



Gender Representation in selected Literary Texts: Grade five to Eight EFL Textbooks in focus

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ABSTRACT

The study is a purely qualitative content analysis intending to examine gender representation in literary texts unearthing how gender dis/parity unfolds in grades five to eight English language textbooks. The design enables researchers to identify the frequency of literary texts and examine the nature of tasks driven from literary texts thereby showing gender representation and gender parity and disparity. The ways gender parity and disparity unfold in literary texts need both thematized analysis. Hence, data generated from literary texts are coded and organized into themes. The findings reveal that literary texts' portrayal of gender in terms of visibility is frequent. On the contrary, the theme-level representation of gender in the literary texts raises questions about previous approaches to studying gender representation. For instance, in terms of themes of literary texts, gender representation is controversial. The level of visibility and sexist language use doesn't guarantee parity of gender representation in themes of literary texts. For instance, in the poem my mother the feminine gender is visible. Likewise, in taming a husband the feminine pronoun is visible. Besides the roles given, the gender disparity occurs in these literary texts at the theme level. Accordingly, it is suggested that literary selections for classroom use should be considered in terms of gender representation at the level of its theme to help teachers, material designers, and evaluators ensure gender representation in literary texts.

Keywords: Gender representation, gender parity, visibility, theme level representation



1. Introduction

Gender as a part of our identity is not stable but under continual construction, with the influence of the factors, we are exposed to. Socialization agents and other social processes shape people's internalized views on gender (Law and Chan, 2004). For instance, contemporary media including television, films, music, and the internet may play a role in shaping the outlook toward gender. For school children, however, textbooks "represent every day for children" (Kereszty, 2009, p.3) as textbooks provide content that is delivered at the earliest levels of their learning (Kobia, 2009). Textbooks impact children's attitudes, values, and behavior as they spend a great deal of time reading them at school. Textbooks serve as an important socialization agent that shapes pupils' view including their views on gender (Kereszty, 2009). Not only do textbooks disseminate knowledge to learners, but they also reflect, construct and reproduce certain worldviews as well as the writers' beliefs. Textbooks and educational materials have lasting influences on learners' beliefs about gender roles, as the phrases and stories heard and learned regarding women and men condition their minds in different ways.

Either visually or textually, gender dis/parity in textbooks manifests in different forms. Visibility is the extent to which either gender is quantitatively represented often female textual

and/or visual omission or underrepresentation signaling that women are less important (Gupta and Lee 1990; Lee 2019; Lee and Chin 2019). Gender stereotyping, the second manifestation of biased gender representation involves females' portrayal as more fragile and passive and engaging mainly in household activities, and males as more active and engaging in physically demanding work and a wider range of social roles (Lee 2014; Lee and Chin 2019). Linguistic sexism, the third way gender dis/parity manifests, refers to the use of words, phrases, or expressions in such a way that they present an unbalanced portrayal of women and men, which encompasses trivializing, diminishing, or excluding either gender, usually females through language. Gender disparity in the form of underrepresentation and omission, stereotyping, and sexist language use (Kızılaslan, 2010) in textbooks inevitably impacts the values, behaviors, world-views, and mindsets of learners and teachers negatively. Undue and inequitable gender representation in textbooks in general and literary texts, in particular, may contribute to a sense of insignificance among girls. As to Sunderland (1992), gender-stereotyped EFL materials aggravate disempowerment; alienate and demotivate (and thus hamper performance), and the patterns of the language contained in them can become classroom routines. On top of these, such gender representations socialize students in the direction of gender



differentiation beyond repair. The motivation of students, especially girls, to learn and emulate good characters would be lessened.

Literary texts, as indelible and widely used materials, play significant roles in providing characters and events from which children can identify actions, beliefs, and emotions (Mendoza and Reese, 2001; Brugeilles and Cromer 2009). Conversely, gender bias as portrayed in literature is still prevalent that Taso (2008:108) concluded 'literature is one of the homes of gender stereotypes. On top of that, care must be taken when selecting such texts for the language classroom. Taso (2008) suggests:

Ideally, all children's books used in classrooms should have well-rounded male and female characters. ...Characters' achievements should not be evaluated based on gender and females should not always be portrayed as weaker and more delicate than males. Besides, teachers may choose books that have counter-sexist attitudes embedded in them. Nonetheless, how gender representation unfolds in such texts and how gender parity and disparity unfold in literary texts remains untouched. Discriminatory gender representations incorporated in literary texts influence female and male students to absolutely different ways of acting

