

Using children's literature to promote gender equality in education: the case of the fairy tale of Ndabaga in Rwanda <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/rj.v2i2.4A>

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate how educational use of Rwandan children's literature, mainly fairy tales, can challenge traditional gender roles in Rwandan education. Indeed, researchers in and authors of children's literature argue that the manner in which gender is represented in children's literature impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender appropriate behaviour in society. In this respect, contents with gender stereotypes can offer children a privileged opportunity to re-examine their gender belief and assumptions, leading them to adopt more egalitarian attitudes. Children's reflections on gender equality in a fairy tale of Ndabaga, a female protagonist portrayed in non-traditional gender roles are analysed. The findings show that children of both sexes reacted positively to the female character, portrayed in male roles, which has been traditionally unacceptable. All children expressed positive attitudes toward a change of traditional gender roles as the latter obstructs full realisation of females' rights.

Key words: children's literature, fairy tales, gender equality, egalitarian attitudes.

1. Introduction

The patriarchal structure in Rwanda, as well as in the Central, Eastern and Southern African regions, as reflected in the oral literature, has influenced the life of women and men in traditional society by assigning them different roles and identities. Most narratives reveal that there has been gender inequality since time immemorial whereby female characters have played important but not prominent roles in the society. Girls' education focused on developing skills which reinforce their socialized roles in the private domain, such as home care, economics, and general hygiene. More importantly, women have been bound to staying home. As for boys, they were prepared for dominant and high command roles that determine societal dynamics in the public sphere. These include, among others, responsibilities in the army and other leadership positions often requiring intelligence, wisdom, and strength. These roles are in alignment with the roles discussed by Tsao

(2008), who claims that literature is a home for gender stereotypes. These narratives have been instrumental in promoting and spreading a gender bias ideology.

Many researchers in and authors of children's literature argue that the manner in which gender is represented in children's literature impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behaviour in society (Bettelheim 1976; Hunt 1990, 1991; Geoff 1995; Zipes 1997; Singh 1998). In this respect, contents with gender stereotypes can offer a privileged opportunity to children to re-examine their gender beliefs and assumptions, leading them to adopt more egalitarian attitudes. This is in line with Bettelheim's (1976) view that the fairy story communicates to children an intuitive, subconscious understanding of their own nature and what their future may hold if they develop their positive potentials.

This study is anchored in a socioconstructionist perspective, especially in the works of Paechter (1998, 2006); Prügl (1999); Renold (2005) and West and Zimmerman (1987). From this perspective, gender is seen as a social construct influenced by values, experiences, discourses and actions that are found within the society at large. Discussing the globalization of gender construction, Prügl (1999: 4) asserts that "notions of female and male, feminine and masculine, are not naturally given but emerge from particular socio-historical practices". In this respect, feminist and postmodern/ poststructuralist discourses and theories on gender hold that gender is a social construct that draws on socially and culturally prescribed roles assigned to boys and girls, men and women. It is therefore a construction of the society based on cultural practices and norms. In addition, Paechter (1998) notes that the way in which an individual's biological sex is determined is itself a social and cultural construction. Hence, the construction of gender identity is also influenced by the intersubjectivity formed by cultural and historical factors of a given community and society (West and Zimmerman 1987).

The Government of Rwanda (Ministry of Finance 2007) is fully aware that investing in girls' education contributes to the achievement of critical social objectives like decreased fertility rate and infant mortality, increased child health, and improved productivity. However, according to the Minister of State for Primary and Secondary Education (Asiimwe 2008), the rate of girls drop-out is at 11% countrywide due to many causes, among others traditional gender roles and parents' preferences as to whom of their children drop-out of school in case of shortage of resources. Among the ways devised to address issues of girl-child education and school drop-out include the setting up of the Imbutu (seed) Foundation in 2004, an initiative of Mrs Jeannette Kagame. This initiative accords awards made of various scholastic equipment and gifts to girls who perform well at primary and secondary school leaving exams.

To conclude, in order to achieve the millennium development goals, Rwanda has for the last decade devised a gender policy that gives equal opportunities to its children regardless of their sex in all walks of national life. The policy also serves as a vigil to block any negative force from the ancient traditions found in our literatures. It is in this context that this study investigates how educational use of Rwandan children's literature, mainly fairy tales, might be one means of challenging traditional gender roles. Based on this aim, two questions will guide this study: (1) how is gender equality expressed in a children's discussion about a Rwandan fairy tale? (2) what can they learn from reading and discussing fairy tales?

