulos, 2016).

Children's interests and hobbies, as well as adults', can give information about their personality and stimuli they perceive from the environment. According to findings, boys and girls of the sample appeared in activities with different frequencies. In more detail, boys were depicted more often engaging in an activity, while at the same time they presented a wider variety of interests. These differences alone could suggest gender bias; although they could relate to the fact that male main characters of the sample were cumulatively more than female.

Minor female characters are depicted with interests which are either stereotypically attributed to women, or don't require intense physical movement. More specifically, some of the girls play with dolls, dollhouses and stuffed animals. When the group of children consists of both genders' girls appear to play team games like hide and seek. Also one young giraffe loves to cook while another enjoys listening to music. Sometimes girls are involved in activities with adults. For example, a little girl is taught by her stepmother to make origami (a folding technique which gives paper impressive shapes) which becomes her new hobby. Similarly, another girl

and her brother prepare a sweet treat with their grandmother. Besides cooking, this girl enjoys solving mysteries, as she does later in the narration (Varvogli, 2015). Although this is a non-stereotypical interest, it is something she does with her brother. Therefore it is not safe to assume that she solves mysteries completely by her initiative.

Even when minor female characters appear to have many interests and talents, they are still depicted in a generally traditional manner. For example a little princess, who after reading a drawing book learned to paint beautiful works of art. Later, and in a similar way, she learned playing the piano, dancing, gardening and singing (Strikou-Tomopoulou, 2017). This girl not only has many interests but is also very skilled, as the text mentions that she masters all of her hobbies. However her interests are mainly artistic (singing, dancing, playing the piano, painting) and for centuries were considered qualities of the upper class ladies. This may relate to the fact that the girl is portrayed in the illustrations in a medieval dress. Also all of her interests could be characterized domestic concerning the location, since she does so many things without ever leaving the premises of the palace.

Another little girl, who lives with her brother and parents, asks her mother persistently for a dog, as she feels lonely (Petrovits-Androutopoulou, 2012). The girl explains that she has no one to play with, since her brother is only interested in "boys' games". Her preferred toys seem to be dolls and cooking sets. Although her mother explains to her that toys are for all children and should not be categorized according to gender, she insists on her belief. Despite the fact that the book expresses the politically correct opinion about gender categorization of toys, the main character and narrator of the story, the little girl, seems to undermine the opinion, proving her mother wrong with her toy choices. Furthermore, the fact that a mother with this ideology has two children who play only with stereotypical toys according to their gender is a paradox given that parents usually control and filter their young children's choices.

The most encouraging female character of the sample is a little bird, which makes a short appearance on text and illustrations, skating (Giannaki, 2019). This character is not only depicted performing an activity which is usually attributed to the opposite gender, but is also mentioned to be skilled at it.

Male minor characters of the sample appear to be more active and adventurous than female, presenting a wide variety of interests and hobbies. Many of the boys in the books choose athletic activities such as football, basketball and boxing. Several of them are mentioned to have good performances. A typical example of the above is that of a young boy who narrates his everyday life. The boy is frustrated because, as he claims, his older brother is more accomplished and therefore has better performances in basketball, volleyball, swimming, wrestling, fencing and cycling (Tsitias, 2015). The activities that are attributed to boys in this book are all athletic and demand a good physical condition. Also they are performed outdoors.

Minor male characters don't leave their house only to play sports. Three bear boys enjoy hiking in the mountains and making constructions with all the interesting materials they find along the way. Even when boys stay inside they choose action games. Some male characters seem to be very fond of knights, since they play with swords pretending to protect the king or choose miniature knights and castles for their game. Additionally, a large group of male characters appears to be very interested in vehicles of every kind. More specifically, some boys like to play with miniature cars or ships, while a male bear wants to learn Jet Ski, wind surfing and other water sports. This comes in agreement with the stereotypical belief that men are interested in motorized vehicles and mechanical engineering.

On the other hand there are two male characters who are depicted with artistic interests, but in a very different way. The first case, is that of a small fish which wonders in the vast ocean searching for love. The little fish plays the ukulele (a small guitar) and sings tenderly as an answer to the cruelty of this world (Priovolou, 2014). This is the only male character of the sample who is described as sensitive, which can also be assumed from the instrument he chooses to play. Moreover the text suggests that his sensitivity is his most valuable trait. The second case is that of a young bear who lives with his parents in difficult conditions (Gkrekou, 2018). The father is most of the time displeased, yelling and doing aggressive gestures, while the mother accepts his outbursts stoically. As a result the young bear becomes angry and violent. The boy's problem is solved at the end of the narration when he begins to play drums. Here the hobby of the character is associated directly to his personality as he is described to channel his anger in drums.