and reacting ascertaining and glorifying unjust beliefs. As a developing country with a predominantly patriarchal society, Ethiopia is struggling to progress on gender parity in education and economic opportunities currently ranking 140th and 125th of 153 countries. Local studies on gender representation reveal the prominence of both gender-stereotypic and emerging gender-equitable discourse (Addis, 2019; Mehari, 2016). However, in literary texts, representation of gender cannot be studied merely by counting sexist language use. On top of that, none of the studies examine the representation of gender in literary texts unearthing how gender dis/parity unfolds in textbooks. For instance, Ruterana (2017) investigates how the educational use of fairy tales can challenge traditional gender roles in Rwandan education. The study reports that the students expressed positive attitudes toward a change of traditional gender roles as the latter obstructs full realization of females' rights. Hosseinpour and Afghari (2016) uncovered the under-representation and stereotyping of females in terms of the number of characters and roles in fifty Persian folklores. Thus, the current study examines gender representation in selected literary texts unearthing how



gender dis/parity unfolds. In so doing, this study has both theoretical and practical significance.

1.1. Research objectives

The general objective of the current study is to examine gender representation in literary texts unearthing how gender dis/parity unfolds in grades five to eight English language textbooks. Specifically the study:

1. Examines how literary texts portray gender in terms of visibility in the textbooks.
2. Describes how literary texts portray gender in terms of sexist language use.
3. Discerns how literary texts portray gender in terms of themes of a literary text.

1.2 Research methodology

The study is a purely qualitative content analysis intending to examine gender representation in literary text unearthing how gender dis/parity unfolds in grades five to eight English language textbooks. As to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities or conceptual categories to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes. Content analysis is the most appropriate technique for this study as it enables

researchers to study human behavior (gender representation) indirectly (Frankel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012) going through some valuable steps. After determining objectives for carrying out the study, which in the case of this study is, exploring gender representation in literary texts, this content analysis specified the unit of analysis. The literary texts are analyzed at word; sentence and text levels for gender can be represented in words, including pronouns and themes of literary texts. To that end, the literary materials are purposively (on the grounds of relevance for the purpose) selected for the study. In doing content analysis on literary texts, both the manifest and the latent contents (Frankel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012) on gender representation and gender dis/parity are considered. Thus, this design enables to identify the frequency of literary texts and examine the nature of tasks driven from literary texts thereby showing gender representation and gender parity and disparity.

Utmost efforts are made to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of findings. To reduce problems of observer bias due to the person performing the content analysis knowing the hypotheses of the study (Frankel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012) a “blind” observer, five expert teachers who do not know the purpose of the study did the ratings. To that end, the researcher selected literary texts from different editions of the grade eight English language textbooks that were read by five teachers to

determine gender representation and gender dis/parity at themes level. Discussion of findings is made accordingly in a way that ensures maximum dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 2019).

Both thematic content analyses have been carried out. The different ways of gender representation and gender dis/parity in literary texts look for frequency counts, the description of how the representation parity and disparity unfolds in each of the literary texts and activities driven from those literary texts needs qualitative analysis. Hence, the data is generated from literary texts and it is necessary to code and organize themes accordingly.

2. Results and discussion

The current study examines how gender representation unfolds in selected literary texts. A content analysis on a total of five literary texts has been carried out. In so doing, this study has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the findings show teachers, material designers, and evaluators the ways to ensure gender representation in literary texts. Practically, the findings help different stakeholders in their efforts to induce gender parity by redressing sources of the disparity.

| Edition | Literary text | Gender | Gender representation markers | | | | | Firstness |
|---------|--------------------|---------|-------------------------------|-----------|-------|------------|--------------|-----------|
| | | | Visibility | | | Roles/jobs | | |
| | | | Adjectives | Pronouns | NAMES | gendered | Not gendered | |
| 8/1978 | The living whisper | Male | - | 1(1.29%) | | | | 3 |
| | | Female | 16 | 27(36.3%) | 1 | | 1 | 1 |
| | | Neutral | | 49(63.6%) | | | | |
| 8/2008 | My mother | Male | - | 0 | | | | |
| | | Female | - | 15(100%) | | | | |
| | | Neutral | - | | | 1 | | |
| 8/1998 | Taming a husband | Male | | 9(21.4%) | | | | |
| | | Female | 6 | 23(54.7%) | | | | |
| | | Neutral | | 10(23.8%) | | | | |
| 7/1982 | Unity is strength | Male | 6 | 17(22%) | 2 | 2 | | |
| | | Female | | 0 | | | | |
| | | Neutral | | 60(77.9%) | | | | |
| 7/2001 | Who is easier? | Male | | 19(61.2%) | 0 | 1 | 1 | |
| | | Female | 4 | 2(6.4%) | 0 | 1 | 1 | |
| | | Neutral | | 10(32.2%) | | | | |

In the *living whisper*, a literary piece written about a female soldier who led people's militia fighters, the female pronoun is apparent as compared to the male counterpart. The pronoun *she* occurs 27 times in contrast with the male pronoun *he* which appeared once. The gender-



neutral pronouns *they, you, them* and *we* occur more frequently about the militia fighters. This contrasts with Addis (2019) who reports (a 52.97%) occurrence of male pronouns in the 2003 edition of the grade eight English language textbook published by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

In the literary text entitled the *living whisper* gender is represented in terms of names. The name of the militia fighters' leader Kibre, is used throughout the literary text. Nevertheless, no male name is mentioned. This, along with the visual representation, gives primacy to the feminine gender in the literary text. This may be in direct contrast with Taso (2008:108) who concluded that 'literature is one of the homes of gender stereotypes.

