

The Feminine Gender: Portrayals in Novels and Readings with its Psychological Impacts on Young Adults

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examines the changing perception of gender roles in the global world. There are gender inequalities in opportunities to education, achievement orientations, success and career options. It has been argued by many that the differentials in education and career between men and women is as a result of childhood and adolescent training. Subtle messages can be sent out to young people in varied ways. And these include trainings given during the childhood period or adolescence period.*

Males are encouraged to be aggressive, which they invariably exhibit in almost every facet of life, which result in their being go-getters and goal oriented in achievement and in their career. They are also encouraged to fend for themselves and to be invariably independent in thought and action. The above may not be true for the females. Furthermore, it has been found that in most novels and readings, either for pleasure, academic or business, females are usually portrayed in traditional stereotypical roles and as being weak and weaklings and rarely in managerial positions or taking charge of any corporate outfit, business or governance. The present study is exploratory as it looks at some of these portrayals in published novels and readings.

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Gender comprises assigned beliefs, symbols behaviors, traits, actions and perceptions that define men and women. The dynamics of gender construct is as important in societies as are, technology and political efforts. Understanding the dynamics of gender has been found to pave way to the understanding of men and women for the advancement and enhancement of human potentials.

The entire process of gender differentiation it said to develop in five stages, and that the development of conscious gender identity takes places during the last three stages of development, (Condry, 1984). Condry went on to give the five stages of development as follows:

- State I - From conception to birth
- Stage II - From birth to 18 months (pre-awareness stage)
- Stage III - From 18 months to 6 years (gender orientation)
- Stage IV - From six years to adolescence (gender orientation)
- Stage V - Begins at adolescence (gender identity)

Condry (1984) went on to say that at the fourth stage of gender differentiation, a child has a firmly established awareness of the social categories of gender, and begins to move away; from the home to take part in a more demanding social life than was available at home, he or she begins to orient towards gender in order to learn the specific content of the separate gender roles. Much of the learning is said to come from television viewing, peer groups, novels, textbooks and the school (Condry, 1984). As regards some occupational roles, children may vehemently hold on to some viewpoints like the fact women are not doctors and that men cannot be nurses. As regards dolls, some may say that girls play with dolls and that the situation cannot be vice versa.

Jongeward and Scott (1976) affirmed that messages children received about themselves and their roles come from significant others in their lives. These messages may come in the form of values, expectations imitations encouragement or discouragement. It is from these those children form their first inklings of how they are to live there as adults. They may know that women should be teachers or nurses, and men should be pilots or engineers. Hurlock (1978) claimed that girls are influenced by parents and teachers in the acceptance of roles through the type of task and assignment given to them in school and at home. Rheingold and Cook (1975) asserted that girls are more likely to be given playthings of the mother's role such as dolls and dishes, while boys are likely to be given toys that represent the world of work-trucks, tools and building materials.

Thus, Rosenfeld (1975) observed that boys excel in those skill in which they excel because of the advantages of masculine toys they have been used to, while girls excel in verbal activities as a result of the interaction, they have with their mother during works at household tasks. Kohlberg (1966) went further to say that children usually perceive males as strong and females as weak and incompetent.

Studies on Gender Perception

Sex roles are part of the wider variety of social roles or organized patterns of behavior we acquire because they allow us to act competently in the world. (Condry, 1984). Children are said to become aware of gender as a category by the end of the second year of life. They can say categorically if they are males or females (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1980). By the age of three, children are also said to have established stereotypical patterns of toy and play activities. According to Condry, (1984), a child first learn to distinguish between “mommies” and “daddies”. Then, he uses these categories of man-woman, boy-girls, to reflect the basic gender difference.

Rosch (1975) in Mowaiye (1995) suggested that children categories of things and objectives are mutually exclusive and tend to be of the “all or nothing” type. Social roles are said to be therefore perceived in like manner “all judges are men and all nurses are women” (Constantinople, 1979). Thus, if one is to go by Kolberg’s (1974) postulation, if a child is female then she will believe that she cannot be a judge, even if she wants to, because she is not of the correct gender. The years of middle childhood are devoted to acquiring the skills, attitude and values appropriate to establishing a social identity; gender inclusive. They do so by orienting more to one sex than the other. By the age of 6 – 12, children are believed to become more flexible in behavior, though boys still stick to masculine things, but girls do not increase their preference for feminine activities, rather they prefer masculine activities.

Anenshenel and Rosen (1980) opined that adolescents’ expectations are antecedents to their attainments as adults. It is equally true to say that children’s expectations are antecedents to their adolescents. Children’s expectations of what is given for females will affect the academic, social and occupational expectations of female children, while for the males, it will affect their expectation of themselves and their perception of females in their lives. Anensheshel and Rosen (1980) reported that many adolescents see the sexes in stereotyped ways and believe that women and

men should occupy different domestic and occupational roles. They believe that men's and women's work should be different. Kuhn, Nash and Brucken (1978) in Mowaiye (1995) tested three year olds on both sex stereotyping and gender understanding. They also measured sex stereotyping by showing the child two dolls and asking which doll would do or say certain thing e.g. cook the dinner, play ball etc. they found a strong relationship and a high correlation between their measure of gender understanding and sex stereotyping.

