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GENDER STEREOTYPES IN FAIRY TALES
A CASE STUDY

Abstract

Since a fairy tale is considered to be a social piece of writing, it frequently expresses the problems faced by society. The fact that social roles assigned to genders are biased, allows generating a socio-cultural and sociolinguistic portrait of the community of the period. Even more, studies have shown that tales influence on a child's development is immense and they have the capacity to have an impact on their perception of gender roles, gender prejudice and negatively affect their self-esteem. Whilst fairy tales have the greatest impact on both the child and society, it is advisable to transform traditional roles of women and men and adapt them to the demands of modern life (Warner, 1995; Zipes, 1993).

The paper aims to reveal the stereotypes that children of a school gymnasium "Shavnabada" have regarding gender and social roles. Moreover, the research sets out to determine the possible reasons behind the children's attitude to gender bias. As the case study presented in the article shows, the society manages to brainwash people as early as a school-age. Indeed, school children have already fallen "victims" to the biased gender roles and sexism. The experiment also reveals that the pupils have already acquired their attitudes towards acceptable roles of women and men in society. Specifically, men are breadwinners, whereas women are assigned only the role of homemakers. On the other hand, it was obvious that girls try to overcome prejudice as they consider these stereotypes to be humiliating and even degrading.

Key Words: Gender, Stereotypes, Sociolinguistics, Fairy tale

1. Introduction

Since a fairy tale is considered to be a social piece of writing, it frequently expresses the problems faced by society. Although gender issues and particularly, those of gender inequality have only recently become a popular research topic, this issue emerges in old, traditional tales. The fact that social roles assigned to genders are biased, allows generating a socio-cultural and sociolinguistic portrait of the community of the period. Gender inequality shines through real-life situations as well as in paintings, literature, and even through sexual life (Eden, 2016). Moreover, this tendency is expressed in traditional fairy tales, where, in most cases, the princess is waiting for the prince to save her or cherishes the dreams of marrying him, while the male characters are active and look for adventures. According to Nanda (2014), passivity in fairy tales is one of the most valuable and important attributes for a woman. A woman cannot save herself and waits to be saved by a man. The author's extensive research suggests that ambitious women are less "successful" in traditional fairy tales, because active females are usually depicted as evil characters, and they often die in the story. It is also noteworthy that the authors often refer to the proverb "a beautiful soul in a beautiful body" because kindness is inevitably associated with beauty, whereas the evil is associated with the ugliness (Nanda, 2014). Since fairy tales have the greatest impact on both the child and society, it is advisable to transform traditional roles of women and men and adapt them to the demands of modern life (Warner, 1995; Zipes, 1993).

As is known, the influence fairy tales make on a child's development is immense. A 2007 study by Baker-Sperry focused on Cinderella and the impact of the tale on the school-age children. As the author points out, "Cinderella" is one of the sexist fairy tales, even though it doesn't have many male characters and the main target group is girls. The lack of female characters in the lead role is particularly important as well as relevant, considering the study of gender roles, as gender is based on social perceptions and stereotypes. When children do not have access to both gender roles, they are mostly given information about negative stereotypes or limited gender roles. Consequently, for Baker-Sperry, Cinderella is one of the most significant fairy tales through which we can perceive traditional feminist stereotypes and study the gender perception development of the modern child. Accordingly, children participating in the Baker-Sperry study were read the adapted version of "Cinderella" by Disney. As revealed by

the results, although both girls and boys knew the story equally well, the boys negatively reacted to their male group-mates, who showed interest in the "girls' fairy tale". Consequently, the lack of responses from the boys was caused not by the fact that they did not like "Cinderella", but by the fear of how other members of the group would react to their choice (Baker-Sperry, 2007). Therefore, these children can be seen as a model of society where members are constantly (intentionally or unintentionally) forced to be stereotyped.

Kate Patterson conducted a study similar to Baker-Sperry in 2014, but she read only one specific paragraph from "Cinderella" to the children. In particular, the corset dress scene. To the question of why the children thought the sisters wanted to wear a corset, they replied that perhaps the sisters were fat and wanted to look thin to attract the Prince. The children's concerns that the sisters aren't beautiful enough to play the role of Cinderella indicate the harmful effects of gender stereotypes in fairy tales. Also, Kate Patterson, in the same study, showed the children an illustration from the fairy tale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears". The children correctly guessed which of the bears was the father bear and the mother bear, because they thought men should be bigger than women and the aprons were only made for women. This, of course, stresses the stereotypical thinking that children are exposed to from an early age.