2. Importance of children's literature

Theories pertinent to this study are found in the functions of children's literature in general and fairy tales in particular (see for example, Bettelheim 1976; Hunt 1990, 1991; Geoff 1995; Zipes 1997). The importance of children's literature lies in the development of children's moral, intellectual, and linguistic abilities. Most stories are amazing and, as Yitah and Komasi (2009: 244) put it, "seek to inculcate in the child reader an appreciation for certain cultural values and disapprobation of undesirable behaviour". Firstly, children's literature is entertaining and associated with language acquisition. It also enhances children's motivation to read. Moreover, specialists in children's literature and education believe that it helps them grow up into sociable and virtuous future citizens (Bettelheim 1976; Hunt 1990; Sutherland 1997; Zipes 1997). Oittinen (1993) holds that while reading and by experiencing different emotions, children learn how to cope with their feelings and solve problems in life. Also, Bettelheim (1976) argues that genres encountered in children's literature are both therapeutic and informative. Furthermore, they convey a socializing content meant to make children behave in the ways that fit them into the society. Heroes or heroines are engaged in a struggle to uproot the evil grass in the society.

Secondly, children's literature conveys an educational message since plots in most genres are "dramatization of stormy conflicts of good and evil" (Sutherland 1997: 6). Our childhood experiences reveal that after or while listening to or reading an interesting or sad story, children internalize it and act it out in play or in their mind. In most stories the emphasis is put on positive aspects of the story where goodness will triumph over evil. At the end of the story, the dilemma is most often resolved in an interesting, amusing, or satisfactory manner- thus constituting a good story for children. The literature serves not only to instruct but also to amuse and make moral lessons and social structures more palatable to children (Zipes, 1997). All in all, as the Roman poet Horace affirms, the *raison d'être* of children's literature, like adults', is "to delight and instruct" the child audience in a specific way (Leitch, 2001).

Thirdly, it is held that fairy tales work consciously or unconsciously to free and support the child. Bettelheim (1976) holds that the fairy tale helps children to develop the desire for a higher consciousness through what is implied in the story. As a result, children make use of stories in fairy tales to cope with their baffling emotions. On top of this, a fairy tale releases children's anxieties in the sense that it ends most often in a predictable way; that is, no matter how tedious and strenuous life the hero or heroine is going through, he or she will come out triumphantly. The fiction reaches its climax when the heroes get help from their fairies and then fight until they destroy the evil forces. Fairy tales, as Geoff (1995) states, make good literary fiction since they deal with a struggle between good and evil at some level. Moreover, through the appeal the stories make on readers' imagination and the attractive outcome of events, they convince their audience (Bettelheim, 1976).

3. Children's literature and gender

Characterization in children's literature has traditionally been gender-biased and stereotyped according to research on gender issues and role perceptions in children's literature (Scott and Feldman-Summers 1979; Davies 1993, 2003; Singh 1998; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski 1999; Tsao 2008). In this respect, in fairy tales male characters have been portrayed as being strong, potent, and powerful, with mastery themes such as cleverness and adventure, whereas female characters were portrayed as impotent, weak, passive, naive, even sweet, with second sex themes such as beauty, gentility, domesticity, marriage, emotions, motherhood, and so on. This corroborates findings from a study by Davies (2003) on reading fairy tales to children. She found that children as old as 4 to 5 years can already associate male and female characters with supremacy and dependency respectively.

Stereotypic gendered characterization can be harmful in the way that it can limit both boys and girls in the full realization of their potential and expectations. As Tsao (2008) points out in a study on gender issues in young children's literature, gender stereotypes depicting girls as weak, passive, and beautiful deprive them of a range of strong, alternative role models, which only increases inferiority complex in girls. However, as the situation stands in this century, women are encouraged to be independent and rely on their brains rather than beauty. Similarly, male portrayals of lacking emotions, fear, and so on, pressure in many ways boys to behave in this way.