Of the adjectives included to describe the fighters and the fight that took place, the majority emphasized physical strength and difficulty. The adjectives are mainly used to describe the beauty and courage of Kibre. The adjectives comprising *allest, most beautiful, terrible, shining, kind, cruel, and brave* describe the personality and appearance of the fighter Kibrie. The remaining adjectives including *quickly, nearest, short, heavy, fair, brave, beloved, loud, and forceful* modify the fight. In both cases, the heroic deeds and visionary outlook of the female fighter are underlined. Though there are adjectives that

modify the physical beauty of the female character including *beautiful, shining eyes and beautiful breast*, among others, her mental and physical strength has also been modified by some adjectives (Sögüt,2018).

Firstness which refers to placing male terms before female terms when both come together occurs three times out of four possible instances. In the literary text, when both female and male referring terms appear together, the male term precedes the female term in three instances while the opposite occurs in one instance. Regarding the character's parents, *her father and mother, her two sisters and three brothers, her uncles and brothers* as well as *men and women* are the instances where choices on Firstness are made. In three of the instances, the masculine gender is put first.

Of the occupations represented in the literary text, the female character, Kibrie, performs the unusual role of being a military leader. Strikingly, in the literary text, the female character is attributed to a role of military leadership, one of the most demanding jobs. The character has succeeded in instilling a burning desire that made everybody sing *we must defend our motherland and our revolution*.

In the poem *my mother* the pronoun *she* is used in fifteen instances while the masculine *he* is not used at all. The literary piece is written



from a daughter's point of view about a mother who is carrying, supportive and loving. In the poem, the female pronoun is apparent as compared to the male counterpart. The pronoun *she* occurs 15 times in contrast with the male pronoun *he* which did not appear at all. This contrasts with Addis (2019) who reports (52.97%) occurrence of male pronouns in the 2003 edition of the grade eight English language textbook published by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

In the poem *my mother*, gender is not represented in terms of names. The name of the mother or the daughter is not mentioned throughout the poem. Likewise, no male name is mentioned. This, along with the frequent use of the feminine pronouns gives primacy to the feminine gender in the poem. This may be in direct contrast with Taso (2008:108) who concluded 'literature is one of the homes of gender stereotypes.

The occupation represented in the poem is indoor which is about caring for children. The daughter adores the way her mother performs the usual role of caring for one's daughter. All the roles described in the poem including carrying, playing, feeding one's daughter are usual to the biased feminine gender. The poem states the affection and love of the mother as a result of which the physical strength of the mother has not been presented in the poem.

In *taming a husband*, a story of a young woman who attempted to tame her husband, the female pronoun is apparent as compared to the male counterpart. The pronoun *she* occurs 23 times in contrast with the male pronoun *he* which appeared nine times. Likewise, the gender-neutral pronouns *they*, *you*, *them* and *we* occur ten times. This contrast with Addis (2019) who reports (52.97%) occurrence of male pronoun in the 2003 edition of the grade eight English language textbook published by the MoE, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

The adjectives in the literary text describe the old man and the young woman. The adjectives *young*, *wise*, *old*, *near*, *fierce* and *brave* are used in the literary text. The adjectives are mainly used to describe the courage of the young woman to tame her husband and the wisdom of the old man. The woman courageously tamed a lion but asked for a magic charm to tame her husband. Among the occupations represented in the literary text, the young woman performs the usual role of being a housewife. In contrast, the literary text reserves the role of being wise to an old man. Her husband used to beat and shout at her. This implies that the man takes a primary role in managing the household. *Unity is strength* is a story of a father his young children and a wise teacher who attempted to wisely solve a problem of disagreement among the boys. The



male pronoun is apparent as compared to the female counterpart. The pronoun *he* occurs 17 times in contrast with the female pronoun *she* which never appears in the story. Likewise, the gender-neutral pronouns *they, you, them* and *we* occur sixty times. This contrast with Addis (2019) who reports (52.97%) occurrence of male pronoun in the 2003 edition of the grade eight English language textbook published by MoE, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

In the story *Unity is strength*; gender is represented in terms of names. The gendered name of the father and the wise teacher is mentioned in the story. However, feminine gender names and occupations are not mentioned. Of the occupations represented in the literary text, the male characters act as a wise teacher and a successful farmer. The role of being a wise farmer and teacher is reserved to the masculine character. Of the adjectives included in the story, the majority emphasized the physical strength of the boys. The adjectives *big, strong, young* and *great* describe the physical strength of the boys while the *good* and *wise* describe the wit of their father and the new teacher. However, adjectives referring to the feminine gender are not used in the story.