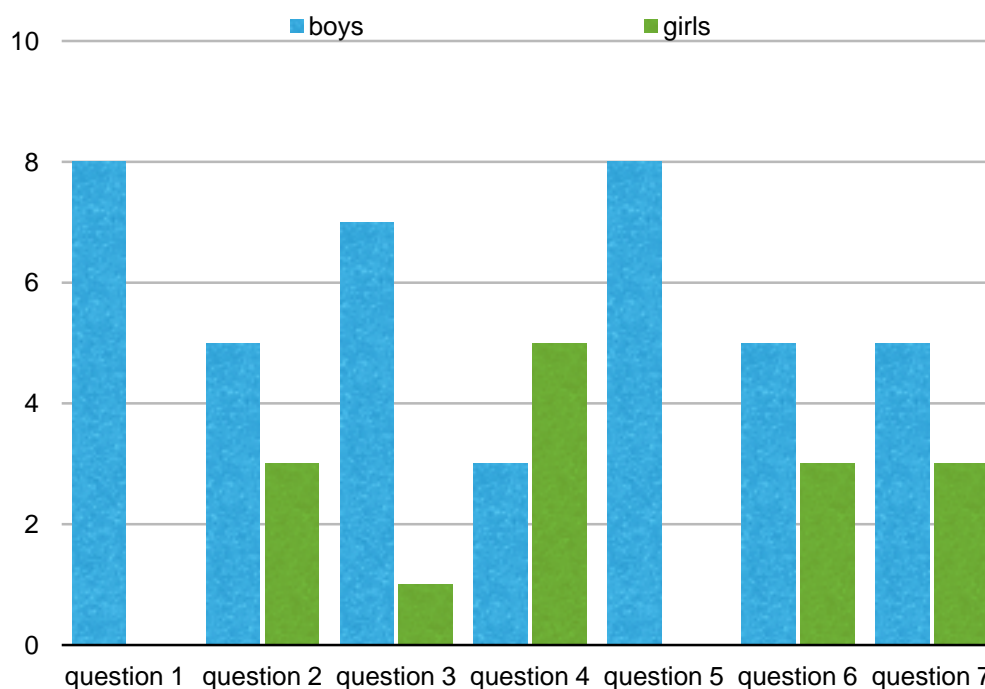
Based on the previous case studies, this paper aims to reveal the stereotypes that children have regarding gender and social roles. Moreover, the research sets out to determine the possible reasons behind the children's attitude to gender bias.

2. The Case Study- Methodology, Data and Discussion

The target group of the experiment was school-age children. In this particular case, 19 students aged 10-14 (11 girls, 8 boys) were interviewed at the "Shavnabada" Gymnasium. The experiment was conducted in two stages. The experiment aimed to survey the student's attitudes towards gender stereotypes. At the beginning of the experiment, the students were asked several easy and engaging questions to help to create the "safe" atmosphere and encourage the participants to speak their minds. At the first stage of the study, students were given an

anonymous, seven-question questionnaire to complete [1]. The children were only required to indicate their gender (to ensure anonymity and honest answers) and indicate whether they thought the extracts from the fairy tales were about a girl or a boy. Students also had to substantiate their answers. Interestingly, the questionnaire did not have the option "both sexes" as I wanted to focus on the participant's first reaction to the extract in question. Also, I interviewed the target group of the experiment (school students) employing both in-depth and group interviews and group observation methods. The second stage included followed a similar study by Kate Patterson's (2014). Specifically, students were read "The Paper Bag Princess" and asked first the pre-prepared comprehension questions and later the questions that were generated by the discussion. Children were allowed to express their attitudes towards gender roles presented in fairy tales in a fun and free environment; We also asked the participants to draw parallels with their lives. The sessions were recorded and analyzed. The experiment lasted about 50 minutes.

Interestingly, each excerpt in the questionnaire refers to the girl and is taken from the collection of modern fairy tales, "There Once Was A Girl." However, as seen from the tables, in most cases most of the students thought that the excerpts referred to boys (except for the third and fourth questions, where four girls indicated that the excerpt was about a boy, and five girls noted that the text implied a female).



All eight boys who participated in the experiment believed the excerpt presented in the first question: "Strong, smart, adventurous? I know some [...] that defeat the strongest wrestlers, pull up the horse by the hand, wrestle the bear, and with one stroke, harvest half of the field" was addressed to the boy, because, in their opinion, strength and intelligence are the qualities characteristic of a boy and not a girl - "Of course [the boy] because they are the strongest and love adventures," "The boy is the strongest. A woman is cowardly and powerless"; "Because boys are strong and girls are gentle." Moreover, the boys involved in the experiment not only think that men are strong and smart but also, in their imagination, a woman is cowardly and powerless. These adjectives characterize a woman negatively. Interestingly, most of the girls also agree with the opinion that boys are stronger and, in their opinion, more boys are characterized in fairy tales through such epithets. It is clear that children at this age already have a wrong attitude towards the role of women and only perceive women as "weak sex" who need protection and care. Interestingly, not only boys but also girls agree with this idea. Both girls and boys believe that such words as "strength", "helmet", "military armor", "stubborn", "strong", "daring", "bold" are more characteristic of boys because they are brave and good warriors who "manage to do everything." Moreover, children think that boys are "better able to store and keep [items]", which means that they are more careful and attentive than girls. Besides, according to one of the boys, the diamond is usually given to the boy because "the boy