Prior research on gender role perception in children's literature, examining the influence of young children's gender attitudes regarding occupational roles (Trepanier-Street and Romatowski 1999) and assessing children's reactions to stories in which females are portrayed in traditionally male roles (Scott and Feldman-Summers 1979) has shown that

the influence of stereotypic and non-stereotypic gender role exposure to children is enormous. When female main characters are portrayed in traditionally male roles, girl-readers are enthusiastic about their performances and eager to engage in the same activities as those performed by the main characters. The exposure to female as well as male characters presented in positive and non-traditional roles is likely to alter children's perceptions of the roles of males and females in society. Of course this exposure needs support from parents, teachers, and peers as well as the political discourse prevailing at the moment. Finally, as Mendoza and Reese (2001) point out, children's literature provides characters and events with which children can identify with and through which they may consider their own actions, beliefs, and emotions.

4. Methods

This qualitative study was conducted from one rural and one urban primary schools in Rwanda. The urban school is a church-run school with relatively well-to-do children while the rural one is a public school with children predominantly from a low socio-economic background. In both research sites, I attended three classes at each school: grades 6, 4, and 2. The time spent in each classroom was approximately one-and-a-half hours. The children's ages varied between 8 and 12 years. With regard to the choice of research sites, I wanted to crosscheck urban and rural children's reflections and understanding of gender issues that are indeed topical in Rwanda today. However, the tale under study did not appear in the second graders, so they are not included in this study.

After a warm up session and a chat on gender issues in their families, I asked children to tell Kinyarwanda stories or tales focusing mainly on plots with human characters, and involving both sexes. They narrated fairy tales, stories and fables, and they told jokes. Discussions of the stories were held in gendered groups, that is, girls seated alone in their rows and boys in theirs to make sure that both girls' and boys' voices were heard. I also wanted to find out whether girls and boys discussed in different ways. Each child had something unique to offer in their group constructions and understanding of gender. They were asked to say the source of their stories, lessons drawn from stories, their reflections on female and male characters in the stories, if they want things to change, and to contextualise the story with regard to today's situation of gender relations in Rwanda. These sessions were audio taped for later transcription, translation into English, and analysis. Finally, to ensure anonymity, respondents were identified by letters B for boys, G for girls, U for urban, R for rural plus a number for the primary grade the respondent attends. Then, I transcribed and translated verbatim the selected fairy tale and related comments and responses from the children. A second translator proofread and validated the translated narrative.

Finally, the awakening and warm up questions during my introduction may have influenced children's responses in one way or another. Probably no child would have wished to sound old-fashioned by approving the traditional portrayal of gender roles in the modern Rwandan society, or they were probably performing being 'good citizens'. The children might also be conforming to the political and education discourse they are exposed to in their homes and schools. Discussions were held in gendered groups, and there was a final *mise en commun* all together to hear and learn from each other.

5. Findings

The selection of the narrative of Ndabaga was mainly made on the ground that it is a fairy tale which is among the very few antithetical tales to the dominant fairy tales circulating in the Rwandan literature with a female heroine. Findings concern the participants' reflections on their understanding of gender, what they can learn from the fairy tale, and their reflections on the possible change in society with regard to the Rwanda's gender situation today. There are more citations and elaborate statements from the urban school than the rural school. This can be justified by the fact that the political discourse on gender gets easily translated into actions through family and school practices more rapidly in urban settings than rural ones. Success stories of gender equality in urban settings are more visible, hence urban children were more eloquent.

Children's understanding of gender

As stated above in the data collection procedures, I started by chatting with children on various issues related to gender in the country to awaken them to the effects of gender. I learnt that they have some knowledge about gender as this notion is included in the school curriculum as early as in the second grade in the subject of civic education. For example, to the question on the importance of gender, both girls and boys were indeed eloquent as in the following statements:

We girls should forget the traditional ways of thinking that certain activities were meant for boys and others for girls. We were all born with equal capacities and we can compete equally in any activity (GR6).

Gender awareness in Rwanda has made it that in our families, parents have come to understand that their sons are not anymore more important than their daughters (BU6).

These statements were made during the warm up chat that served to create a shared understanding from their construction of the meaning of gender, its roles and importance in the Rwandan society. Children from both urban and rural schools stressed the fact that

the beliefs that there exist activities exclusively meant only for girls or only for boys do not have room anymore. They are equally competitive. In addition, they report that their parents now do not discriminate them on the grounds of their sex. This chat reflects the modern liberal feminism of the 1960's where women were fighting for a place in political and public life. They also claimed for equal conditions on the labour market and equal salary for same work.