In *whose work is easier*, a story of a husband and wife who quarreled on sharing tasks, a lesson on gender parity is underlined. The

pronoun *she* occurs twice in contrast with the male pronoun *he* which appeared nineteen times. Likewise, the gender-neutral pronouns *they, you, them* and *we* occur ten times. This contrast with Addis (2019) who reports (52.97%) occurrence of male pronoun in the 2003 edition of the grade eight English language textbook published by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Of the adjectives included to describe the woman and her husband, the majority emphasized physical strength and difficulty. The adjectives in the literary piece *angry, easier, easy* and *slow* are used to describe the confrontations of the husband and wife. The man considered a woman's job as easy and questioned why the woman was slow. But, he learned his expectations were wrong. Of the two occupations represented in the literary text, the female character performs the usual role of being a housewife. In a moment of the contest to determine whose work is easier, the woman went out for farming while the husband failed to stand up to the indoor tasks. In contrast, the literary text presents the role of farming to men. Altogether *The living whisper* is a story of a young woman named Kibre and her struggle for justice. *My mother* is a poem on the love and kindness of a mother. *Unity is strength* is a short story of the quarreling sons of Ato Tesemma and their wise teacher. *Taming a husband* is a story of a young woman who



wanted a magic charm to tame her husband. However, she learned to be patient to succeed. The short story *whose work is easier?* Presents a farmer who claimed a woman's job was easier. Gender disparity occurs in the number and meaning of adjectives, the number of pronouns, names and roles of characters in the literary texts. In instances of paired occurrences, masculine firstness is evident in three cases while feminine firstness occurs only once.

Gender representation in literary texts has to be considered in the themes of the literary texts as opposed to the number of adjectives, pronouns, names, roles and instances of Firstness of either gender. For instance, in *the living whisper*, the feminine gender is represented by twenty-seven feminine gender referring pronouns and only one masculine referring pronoun. Of the adjectives used, sixteen are used to modify the woman militia leader positively. The theme presents the role and worth of both genders in defending a motherland. In *whose work is easier* the number of pronouns referring to the masculine gender exceeds that of the feminine while the roles are in parity. Nonetheless, the theme of the story underlines gender parity. *My mother* and *Taming a husband* are literary texts where the feminine gender is predominantly represented. A close look into the themes of these literary texts, however, reveals that the feminine gender is undermined in these literary

texts thereby posing questions on the parity of gender. *My mother*, in appreciating the candidness and love of a mother, confines women to indoor tasks. Likewise, *taming a husband*, the woman is pictured as physically weak and unwise to defend herself and her stances. The woman went for the support of a wise old man. The woman proved her courage, yet a magic charm was not found.

3. Conclusions

The study is a purely qualitative content analysis intending to examine gender representation in literary texts unearthing how gender dis/parity unfolds in grades five to eight English language textbooks. The design enables researchers to identify the frequency of literary texts and examine the nature of tasks driven from literary texts thereby showing gender representation and gender parity and disparity. The ways gender parity and disparity unfold in the literary texts need both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Hence, data generated from literary texts are coded and organized into themes. The findings reveal that literary texts' portrayal of gender in terms of visibility is frequent. This is followed by sexist language use. On the contrary, the representation of gender in the theme of the literary texts raises questions on previous approaches to studying gender representation.

1. Gender parity is not maintained in the selected literary texts in terms of visibility. In three out of the five literary texts, the feminine gender occurs more than the masculine gender in terms of frequency of pronouns.
2. The literary texts portray gender disparity in terms of sexist language use. Firstness of the masculine gender occurs in three instances as compared to feminine firstness that occurs once.
3. In terms of themes of literary texts, gender representation is controversial. The level of visibility and sexist language use doesn't guarantee parity of gender representation in themes of literary texts. For instance, in the poem *My mother* the feminine gender is visible. Likewise, in *taming a husband* the feminine pronoun is visible. Besides the roles given, the gender disparity occurs in these literary texts at the theme level.

4. Recommendation

Accordingly, it is suggested that literary selections for classroom use should be considered in terms of gender representation at the level of its theme. The visibility of gender parity and the use of sexist language use interplays with the theme of a literary text. This should help teachers, material designers and evaluators

the ways to ensure gender representation in literary texts. Practically, the findings help different stakeholders in their efforts to induce gender parity.

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