Various studies have also been conducted on gender stereo type among children. One of such mentioned by Mowaiye-Fagbemi is that of slaby – Frey (1975). Questions children were asked included the following:

- If you wore (opposite – sex) clothes, would you be a girl or a boy?
- If you played (opposite – sex) games, would you be girl or a boy?
- Could you be a (opposite – sex) if you wanted to be?

Bem (1981) picked holes in the above measurements and opined that it could be interpreted in many ways. She later used a toddler's photography in the nude and the study sought to determine whether the child could correctly identify the same toddler's sex when he or she was seen a moment later fully clothed in a gender inconsistent way and, then, in a gender consistent way. The result revealed that 40% of the three- four – and early five – year old children were able to conserve sex across perceptual transformations. As regards some occupational roles, children may vehemently hold on to some view points like the fact that women are not doctors and that men cannot be nurses. As regards dolls, some may say that only girls play with dolls and that the situation cannot vice versa.

Jongeward and Scott (1976) affirmed that messages children receive about themselves and their roles come from significant others in their lives. These messages may come in the form of values, expectations, limitations encouragement or discouragement. It is from these that children form their first inklings of how they are to live their lives as adults. They may know that women should be teachers or nurses, and men should be pilots or engineers. Kagan (1971) noted that young children may adamantly assert that women cannot be doctors or men don't change diapers. Hurlock (1978) claimed that girls are influenced by parents and teachers in the acceptance of roles through the types of tasks and assignments given to them in school and at home. Rheingold and Cook (1975) asserted that girls are more likely to be given playthings of the mother's role such as dolls and dishes, while boys are likely to be given

toys that represent the world of work-trucks, tools and building materials. Thus, Rosenfeld (1975) observed that boys excel in those skills in which they excel because of the advantage of masculine toys they have been used to, while girls excel in verbal activities as a result of the interaction they have with their mother during works at household tasks. Kohlberg (1966) went further to say that children usually perceive males as strong and females as weak and incompetent.

In a similar study carried out using University undergraduate students in Nigeria whose mean age stood at 18, Mowaiye-Fagbemi (2003) found out that even at this age, a typical adolescent orientation to gender stereotype was still maintained, for example even girls felt females have poor sense of judgement, and could not be courageous while majority of them felt that being dependent on others, is feminine.

Gender Portrayals in Readings

The influence of literature, be it novels, magazines, newspapers and other reading materials cannot but be emphasized, not only for adults, but even for young minds, and yet most researchers in the area of women studies and gender tend to overlook this aspect of influence on female psychology.

Reading, is one of the past-time of young people. And leisure books which young people read has the potential of influencing them, apart from being source(s) of cultural information. It must be noted that young females can have inklings of how to live their lives from what they read in novels. If women are portrayed in stereotypical way(s) as; love objects, helpless, weak, wife and home-maker, to be seen but not to be heard, not to be successful in a career and not to be seen in achievement settings, then these are the images that the young female sees of herself. These could affect the self-image and self-orientations.

One leisure activity among young people is reading. Apart from television viewing, which people engage in during their leisure time, many have come to appreciate reading as a form of past-time. Books are sources of information about the society, and what holds within a society. Furthermore, assumptions inherent in readers series can influence young readers self-image and their future aspirations. It is therefore necessary to study what young people read and what they will find in what they read and the implications inherent there from.

In America, government and private publishing houses without exception, are said to portray women in traditional occupation. (Farmer and Backer, 1977). Trecker (1975) in her review was of the opinion that as far as the typical literature for the young is concerned, humanity is “masculine”. She further noted that even the graphic design, topics chosen for consideration in the books and the literary style of the books emphasized what would be of interest to males. Trecker went further to cite the study of Josephine Minor to buttress her point. Minor in her report, had made the point in a related study that female mathematicians and scientists of note were ignored in mathematics textbooks. Women were said to be excluded from pictorial materials, and while illustrations portray boys in a variety of activities like gardening, buildings, sports and paintings, girls and women were confined to sewing, cooking and childcare. Also, the language of the texts were said to encourage females to pursue their traditional role(s) while things of interest about women were ignored. Such stereotypical portrayal of women in texts was also reported in another study by Saario, Jacklin and Tittle (1973). An extensive exploratory study on sex role stereotyping, in 134 readers series, from 14 widely used publishers also in the United States of America, revealed the following findings among others:

- boys and men dominated the readers series;
- adult males were presented as job holders and fathers, while adult females were either job holders or mothers, but rarely both;
- when females did work in the series, it was more out of necessity, rather than of special skill or talent;
- women working engaged in the stereotypical work roles like teaching, nursing and secretarial work;
- girls were passive, helpless, unoriginal and lacking in curiosity in the series, while
- boys were active, resourceful, adventurous, and creative.