Lessons learnt from the fairy tale

Both girls and boys understood the plot and expressed almost similar feelings as to lessons to learn from the fairy tale. They unanimously condemn all gender-based discrimination. They also agree that they can do the same activities and that even girls can do some activities better than boys as in the following statement by girls and boys respectively:

Girls can also do tasks boys do (GU4).

Girls can perform better than boys and men (GU6).

Females can do better on jobs and tasks than males (BR4).

There is no task for only boys and only girls (BU6).

The above statements demonstrate two levels of gender understanding as constructed by both girls and boys. The first level is that of the egalitarian view of gender. Children emphasized that there should not be any distinction as to what girls (can) do and what boys do. They state that girls' potentialities should not be underestimated or underrated. The second level is that of outstanding performance of females. For them, it is not strange that females outperform males. However, in their statements, "the male" seems to remain the norm which the children relate themselves to. Another lesson drawn from the fairy tale concerns the parents' consideration of their children. Children vehemently articulated that parents should consider children in the same way. There should not be any discrimination based on the child's sex.

Changes to occur in the society

Children were asked to say if they wanted to see things change. Both girls and boys want radical changes in the society. They agreed that females should stop thinking of themselves as a weaker sex, and that they are unable to do some activities males do, and so forth. Additionally, they said that attitudes of girls who underestimate their abilities by being fearful to take strong decisions are to be discouraged:

Females should stop thinking of themselves as weak; unable to do some things males do because Ndabaga and many other women have proven they could, and she performed even better than men (GR4).

Girls should stop underestimating themselves, being fearful to take decision (GR6).

From experience, after the genocide of the Tutsi in 1994, many survivors and widows realised that there were no men to care for them and decided to take the lead in restoring their communities. This led them to discard cultural taboos like ‘women cannot build a house, climb a tree, or talk in public,’ and this situation drastically awakened them to their new challenges. Women were enrolled in non-traditional professions such as construction, the police and security forces, justice, and they held highly visible positions. As a consequence of the disaster, women have overcome traditions and stereotypes that previously relegated them solely to low status professions. All children also agreed that there should not be any discrimination from parents and the society based on the sex of their children as no sex is more important than the other. They should have the same education and opportunities offered by the society which needs their forces altogether for its development.

Boys have for a long time thought of themselves as the most important people in the society, but it should be stopped (BU6).

There should not be discrimination from parents or society based on the sex of their children anymore: boys and girls are all children, they should be considered and treated in the same way. To have the same education in the society; to have the same opportunities offered by the society (GU6).

As one can observe from the discourse above, children from urban as well as rural areas are convinced that both boys and girls have the same potentialities, and no one should undermine them on the basis of gender. This is indeed due to current political discourses on gender issues in Rwanda through different media, radio and television programs, civic education text books, and from their teachers which emphasize gender equality. In this regard, there are messages to ban traditional practices that used to subjugate and limit women. It is true that the discourse on gender has changed in the country during the last decade. From the grassroots to the national level, gender awareness has been a focal point to smoothly uproot the stereotyped conceptions. This has created confidence in women and empowered them to realize their dreams. Besides, it has acted on the psyche of many men, who thought that women perform less than men and are a weaker sex bound to subjugation. From the history of the country, we know that women could not go in public

with men; they were not allowed to talk in the presence of men. In short, men were to talk and think for them.

Discussion

The present study sought to illustrate and analyse children's reflections on traditional gender roles in a fairy tale vis-à-vis modern gender roles within the context of post-genocide Rwanda. From the children's reflections in the present study, it became clear that both girls and boys understood the fairy tale very well and reacted positively to the plot. They formulated critiques towards the traditional stereotyped gender roles and advocated for a society that ensures equal rights and opportunities to women and men. Generally, the children interpreted the story as a narrative of liberation. The discussion below will mainly focus on the critique levelled against traditional gender bias and stereotypes with regard to labour division, public and political life of women as reflected in the fairy tale from the grassroots level to the King's palace.