Some male characters choose to play games which are not stereotypically attributed to boys but are considered more gender neutral. Three of them spend their time on screen. One of them surfs on the internet and another prefers to watch television programs and movies. The third case is about a young boy who plays

games at his parent's tablet. Although using the tablet is an activity preferred by young children of both genders, the boy is described to prefer games with battles and action. Other male characters also appear to enjoy solving mysteries. One of them engages in the activity in question with his sister, as mentioned above, while the other is determined to become an investigator and therefore spends most of his free time gathering clues about mysteries that he comes across.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Regarding the adult characters of the sample, it is evident from the above that women are depicted more active on their free time than men, as no female is described to relax and be lazy when the opportunity arises. However, it must be noted that most of the female activities are performed in the house area and come in alignment with the traditional female role (e.g. knitting, sewing, cooking, singing, dancing). Additionally, when women leave the house, they do it in order to take care of their appearance (e.g. hair salon, fashion house), which implicitly suggests that they are vain. The only woman who leaves the house for a different reason is a mother who goes to dinner with her friends. Stereotypical representations can also be found in men's depictions, such as their interest in politics and sports. In general, the adult characters of the sample appear to have stereotypical interests according to their gender. Also it must be underlined that there are no characters performing activities traditionally attributed to the other gender. Only exception to that is the giant's wife who makes a bicycle for her husband. Even in this case though, she firstly cleans the house, cooks and takes care of her garden, in other words she is 'fulfilling her gender role' to the fullest. This image of the two genders that emerges from the sample doesn't seem to be representative of today's reality, where, for example, very few women know how to knit or sew. On the contrary, nowadays, men and women of a productive age spend most of their time outside the house, fact that is not depicted in the sample's books.

Considering the minor characters of the sample, girls appear rarely in energetic activities. Usually they are described to play statically, quietly and in the safe environment of their house. On their free time they prefer engaging in activities frequently gender stereotyped (e.g. dolls, cooking, dancing, singing) and occasionally gender neutral (e.g. origami, hide and seek). It is very important to note that no girl of the sample appears to be athletic, to play sports, competitive games or to even like sports. The only minor female character that is depicted more active is the little bird who skates.

On the contrary, minor male characters are depicted more interesting than female, since they appear to be active and adventurous. Most of the boys prefer to spend their free time outside the house, engaging in sports and other hobbies which require intense physical movement. All of them choose activities traditionally attributed to their gender (e.g. football, basketball, wrestling). Even when they play more statically, they mostly prefer 'toys for boys' (e.g. cars, boats, castles, constructions). Additionally, several boys seem to be attracted to battles and races. This competitive side of them suggests that they have dynamic and adventurous personalities. The only exception to the group of male minor characters is the little fish that played the ukulele tenderly.

The current study attempted to examine gender representations in contemporary children's literature published in Greece. Findings strongly indicate that both genders are depicted stereotypically in children's books. Women appear to engage mainly in activities which remind good old housewives and to care about their appearance. Similarly, girls stay mostly at home playing indoor quiet games. On the contrary men seem to have the privilege to relax and do nothing on their free time, while their interests are in alignment with the male tradition (e.g. politics). Finally boys appear quite adventurous and energetic. They love sports and most of the times choose to play outdoors. Even when they stay at home though, they pretend to participate in battles and races with vehicles of every sort. All the above can lead to the conclusion that men appear to be more interesting than women in children's literature.

Summarising, it is evident that the two genders are depicted in a very different manner. Through these representations, children are drawn to believe that men and women come with different traits. Although this discrimination can be restrictive for both genders, boys can form a better self-image through books, since they receive more positive stimuli than girls. On the other hand girls learn through these narrations that women are quieter than men and that their place is mostly inside the house. Gender bias reproduced by books is proven to be harmful for children (Schau and Scott, 1984) as it cultivates further discriminations in adult life. The state, organizations and publishers should take under serious consideration findings like these and intensify their policies in creating a more egalitarian environment for both genders, as European Union visualizes.

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