Thus, it was conclusive from the study’s report that a young girl would have no role model as such in an achievement context. Moreover, the portrayal of women thus could limit the scope of what opportunities there are, available and possible, for a young women, trying to find “her feet” in the world. In a similar study, Hearn (1978), studied the images of women in the leisure readings of young people. Twenty-six books were analyzed from those that were found to be what young people choose for their leisure reading. The selected books were approached thematically as follows:-

- Chapter one-quests;
- Chapter two-crises;

- Chapter three-alienation;
- Chapter four-marriage.

The report was made that male protagonist and narrators dominated the literature. Further, male characters in the literature enjoyed greater freedom of mobility than do the female characters. The researcher concluded the report by saying that female reader of the series would find few models to follow in any kind of search for identity.

In a related study in Korea, Kim (1987) in reviewing some books that young people read in Korea, revealed that not minding the changing roles in the Korean society, females are not depicted in a way that reflect the changing roles in that country, males were said to appear as main characters 76% of the time in that particular study, while females were main characters 24% of the time. And occupation wise, males and females were said to have been presented in the prescribed stereotypic way.

Methods-For the purpose of this study and to ascertain how the feminine gender is portrayed in readings and the literature in Nigeria and Africa, the first stage of the study was random sampling of young people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five, who were interviewed about the books they love to read most.

The survey revealed that almost all the young people said they love reading the pace-setters series, published by Macmillan and the African writers series, published by Heinemann. Some of the novels in the African series are recommended for reading at the secondary school level, while some are read at tertiary levels. Some other series indicated by the youths as part of their loved series were thrown out, based on the fact that the publishers of such series have no known publishing branch house in Nigeria. Other reasons include among others, the fact that some of the series are “narrow” in their focus. Such series included those of the James Hardley chase series, and the Mills and Boon series. A general survey of the novels and a cursory content analysis was carried out in the following major areas:

- How many times males and female appear as main character and protagonist in each of the novels.
- What home activities and roles are assigned to the male and female characters: either stereotypical roles or non-stereotypic roles:
- What work and occupational roles are assigned to the male and female character, either stereotypic work or non-stereotypic work

roles;

- The way male and female characters are portrayed generally in the novels.

Results

A cursory survey of content analysis of most of the novels, each reviewed under the pacesetters series and the African series, revealed that almost every novel under the two series generally had the following features:

- Male characters dominated generally almost all the novels as with protagonist with females appearing some few times usually in some of the novels before disappearing;
- Where females appear as protagonist, they appeared usually as love objects, for example, the protagonist in the novels *Jagua Nana* and *The Joys of Motherhood*.
- In almost all the novels, females appeared mainly as love objects, when they are appearing as main characters or minor characters:
- Females were portrayed in the stereotypical form as lover, wife, mother and home-maker, while males were portrayed usually as warriors, serious-minded, and being in search of a “golden” fleece” or daily bread for the family. Usually too, he’s portrayed as hard-working and wanting to satisfy his women at home.
- Occupation wise, the males usually hold the offices. Rarely do one find a female character as an office holder, if she works at all, it was usually in the household chores or as a minor in the office.
- Male characters in most of the novels were adventurers unlike the female characters. If a female character was adventurous at all, she was usually portrayed as being adventurous in love.
- In most of the novels, males were the ones portrayed as being innovative generally too, the men take the lead on most activities in the novels with women remaining at the background. Sometimes following the “direction” given by the men. It’s rare to find a woman giving directions and a male character following the direction. Moreover, if the woman gives direction at all to a male character, it must be to a male child.

Conclusion.

Children learn about gender roles from readings, be it newspaper, magazine textbooks, novels and the like. More often than not, women and young females in most readings are confined to the traditional roles. Internalization of these readings can not only influence gender perception but also constrict behaviors, thus the need to change what goes into these

novels and “readings” with the changing times. Developed nations have begun such, that even movies now have protagonist females not playing traditional roles, but being head of intelligent outfits, corporations and the like. Writers in developing nations like Nigeria needs to change with the times. There is also the need to encourage more female writers who would be atypical in their presentation of female professional protagonists. Other media outfits should be encouraged to put up propaganda that would push for such. Novels and readings and the constructs therefrom does have psychological impacts on perception, leanings and behavioral outputs, and efforts must be made to do away with that which can lead to any form of psychological damage in behavioral orientations in the 21st century technological advancement that must pull both males and females to the best of intellectual outputs.

Nigerian women have come a long way. The new millennium promises to be better for women. There is no doubt that more women would be found competing and complementing their men folks in varied aspects, and that those areas they still shy away from, they would move into and who knows, the century may produce its first female president in the nation.

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