is the most precious thing for the mother", which reflects the stereotype that giving birth to a son, hence to the heir, is a priority for a woman. In addition, children believe that "only a man carries a gun", therefore, children are already exposed to the roles embedded in a stereotypically minded society. In addition to weapons, children also believe that girls should be more obedient and gentle, they are also "easy to upset and they always cry." Consequently, according to the children, obedience and crying are more common in girls than in boys. At the same time, it is interesting to see the attitude of children towards the word "stubborn". Stereotypically, stubbornness is more characteristic of a boy, and children often refer to it together with the boy's other stereotypical trait, namely, courage. Interestingly, in the negative context, the participants considered this adjective to be more characteristic of a girl - "girls are totally stubborn and do not obey anyone."

In the Georgian society, boys are frequently addressed with the sentence, "Why are you crying, are you a girl or what?!". In the excerpt, "Are you here? I was looking for you. - [she] suddenly heard his voice and [she] was so ashamed of [her] own tears, [she] immediately climbed a tree", the aforementioned stereotype comes to life - it is shameful for boys to cry. The children assumed that the excerpt referred to the boy, because "tears would probably embarrass a boy more than a girl." Those who indicated that this extract referred to the girl while substantiating their reasons, noted that in their opinion, tears and crying are more typical of a girl because girls are "crybabies and shy."

From a linguistic point of view, the last question was especially interesting: "Why does [she] run with a gun in [her] hand? [she] should stay at home, start a family, take care of [her] children". Here, students highlighted three different stereotypical approaches. Some in this excerpt paid special attention to the phrase "running with a gun", which, as has already been mentioned above, is more masculine than feminine. The next phrase that caught the children's attention and resulted in a difference in responses is "creating a family." According to the students, boys are asked to create a family, because, according to the stereotype, a man takes the initiative to start a family, he is the one who chooses a wife and then creates a family, and a

woman “gets borrowed¹ Boys are encouraged to start a family,” “I think it's [a boy] because we're talking about starting a family. The word used is more often said to a boy, not to a girl”. The third phrase that some children focus on is “look after the children”, which is not surprising because in the Georgian culture looking after the children is the duty of a woman - “a girl should look after the family”, “In my opinion, a girl should take care of children”. There are also girls who run with a machine gun, but such girls also have to keep calm, sit at home and look after their kids.” It is noteworthy that even at this age (10-14 years) students reveal the stereotypical perception of gender roles. Moreover, their linguistic choices clearly indicate aggression and a negative attitude towards a strong woman and a strong woman and a desire to subdue her (metaphorically “curb”) and force a woman to confine herself only to the family space.

In the second phase of the experiment, based on a study by Kate Patterson (2014), we read the Georgian translation of “The Paper Bag Princess” to the children and asked questions to better analyze the text and find out the children's attitudes. In the fairy tale, Princess Elizabeth's Palace is attacked by a dragon and everything is burnt and the dragon kidnaps Elizabeth's fiancé, Prince Ronald. Elizabeth, left without a dress, turns a paper bag into a paper dress and chases the dragon to free the prince. The girl manages to trick and tire the dragon, but the prince is not impressed by her attire and asks the girl to “be as beautiful as a princess should be” and then return to him. Enraged by the rudeness of the prince, Elizabeth calls Ronald a ‘bum’ and calls off the marriage.

We asked the children the following pre-prepared questions, and then the questions that arose after the discussion:

¹ In Georgian, getting married has two different terms depending on whether it describes a woman or a man. The man “gets/brings a wife, starts a family-ცოლის მოყვანა”, whereas a woman “is ‘borrowed’ გათხოვება” by her husband.

1) In this tale, the dragon kidnaps the prince. In other fairy tales, why do dragons mainly kidnap princesses?

2) How do princes defeat the dragon in fairy tales?

3) Do princesses often run with swords?

4) How did Princess Elizabeth save the prince? If it were the other way around, how do you think the prince would have saved the princess?

5) Do you think Princess Elizabeth made a good decision not to marry the prince? Why?