Traditional stereotyped gender roles versus modern roles

Gender bias is by far set in the minds of everybody in the tales. As found in the Ndabaga narrative, at the Palace, the King and his men in the camp did not believe their ears when they were told that Ndabaga was a girl. They doubted her bravery that could only be of a boy. Indeed, traditionally, women did not speak publicly, especially in the presence of men. In addition, a woman who dared to challenge men in public was considered insolent. But Ndabaga roared "who's that who has just said that my father does not have someone to replace him?" to the men who were claiming that her father had signed that he did not have any son to replace him, therefore he was doomed to die in the camp. The king said, "You should fear this person, someone who is introduced this way and dares to speak on the first day". Even Ndabaga's mother was desperate, hopeless, and thought she was worthless for having given birth to a girl. From this social mindset, biased gender education of children already limits females to full realization of their potential. Girls are stuck by social interdicts attached to their education. Nonetheless, all the children were unanimous to condemn these traditional gender depictions qualifying them as outdated and old fashioned. They all disassociate themselves from the traditions which undermine the realization of females' rights and discriminate against them.

Although the female character Ndabaga is portrayed in a disguised male character, she wins the sympathy of all the children from the beginning to the end. This is so thanks to the therapy encountered in fairy tales. The patients, as in the words of Bettelheim (1976) referring to children listeners or readers, are induced to follow a pattern of behaviour set by the hero or heroine. For example, Ndabaga's actions, in the eyes of today's Rwandan child readers, are commendable so long as they free the community. To use Hourihan's

(1997) words, she is an emblem “of all humanity confronting the absurdities of existence - and doing remarkably well without fighting or killing anyone”. Both boys and girls would do the same as they unanimously approved her struggle. So, female characters presented in non-traditional roles inspire other females as well as males to engage themselves in the same activities as the main characters (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski 1999). However, it should be noted that just as is experienced by many women all over the world, to become visible and have a voice, Ndabaga had to do gender (West and Zimmermann 1987) on male conditions and even outperform them. Moreover, in contrast to the current desire to empower women to rights, obligations and possibilities, Ndabaga seems to stay dependent on her husband, the king.

From the tale under study, Ndabaga, it stands out clearly that female participation in public life has long been culturally and socially constrained. Ndabaga is a female character who has been compelled to disguise herself as a boy to challenge the traditional housewife life and carry out manly tasks. The tale illustrates gender inequality as it obstructs girls in the realisation of their full rights. At the same time, however, the fairy tale shows the strength of a woman fighting for change. My hope is that this gender awareness will enable children to smoothly discuss and overcome issues of traditional gender stereotypes that have long prevailed in the Rwandan society.

Last but not least, the children’s revolt results in essence from the political and ideological discourse at all levels in present day Rwanda. This rhymes with Hunt (1991) who notes that children’s literature cannot live away from politics and ideology. Right from grassroots to national levels, children are exposed to a discourse that vehicles the Rwandan political agenda with regard to gender. Gender issues and women empowerment are among heated debates held in families, in schools, in interpersonal relations, and throughout the nation. They are taking a lot of attention as the slogan merely goes that ‘to educate a woman is to educate a nation’. In this regard, parents, community leaders, and the general public are sensitized on the importance of girl-child education. Rwandan women politicians and leaders, and other female role models embark on country-wide tours, visiting and addressing girls in the schools who look up to them for inspiration. Undoubtedly, the fairy tale under study has worked consciously or unconsciously to free as well as support the children (Geoff 1995) since both rural and urban children, regardless of their sex, yell, “Yes, girls can”.

Conclusion

In this study on children’s reflections on gender equality in a fairy tale of Ndabaga, a female protagonist portrayed in non-traditional gender roles, the findings show that the fairytale made children of both sexes, rural and urban, see previous gender and social

inequalities females were victims of. Moreover, children reacted positively to the female character, portrayed in male roles, which was traditionally unacceptable. They expressed positive attitudes towards a change of traditional gender roles as the latter obstructs full realization of females' rights. Ndabaga's heroism inspires the youth, especially girls as they can follow her steps. Heroism does not only belong to the males' realms. This is another opportunity, for example, towards encouraging and motivating girls to take on scientific and technological subjects in schools. In addition, this fairy tale can have an educational effect on both men and women with regard to their gender perceptions and related injustices vis-à-vis their children's education. Finally, this study contributes to the reinforcement of the gender equality discourse from the government agenda. Women stand as representatives of the people. They have been given a platform to showcase their ability, a move that has worked as a stepping stone towards the economic development, and social welfare of the nation. This has made them acquire confidence of leadership. No stone should be left unturned to empower women as they have potentials that should not be under-used or underestimated to contribute to the development of Rwanda.

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