To the question why dragons mainly kidnap princesses, not princes, the children said the girls are "weak" and that "boys are stronger and want to appear like heroes and save girls." Both boys and girls agree that in order to defeat the enemy, in this case, the dragon, only effort is not enough and intelligence are needed. However, in their view, if the prince had saved the girl, he would have used the sword rather than his brain, as Elizabeth did in this case. This is due to the fact that "men are more likely to fight." Interestingly, some of the girls mentioned that the portrayal of girls as weak characters in fairy tales "humiliates girls" because it does not correspond to the truth - "We have boxer girls too!". When analyzing the tale, the children do not deny that Elizabeth could have been really strong, but she was smart. Children also remember the proverb correctly: "The way is better if the man invents it." However, some of the children reject the idea that the girl may have been strong, but instead "she used her brain" because she realized she could not physically defeat the dragon. Notably, through healthy discussions, children came to the conclusion that they should not generalize and some girls may be stronger in class than boys, and there may be boys who are smarter than girls. It is interesting to note the change in the approach to stereotypes- a woman is a foolish creature because, during the children's discussions, it is obvious that nowadays they believe that girls are stereotypically smart and boys are stereotypically strong.

The attitude of the children towards the fact that Elizabeth does not marry Ronald at the end of the fairy tale also deserves attention. The girls point out that they do not need a husband who will not "care for them and will only think about beauty", "the main thing is not beauty, the main thing is that he loves you", "why would she want to marry an ungrateful man who did not appreciate what she had done for him?". Interestingly, the girls still emphasize the fact that

the husband should take care of the wives, however, they also note that they liked "that the girl left the boy" because in their opinion, in real life, it is on the contrary- boys break up with girls. It is obvious that girls try to fight against some of the stereotypes, although they are sometimes still influenced by the prevailing approaches in society.

The participants of the experiment clearly had a different approach to gender roles- girls tried to "fight for their rights" while boys stubbornly suggested that girls should sit at home and cook. Moreover, the examples given by boys in relation to women were stereotypically related to the family space: "Girls cry when they break a nail while cleaning the house." These views caused particularly heated debates:

Giorgi²: "Men bring food."

Tamar: "So what? Women prepare them! "

Mariam: "My father helps my mom when she is tired and often washes the dishes."

The girls try to counter George's phrase and emphasize the important role of women - products brought by a man are nothing if it is not prepared by a woman. In addition, Mariam cites the example from her own family life that her father often washes the dishes because women get just as tired at work as men.

Based on the experiment, it is clear that both girls and boys are well aware of the stereotypes in society. Interestingly, from the answers to the questionnaire, we can clearly see that both girls and boys think quite stereotypically, because both of the groups share biased gender roles that are rooted in our society: women must be obedient and gentle, girls are crybabies, and boys are ashamed of tears; courage, fighting, and fighting attributes are common to men, and only men run around with weapons. In addition, "creating a family" is a man's job, while raising children and looking after their homes is a woman's job. Surprisingly, on the other hand, the same children presented a different approach when discussing the fairy tale: the girls were visibly trying to confront the boys, and to overcome stereotypes that impose quite a few restrictions on them- they no longer like being portrayed as weak creatures in fairy tales;

² Names are changed.

Moreover, girls perceive this as humiliating and no longer want to be associated with only household chores and secondary roles, and support the view that family affairs are equally distributed to both sexes, and there is nothing shameful about that.

3. Conclusion

The fairy tale as a social construct indeed plays an immense role in the stereotypical development of a child and society, in general. For decades, active male characters have dominated the tales, whereas the females have only appeared as secondary and passive characters. This perfectly reflects the stereotypes that are deeply rooted in our societies. The experiment conducted at the Shavnabada Gymnasium once again proves that the society manages to brainwash people as early as a school-age. Indeed, school children have already fallen “victims” to the biased gender roles and sexism. The experiment also reveals that the pupils have already acquired their attitudes towards acceptable roles of women and men in society. Specifically, men are breadwinners, whereas women are assigned only the role of homemakers. On the other hand, it was obvious that girls try to overcome prejudice as they consider these stereotypes to be humiliating and even degrading. Nevertheless, the girls considered horse riding, archery, or fighting in a battle to be strictly masculine, rather than, even only rarely, characteristic to a woman.

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Appendix

1. “Strong, smart, adventurous? I know some [...] that defeat the strongest wrestlers, pull up the horse by the hand, wrestle the bear, and with one stroke, harvest half of the field.
2. “You are like a rock- says grandma- with an unbreakable and stubborn personality”.
3. “This diamond will be your strength. Remember, [women] can do a lot of things as long as you use your strengths correctly...”
4. “Are you here? I was at your house looking for you. - [she] suddenly heard [his] voice and was so ashamed of [her] own tears, [she] hurriedly climbed up the tree.”
5. “In the morning [she] put on the armor and the helmet, specially made by the King’s order”.
6. A lot of them praised [her] for being so courageous and bold, but there were some who were angry at [her]; [women] should be delicate and obedient, they have never been this stubborn and unapproachable...
7. “Why does [she] run with a gun in [her] hand? [she] should stay at home, start a family, take care of [her] children”

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